

Faith and Pragmatism Effective Crisis Communication in a Divisive World

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A bit about me...

- Communications professional since 1984
- Globally-certified in strategic communications & corporate crisis management, AI communications
- 2025 Fellow, Centre for Strategic Communication Excellence
- CEO of Institute for Crisis Management since 2014
- Expertise across virtually all communication disciplines
- Experience working with leaders in several Christian denominations
- Led colleagues and clients through virtually every kind of crisis





In This Session

- Presentation and crisis exercise
- Your participation is welcomed!
- Ask questions and join the discussions

What constitutes a crisis? For our purposes today...

A crisis is a significant **event or series of events** that-- *left unmanaged*-- threatens an organization's **brand, reputation, operations and/or financial stability**. Such events often require **immediate and strategic management** to mitigate damage, restore trust and confidence, and ensure long-term recovery.



Current Environment: Social, Political, Business

- Global Political turmoil, wars
- Erosion of trust: Edelman
- Rise of AI
- DEI, ESG efforts in decline
- Support for taking social issue positions decreasing
- Role of communications shifting



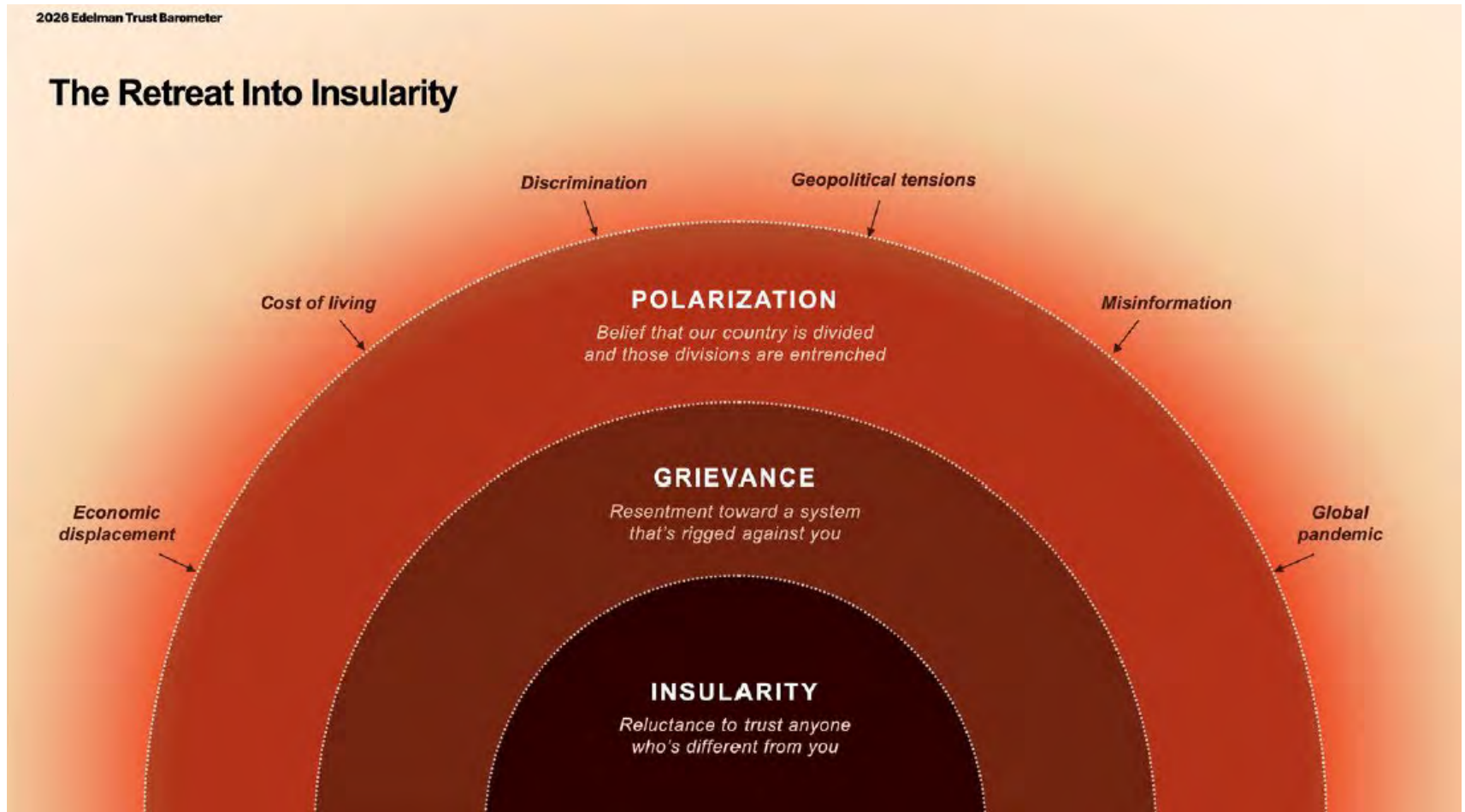
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Edelman Trust Barometer 2026

