

What to do when your organization is in crisis

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At some point, your coalition or member rape crisis center might face a crisis. In our line of work, crisis of course can mean many different things. For the sake of this tool, a crisis is an internal or external event that causes or threatens to cause significant harm to the survival of your agency.

Below are suggested steps to take to contain, address, and redress the crisis.

First, what's going on? What is your crisis?

Step 1: Identify the crisis (crises):

To clearly address the crisis in your agency, it's imperative that you clearly define what the crisis is. To identify and define the crisis, look for facts and specific examples of what is going on; try to avoid focusing on the emotional impact of the events (though these in and of themselves may be deeply affecting the perception of crisis).

It's important to note the origin of the crisis in order to proceed in addressing it. Crises can be internally or externally instigated. Did something outside the agency spur the crisis? For example, did your funder decide to reduce your grant funds significantly? Or did your crisis come from within your own agency? For example, is there a lack of financial controls that allowed for the mismanagement of funds?

Beware of assumptions as you identify the crisis. Too often, our assumptions about what is going on influence our ability to address our circumstances. Discipline yourself and those around you to state clearly observed facts and elements of your situation and avoid editorializing or otherwise giving personal commentary on your crisis. Sticking to facts and observed behaviors will help you be clear about the elements of your crisis and will help you avoid going down a path that is based on misinformation. Similarly, avoid assigning motivation to the people involved in your crisis; only they themselves will be able to tell you why they acted the way they did.

Questions to help unpack assumptions:

- What do we know?
- What, in concrete detail, happened?
- How do we know what we know?

Who needs to know?

Step 2: Contact the organization's leadership

Ultimately, the leadership of the organization is responsible for its activities. Any crisis that an organization faces is the responsibility of staff as well as the Board of Directors. In order to give the Board of Directors ample

opportunity to influence and address any crisis, they should be informed of any serious situation facing the organization immediately. This communication should happen swiftly and through appropriate channels of communication, such as from the Executive Director to the Board Chair. To appropriately engage board leadership, the Executive Director (or other appropriate designee) should explain the situation; give full information about the crisis and what you intend to do to address it if that's known.

Make a plan to communicate openly about the crisis as it progresses, ask for help/support as you need it, and see if your organization's leadership has opinions, ideas, and suggestions you may not have thought of. Your board chair will likely need to share information about the crisis with the executive committee or whole board.

Make it stop!

Step 3: Contain the crisis, stop the bleeding

If the crisis can be stopped, by all means do so. For example, if it was discovered that a staff person was potentially taking money from the organization, you would remove them from the office and eliminate their authority regarding expenditures immediately. Similarly, if a staff person is communicating inappropriately with your membership, cut off their communication vehicles as quickly as possible.

Fix it!

Step 4: Make a plan

Action: Assemble your experts

Who can help you? There's nothing wrong with asking for outside help to assist you and your organization in managing a crisis. In fact, it's a strong move in the right direction to look for help from credible experts who can help you resolve the situation from the outset.

What kind of expertise do you need to help you manage the situation? If you have an accounting problem, for example, think about hiring a Certified Public Accountant on a contract to help you. If you have a human resource challenge, look for a Human Resource Consulting firm or an HR attorney to help through the short-term. Nonprofit management support services, risk management consultants, or other technical assistance providers (such as the Resource Sharing Project) might be helpful to you as well.

These folks can help you proceed through the next steps. Keep them well informed as you move forward.

Action: Mitigate the damage

Once you're ready to proceed with resolving the crisis, it's important to figure out how far the crisis has spread and determine what you can do to mitigate

its damage. What have the ripples of the crisis been? Some questions to use in determining how far reaching your crisis is include:

- Who has this crisis directly affected?
- Who has this crisis indirectly affected?
- Are you constituents/members affected by this crisis?
- Have your funding sources been affected by this crisis?
- Have your clients been directly or indirectly affected by this crisis?
- How much of your staff is directly or indirectly affected by this crisis?
- What is/are the potential long-term impact(s) of this crisis?
- What is/are the potential short-term impact(s) of this crisis?

Once a sense of the span of the crisis is known, steps can be taken to address them all. Similarly, it is important to have some level of communication with everyone who has been affected; though everyone does not need the same amount of information (a stakeholder close to the epicenter of the crisis would need more information than an outside constituent who was not directly affected).

The steps taken to address the crisis need to be decided by individuals in the organizations staff and board leadership and should be in concert with recommendations with outside experts when necessary. These steps will be specific to each individual crisis and therefore cannot be outlined here.

However, the crisis plan should include the following elements:

- how to stop the crisis;
- how to redress the crisis or otherwise make amends for it (what are your goals in moving forward?);
- how to support people who were affected by the crisis, both directly and indirectly; and
- how to communicate the organization's plan to redress the crisis.

Action: Implement resolution

OK, now that there is a plan to address your crisis, move forward quickly to implement it. At a time of crisis, it's important the organization move forward with great leadership to show that it's taking all necessary steps to address this event in order to appropriately make amends and move forward.

If your constituents provide you with feedback as you implement your plan, take great care to pay attention to it and amend your plan as necessary.

Action: Evaluate, revise

Is your plan working? How will you know if you've been successful? Did you meet your goals? If not, what can you change to meet them?

If you are not meeting your goals, amend your plan and move forward.

