

Leading and Communicating During Crises

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20
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Institute for Chief Academic Officers with Chief Advancement
and Chief Communication and Marketing Officers
November 4–7, 2023 » Tampa Marriott Water Street Hotel



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Goals for our Conversation Today

- Understand the difference between a problem and a crisis and the response for each.
- Evaluate a crisis to meet the decision-making demands of the situation and communications needs of your community.
 - And ascertain how and when to incorporate feedback.

Let's start with a look back.

What Higher Ed Leaders Face Each Day

- Higher education continues to serve as a political lightning rod at the local, state, and federal levels
- SCOTUS is hearing and ruling on cases that directly impact our institutions
- There are a significant number of leadership transitions across the industry
 - ACE's president survey results are startling
 - Not yet out of the great resignation, and not yet to a great return
 - There is a continued desire for work-from-home options
- Questions abound about the value of higher education
- Did I mention there's a demographic *cliff* on the horizon?
- Concerns about physical, mental, and social safety
- The proliferation of social media platforms and "media" outlets, with outrage as a common content thread
- Exhaustion

For many, a picture says a
thousand words.



Do Any of These Comments Sound Familiar?

- “Let’s issue a statement.”
- “I’m hearing from [fill in the blank audience] that we need to speak up.”
- “If we don’t say/do something, who will?”

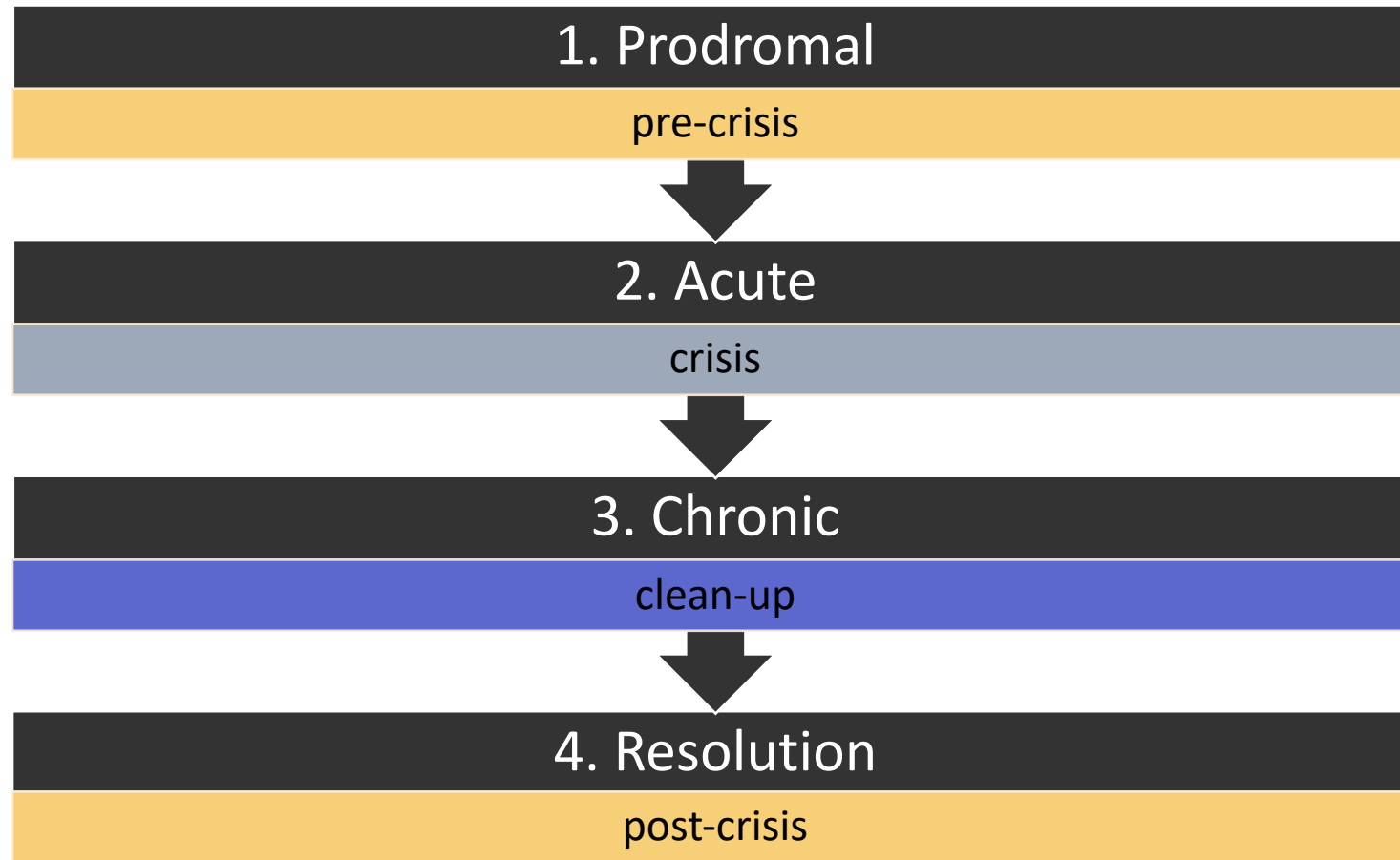
It is your job to ask why me, why us, why now?