Trust Amid Insularity

2026 Edelman Trust Barometer

The Retreat Into Insularity



Edelman Trust Barometer 2026: Top 10

1. Insularity undermines trust
2. Mass class divide deepens
3. Nationalism is widespread
4. Optimism for future wanes
5. Personal networks fill a void left by institutional leaders
6. Insularity is a key business issue
7. Institutions fall short on trust brokering
8. My employer outperforms others...
9. CEOs must model trust-brokering behavior
10. Trusted voices on social media open closed doors



Worldwide, 7 in 10 Have an Insular Trust Mindset

On average, percent who say

GLOBAL 28

When it comes to **trusting someone who:**

- Lives by **different core values** than me
- Believes **different facts** and trusts **different sources** than I do
- Wants to address **societal problems differently** than I do
- Has a **different culture, background, or lifestyle** than mine

I am generally ...



70% insular

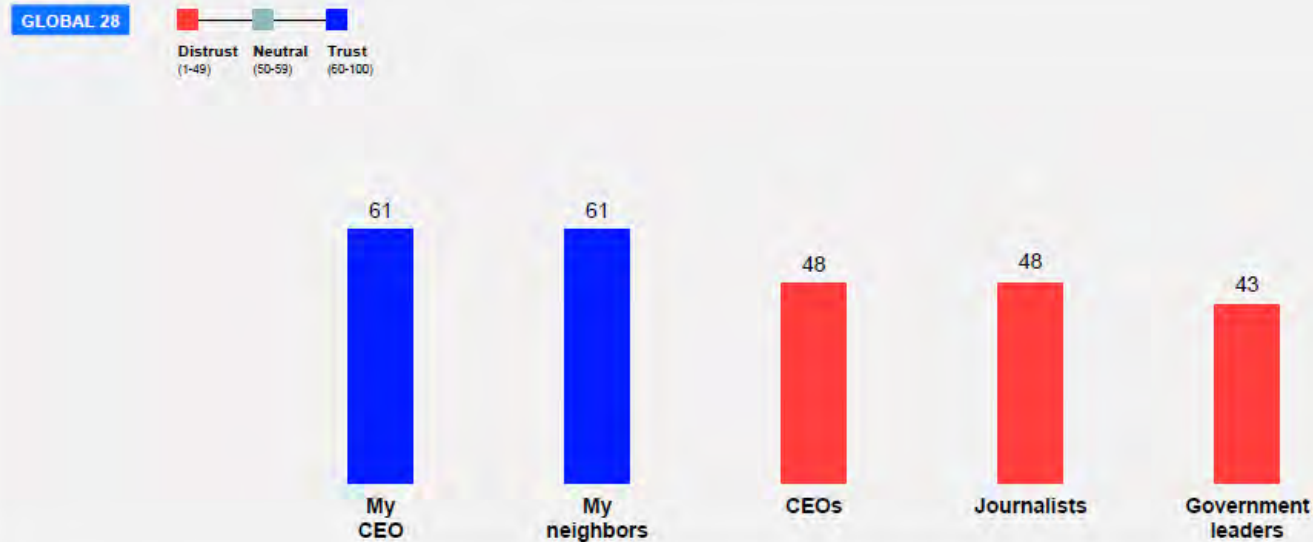
I am hesitant or unwilling to trust someone who is different from me

2025 Edelman Trust Barometer. Insularity segments: General population, 28-mkt avg. For a full explanation of how the insularity segments were created, please see the Technical Appendix.