Once the crisis is contained and addressed, the organization might consider doing a post-mortem or an analysis after time has passed of how the crisis

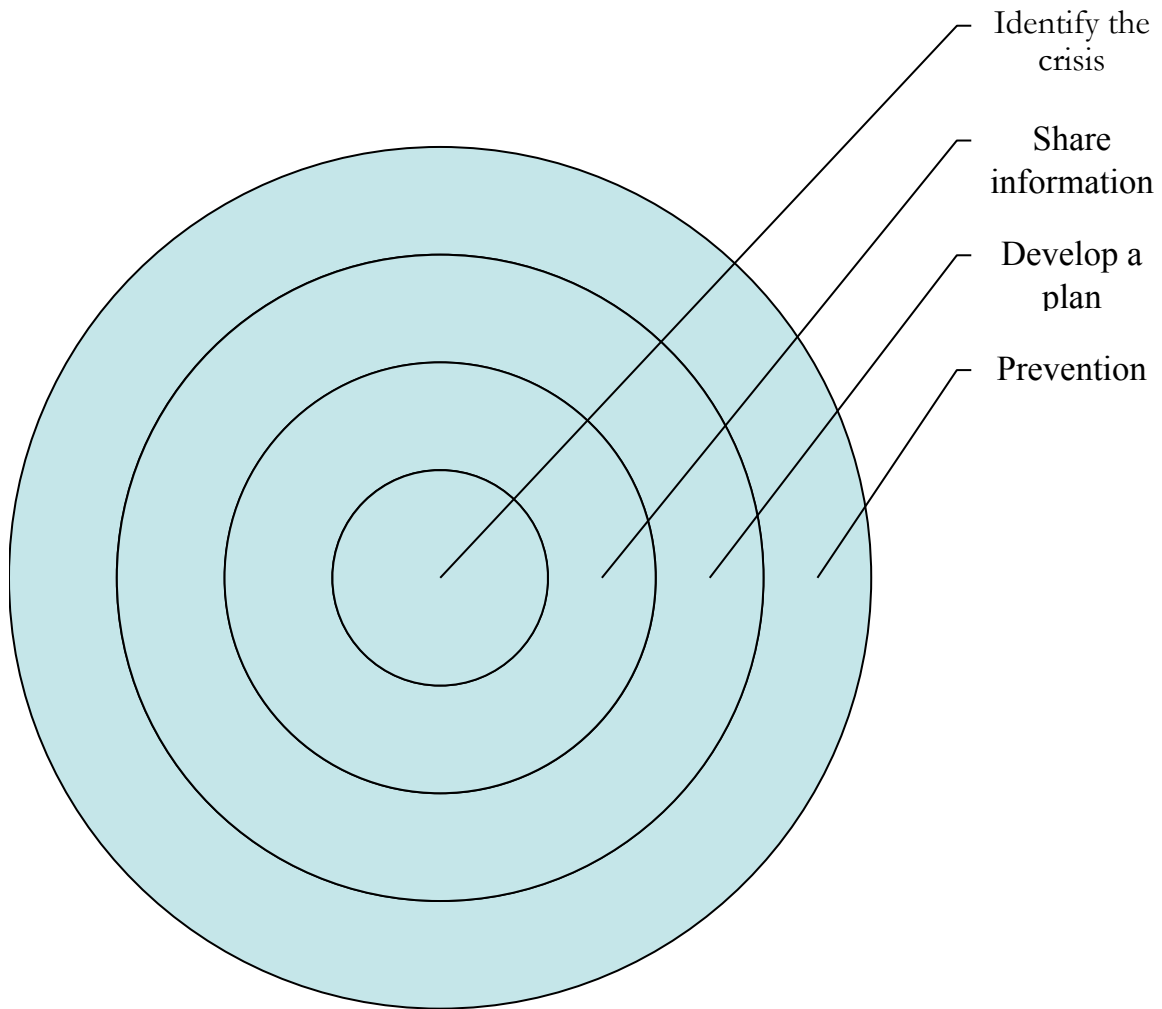
came to be, how it was addressed, and what any long-term impact of the crisis might be.

Prevent the next one

Step 5: Lessons learned, crisis preparedness

After the crisis is contained, impacts of it are mitigated, and improvements have been made to prevent it from happening again, it's time to sit back and reflect on how the crisis came to be in the first place. This reflection should take stock of the bigger forces at work, not the specific factors that led to this singular crisis. Instead, think about the broader systems and processes in your organization that allowed such a thing to happen. For example, was the staff ill-prepared to handle a client crisis because there wasn't adequate training and supervision available? Were the agency's policies lacking major points about client safety? About staff misconduct? Is there a lack of resources available to insure that you've got the kind of professional support you need to do business? If so, now is the time to assess your organization and make recommendations about how to solidify systems and processes so that future potential crises can be averted.

Crisis Triage



This image provides a view of how an organization can move forward from a crisis to grow and protect the agency. Starting at the core, the agency must identify the crisis, then share information about the crisis and how it will be addressed, then directly address the crisis, and finally grow to prevent future crises.

Crisis Plan

What is your crisis? _____

Who do you need to tell immediately? _____

Stop the bleeding! What can I do today to stop the crisis from spreading? _____

Make a plan!

Who are your experts? _____

What is your plan? What will you do? _____

With whom will you communicate? How?

Evaluate your success. Did you address all of the impacts of your initial crisis?

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