We have to move away from everything being treated like a crisis.

Defining a Crisis

- Is this a crisis, or just a tough day?
- If the institution or its leadership is called out or upset, that does not mean the college is in crisis.
 - However, your response to that tough day can lead to a crisis situation.
- A crisis includes significant:
 - Harm to people or property
 - Inability to conduct business as usual
 - Damage to your reputation

Four Stages of a Crisis



What's at Stake?

In the court of law

- Legal settlements and additional lawsuits
- Insurance claims and limitations

In the court of public opinion:

- Decreased image and reputation
- Failed administrator and faculty searches
- Decreased # of applications and enrollments
- Decreased retention and matriculation
- Decreased donation rates and amounts
- Donor pledge defaults
- Decreased state appropriations
- Loss of public trust
- Fewer positive media citations

In an era of constant crises, you must build credibility in advance and be a leader.

The Intersection of Communications and Leadership

Articulate your vision (what) and leadership approach (how) for your team. Partner to incorporate both into your communications.

Every public, private, formal, formal, internal and external communication matters. Your credibility as a communicator is a direct reflection of how you are viewed as a leader.

Your audiences will compare what you say with how you lead and hold you accountable for differences.

Your leadership voice must be preserved, which means not everything needs to come from you or be addressed by you.

Delegation is a form of leadership.

How do we get to this ideal situation?

Take Inventory

- Talent and expertise you bring to the table
- Skillsets your team holds
- Resources your office has at its fingertips
- Knowledge only your office can share
- Topics and expertise for which you hold credibility

Aligning Expectations and Communications

Empower your team to be a part of your vision and strategy– and arm them with the tools they need for success.

- Set examples of and expectations for timeliness of decision-making and solid communications roles.
- Make “no surprises” your team approach.
- Be clear about who is accountable and what that means.
- Acknowledge success and strive for continuous improvement.
 - Your community will provide you with feedback for new team goals.

Your confidence in a crisis is
determined by your trust in your
own leadership and your team.



Create a Framework for Evaluating and Responding to Crises

It is our responsibility to be the
leaders and the voice of reason.

Weigh in if it ties to your mission, impacts students or has a direct bearing on the short- or long-term health of your institution or community.

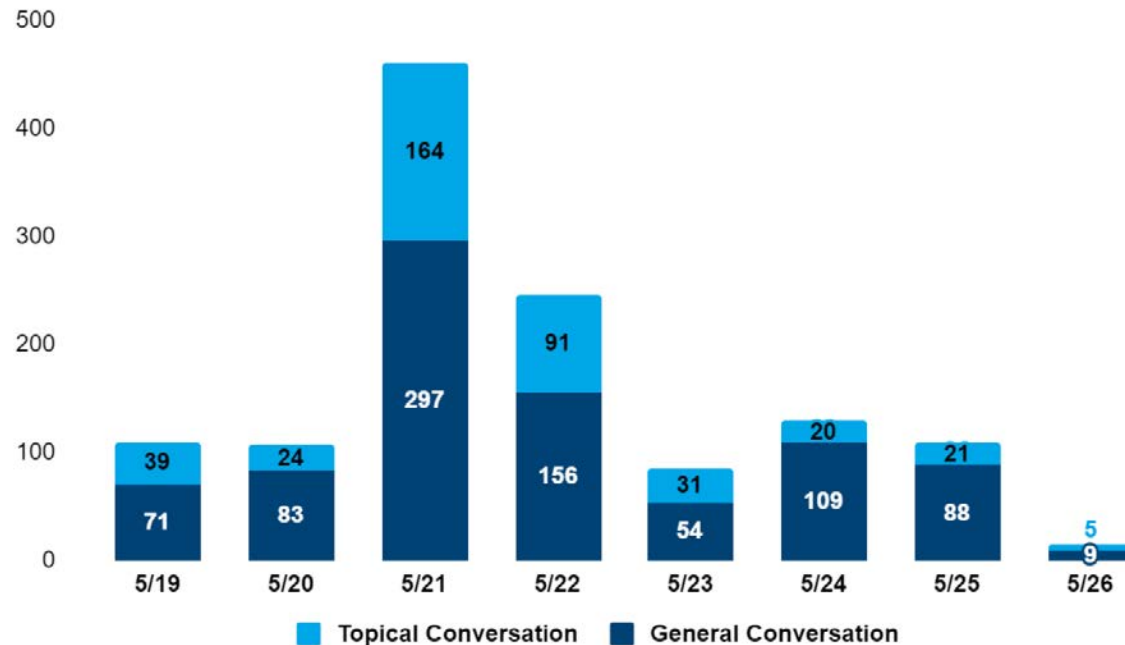
Delineate your role (and what it's not) and the institution's role (and what it's not) from the beginning.