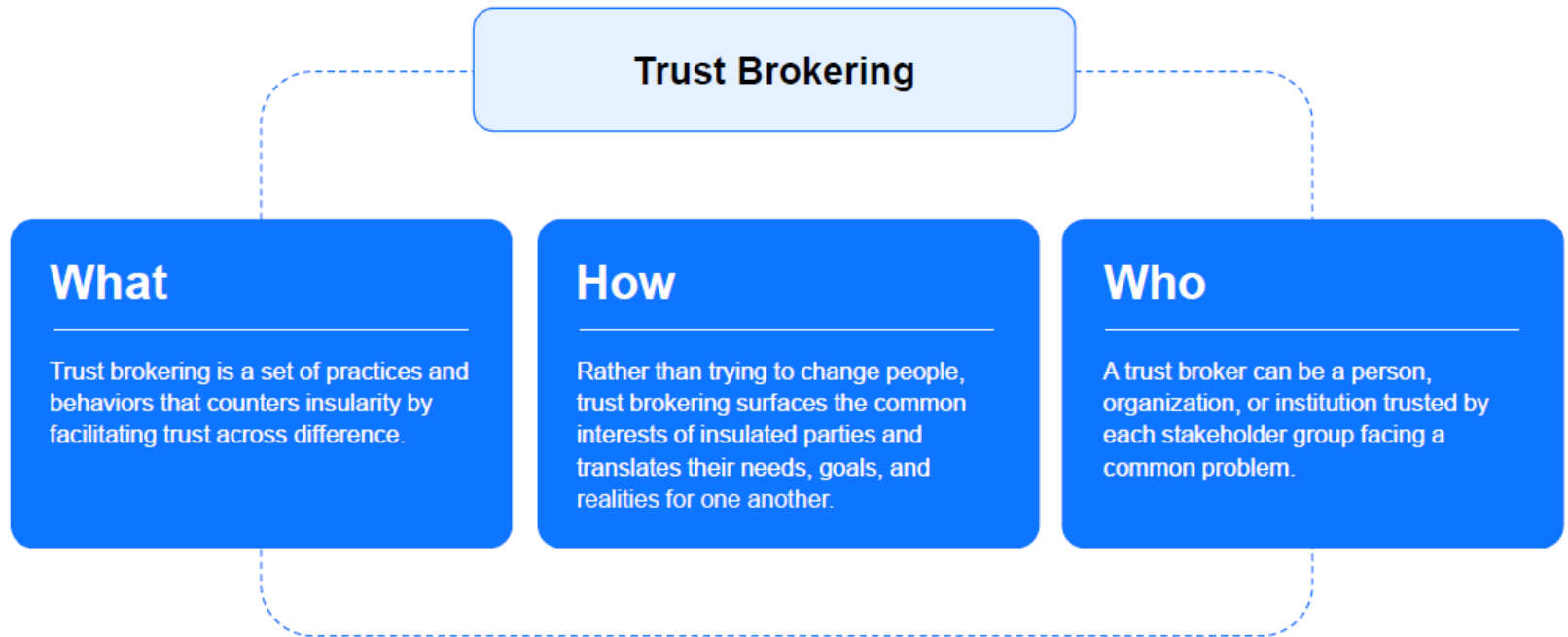
With Insular Trust Mindset, My Circle Trusted and Institutional Leaders Distrusted

Among those with an insular trust mindset (70%), percent trust



2026 Edelman Trust Barometer. TRU_PEP. Below is a list of groups of people. For each one, please indicate how much you trust that group of people to do what is right. 0-point scale; top # box, trust. "My CEO" only asked to those who are employees of an organization (Q43/1). General population, 28-mid avg., among those with an insular trust mindset. For a full explanation of how the insularity segments were created, please see the Technical Appendix.





Trust Brokering Most Powerful Action for Business To Earn Trust in High-Stakes Moments

Percent who say

GLOBAL 28

When responding to a highly divisive social issue, a **business could earn my trust by ...**

Encouraging people to cooperate on finding solutions without taking a side	35
Supporting the position that is true to its values	28
Supporting my position	13
Not taking any public position on the issue	13

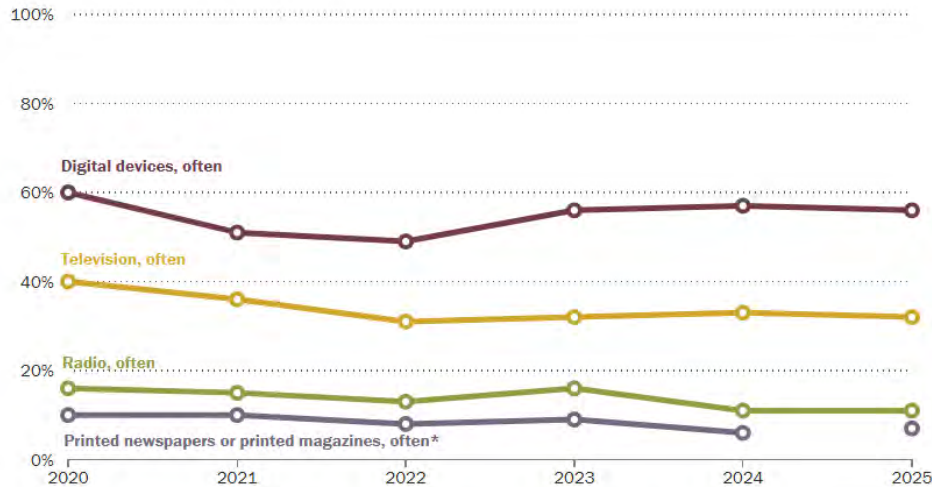
2026 Edelman Trust Barometer. BUS_TRU. Which of the following actions that a business could take in response to a highly divisive social issue would be most likely to increase your trust in that business to do what is right? Question asked to partial sample: General population, 28-mlt avg.



Where do you get news? Do you trust the source?

News consumption across all platforms

% of U.S. adults who say they get news from ...



- 86% digital devices
- 32% television often
- 11% radio
- 7% printed media

* Item was asked as "print publications" from 2020 to 2024.

Note: Other response options were "Sometimes," "Rarely" and "Never." Respondents who do not use the internet did not receive the item about digital devices; they are included with those who said "Never." Refer to the data tab for results for all response options.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Aug. 18-24, 2025.

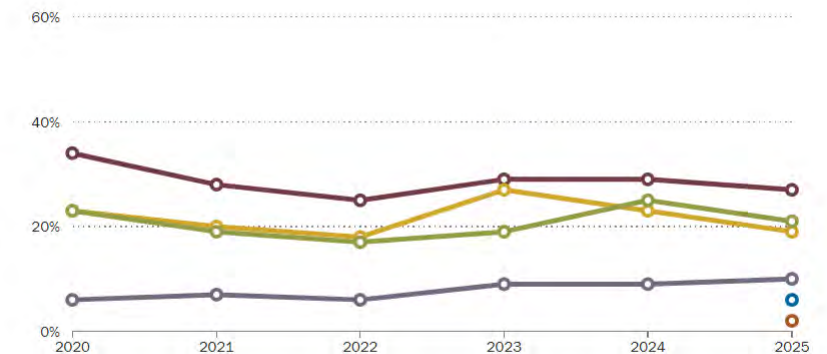
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- 20% News websites or apps, social media & search engines
 - FB 38% YouTube 35%
 - 20% ea. Instagram & TikTok
- 10% podcasts
- 6% email newsletters and chatbots

News consumption across digital platforms

% of U.S. adults who say they get news from ...

● News websites or apps, often ● Search, often ● Social media, often ● Podcasts, often ● Email newsletters, often
● AI chatbots, often



Note: Other response options were "Sometimes," "Rarely" and "Never." Respondents who do not use the internet did not receive these questions; they are included with those who said "Never," along with those who do not say they get news from digital devices. Refer to the data tab for results for all response options.