Don't make strategy changes based on limited feedback. Ask for data. Sample size and connection to the institution matter.

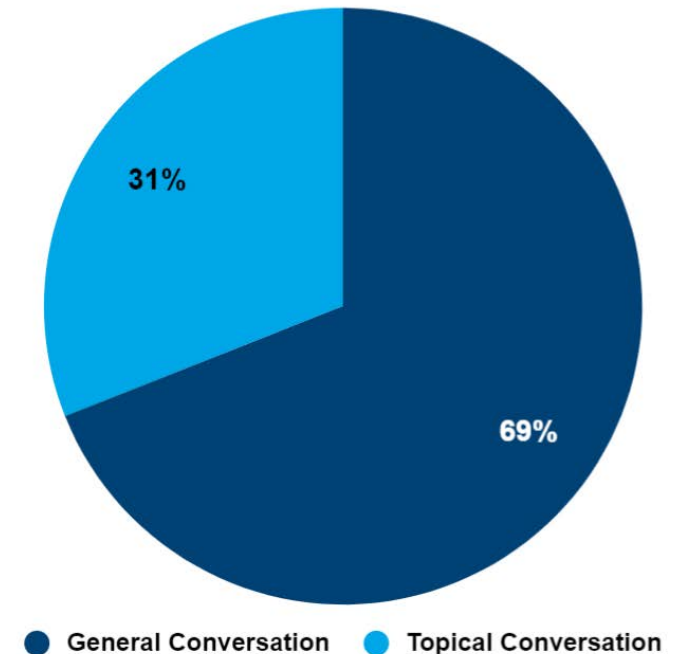
Know if a Situation is Growing or Waning

Example of a social conversation:

Share of Voice: General Conversation vs. Topical Conversation



Share of Voice: General Conversation vs. Topical Conversation



Take the time now to determine your values, your limits and your priorities. Think about how those align with your institution's expectations.

Prioritize internal audiences and consider- up front- if parents make the cut and then personalize your comments appropriately.

Sometimes, it is our
responsibility to be the one to
say “no” or to make the case for
why you, why now.

Making the Case for Leadership

From the leader's perspective:

- Where are they in their career?
- What will be needed for buy-in?
- How will this impact their relationships and/or legacy?
- What do they need to accomplish to be successful?
- What are their fears?

You cannot communicate your way out of a leadership void.



How to Prepare

Shortcut Lists

Campus

- Predict
- Prevent
- Prepare
- Perform
- Post-action Assessment

Communications

- Honesty
- Transparency
- Consistency
- Timeliness

Personal

- Care
- Compassion
- Concern

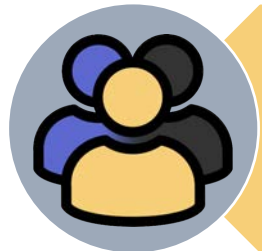
Test the Values Associated with the Situation