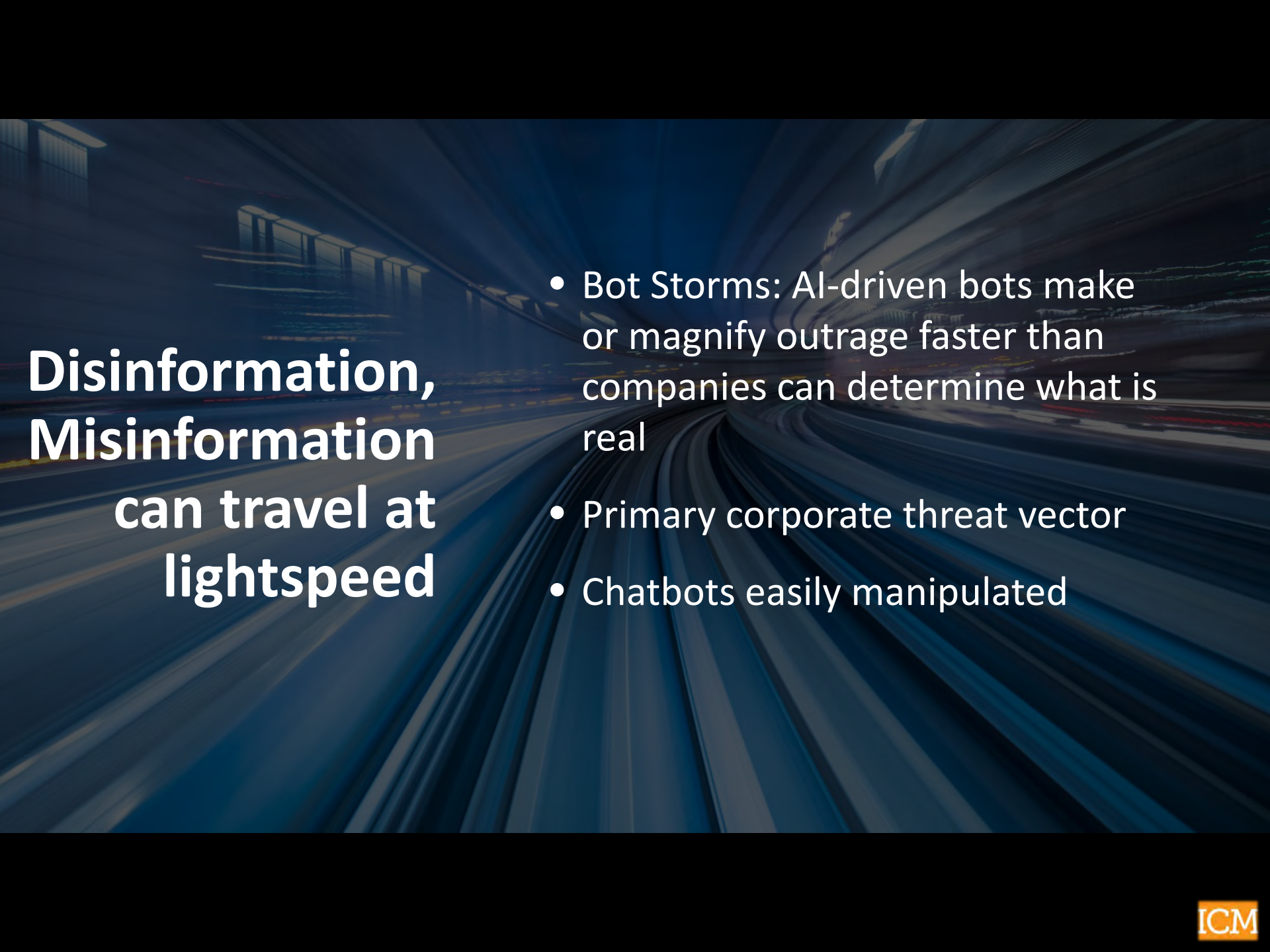
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Aug. 18-24, 2025.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Mis/Dis/Mal Information

The image shows a hand on the left holding a chain of blue metallic links. The chain is broken in the middle, and a red arrow points to the right, indicating the direction of information flow. The background is dark with a network of white dots and lines, suggesting a digital or data environment.

- 69% of Americans believe disinformation is a major problem in society
- Local news sources considered most trustworthy
 - 64% trust local broadcast news; 63% trust local newspapers
- 3/4 of respondents cited family as their most trusted sources of information
- What is MAL information?
 - Malinformation is **information which is based on fact but removed from its original context** in order to mislead, harm, or manipulate.



**Disinformation,
Misinformation
can travel at
lightspeed**

- Bot Storms: AI-driven bots make or magnify outrage faster than companies can determine what is real
- Primary corporate threat vector
- Chatbots easily manipulated