Personal

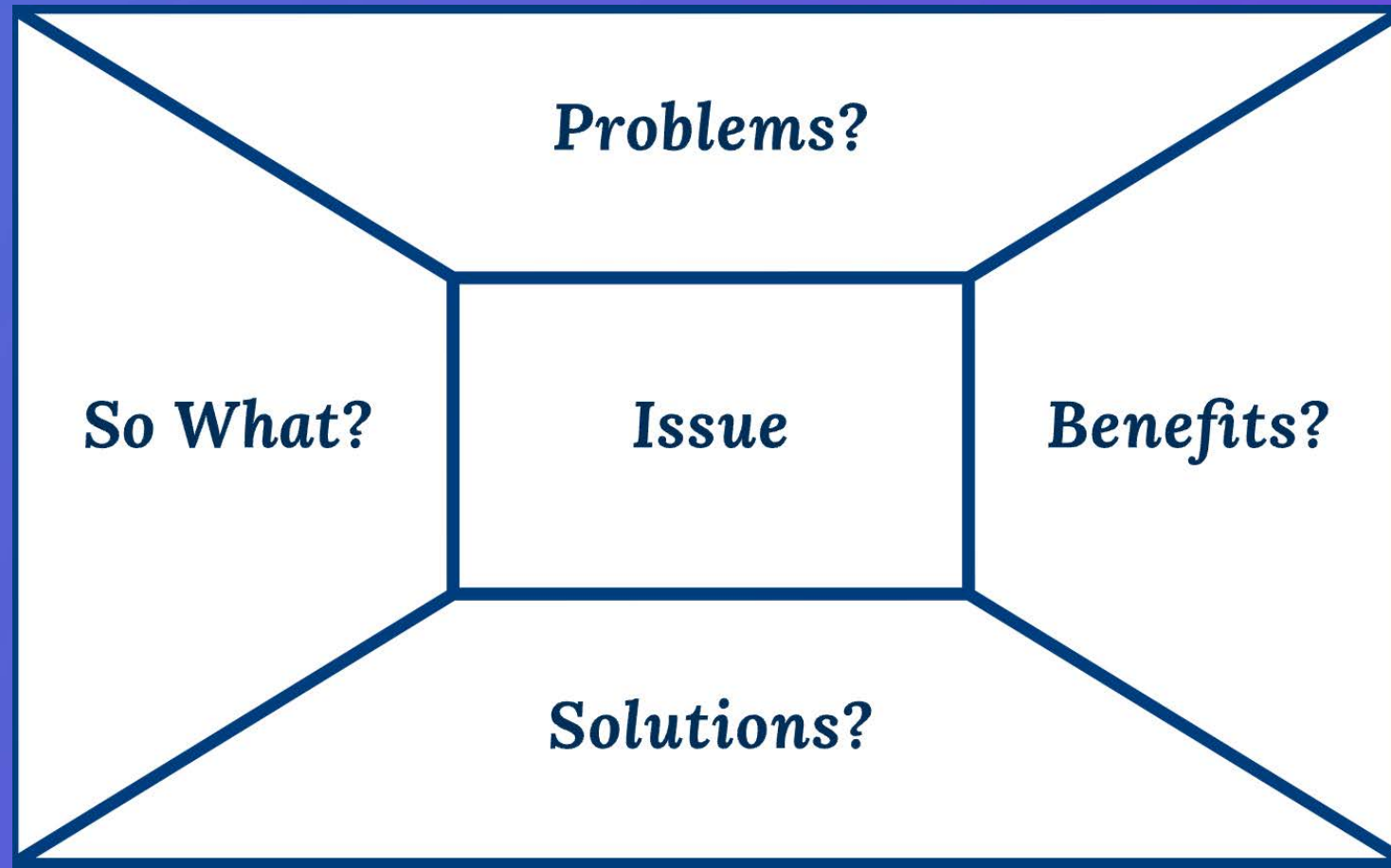


Institutional



Community

Learn to Use a Message Box in Advance



(compassscicomm.org)

Are Communications Necessary?

- Ensure you are complying with all legal and mandated communications and apply a healthy dose of common sense
 - View the situation through the lens of SCOTUS opinions, the Clery Act, Title IX, FERPA and insiders' and outsiders' perspectives
- Can key audiences credibly ask:
 - “What does this mean for me?”
 - “How am I impacted?”
 - “How will people like me be impacted?”
- Does the situation run counter to your institution's ethos or your own?
- Will waiting to communicate be viewed as covering or spinning?

All Communications

- Must lead with genuine care, compassion and/or concern
- Need to have an appropriate level of emotion and leadership expressed
 - Sincerity is the ultimate litmus test
 - Communications aren't a substitute for leadership
 - Focus is on strategy and relationships
- Should reflect your mission and your brand promise
- Need audience-specific personalization

Identifying Your Audience Approach

- What does this audience want/need?
- What information, knowledge, history, perceptions do they have?
 - What can you share that is new?
 - What can you supplement or correct?
- Can you build a relationship through ongoing communications?

What Do We Say?

- The TRUTH!
- Something that reflects a leadership stance
- Consider the average person's perspective
- Monitor how it is being received and act accordingly

Consider the Bigger Picture

Here's what matters:

- Community
- Context
- History
- Language
- Emotion
- Data
- Image/reputation

Here's what doesn't:

- Ego

Let's talk.

Keep in Touch

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Thank you
for attending
this session!



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