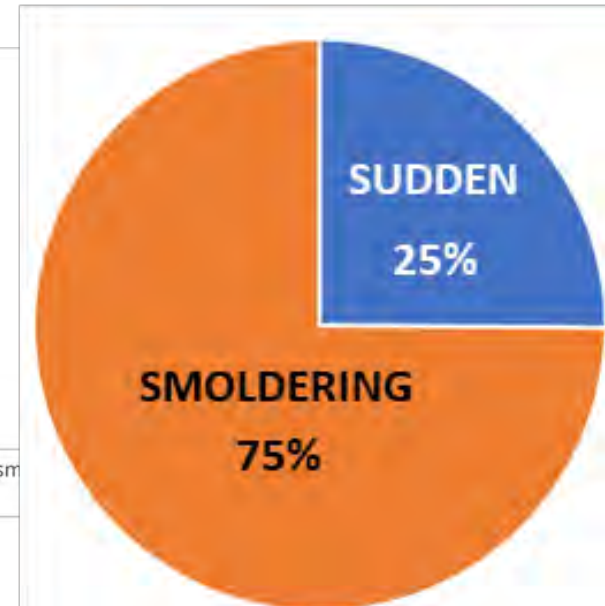
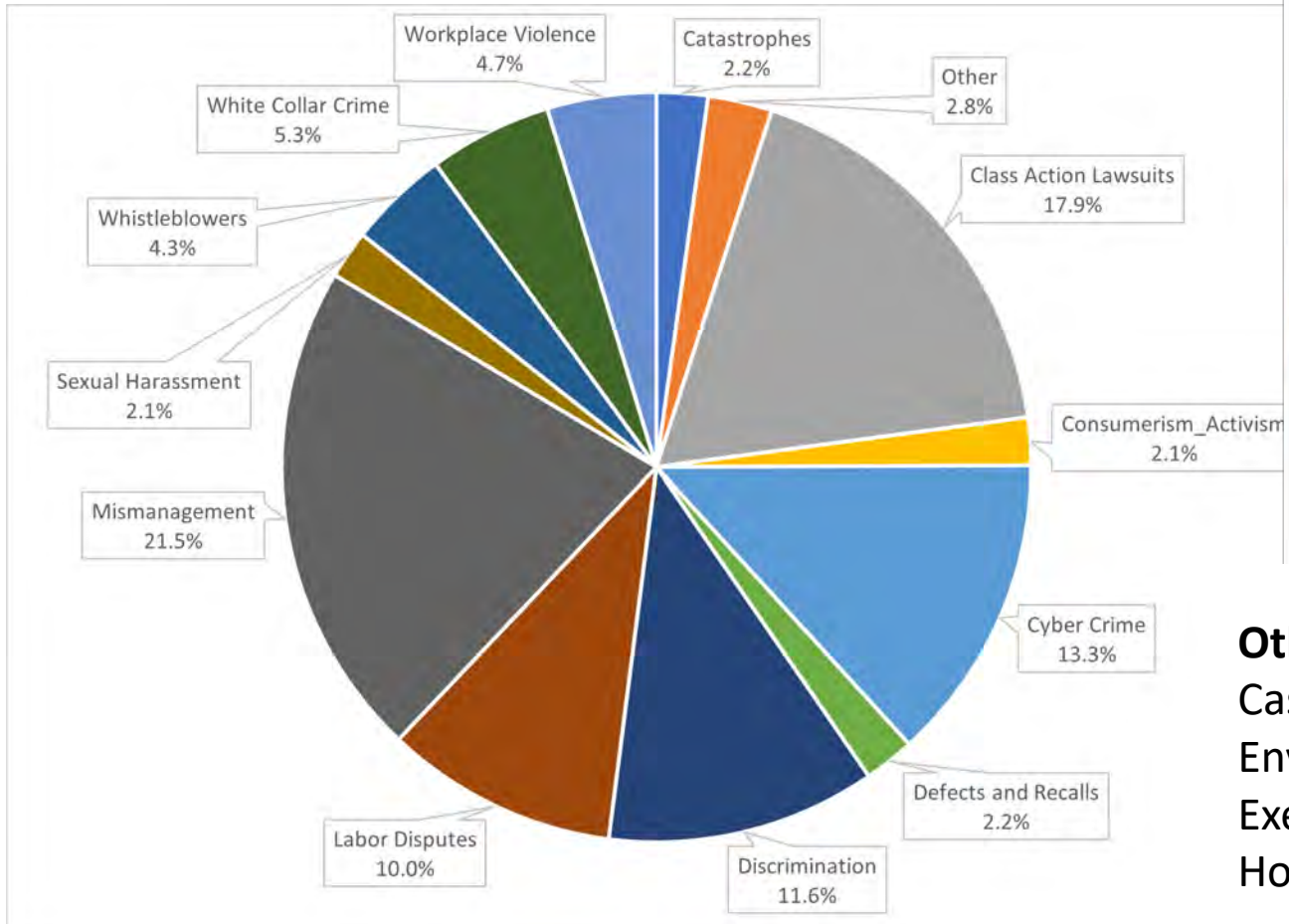
ICM Studies Crisis News

We track 16 crisis categories

- Catastrophes
- Casualty Accidents
- Class Action Lawsuits
- Activism
- Cyber Crime
- Defects and Recalls
- Discrimination
- Environmental Damage
- Executive Dismissal
- ~~Hostile Takeovers~~
- ~~Labor Disputes~~
- Mismanagement
- Sexual Harassment
- Whistle blowing
- White-Collar Crime
- Workplace Violence

Twelve of these categories can—and do – happen to church organizations

2024 ICM Annual Crisis Report



Other:

- Casualty Accidents 0.48%
- Environmental Damage 0.21%
- Executive Dismissals 1.07%
- Hostile takeovers 1.01%

Crises are Common in Many Denominations

Southern Baptists keep kicking the can down the road in their child sex abuse scandal

Americans flee religion after abuse

Five Major Catholic leaders taken down by church sex abuse scandal

Archbishop of Canterbury urged to resign over scandal

Bulawayo Baptist Church youth leader in sexual abuse scandal

Church of England is treating its volunteers abominably

Vatican finances collapse

Rent boys, crystal meth and fraud: How a Methodist bank chief fell from grace

Prominent Christian Donor Convicted in **\$100 Billion Fraud Scandal**

A Closer Look

Financial Crises

- Membership declines, loss of funding, declines in tithing
- Unexpected expenses
- Mismanagement or embezzlement of funds

Leadership and Moral Crises

- Sexual misconduct, financial impropriety
- Conflicts between factions that drive a split

Natural Disasters / Catastrophes

- Play a key role in response but can also be impacted
- Disruption of services
- Community needs

Other Events

- Mass shooter or workplace violence
- Cyber event
- Unexpected loss of key leader

Reputational Issues

- Conflicts over church direction or priorities
- Controversial statements or actions by leaders
- Negative media coverage
- Disagreements over social or political issues

We have
a problem...

Other Communication Challenges in Church Organizations



- Conflict and division about diversity, equity, inclusion, role of women
- Doctrinal disagreements
- Leadership and structural changes
- Complex cultural issues, engagement and relevance
- Balancing church autonomy with denominational cohesion
- Leaders' loss of credibility amid turmoil

The Reputation Risk Gap

Organizational Behavior:

What We Have a *(legal)*

Right to Do

vs.

Stakeholder Expectations:

What *is Right* *(ethical)*

to Do

- How does a poorly managed crisis impact reputation? Trust.
- Does the organization focus proactively on long-term solutions, or does it react to crises?



Many Faith-Based Organizations are Ill-prepared

- Half of all organizations worldwide have a plan
- Many who do have a plan, have not updated or exercised it recently
- Faith is needed but so is pragmatism and preparedness
- Biggest reason for lack of planning: **Denial**



*EXPECT THE
UNEXPECTED*



Spokespersons Utterly Unprepared:

*Zimbabwe Baptist Church
response in sex abuse
scandal*

“I can **neither deny nor confirm anything, but we are investigating such a case.** When something happens in your home, you do not go around broadcasting it as we take care of sinners, including those who are hurt by sinners.”

In the Methodist Church when a splinter group emerged in Africa...

“Even though we are saddened by their exit, we hold them in our prayers and wish them God’s guidance in their new found faith community.

We also wish to **make it categorically clear that our denomination does not permit them to leave with any of the United Methodist property** in the way and manner they left.

There, we call on him and the few who left with him to treat their exit with integrity and **not tamper with any of the United Methodist Church properties.**”



What to Communicate: *What do Stakeholders Need from Church Leaders?*

- The Three A's: **assess, acknowledge, apologize**
- **Empathy** first and foremost
- No legal-speak
- **Transparency Builds Credibility**
 - Share what you can, explain when you can't
- Explain what is being done to address the problem and make things right
- What is being done to prevent future occurrences



PROACTIVE
PREDICTIVE
PRACTICED
PREPARED

No Crisis Communication Plan or Outdated Plan?

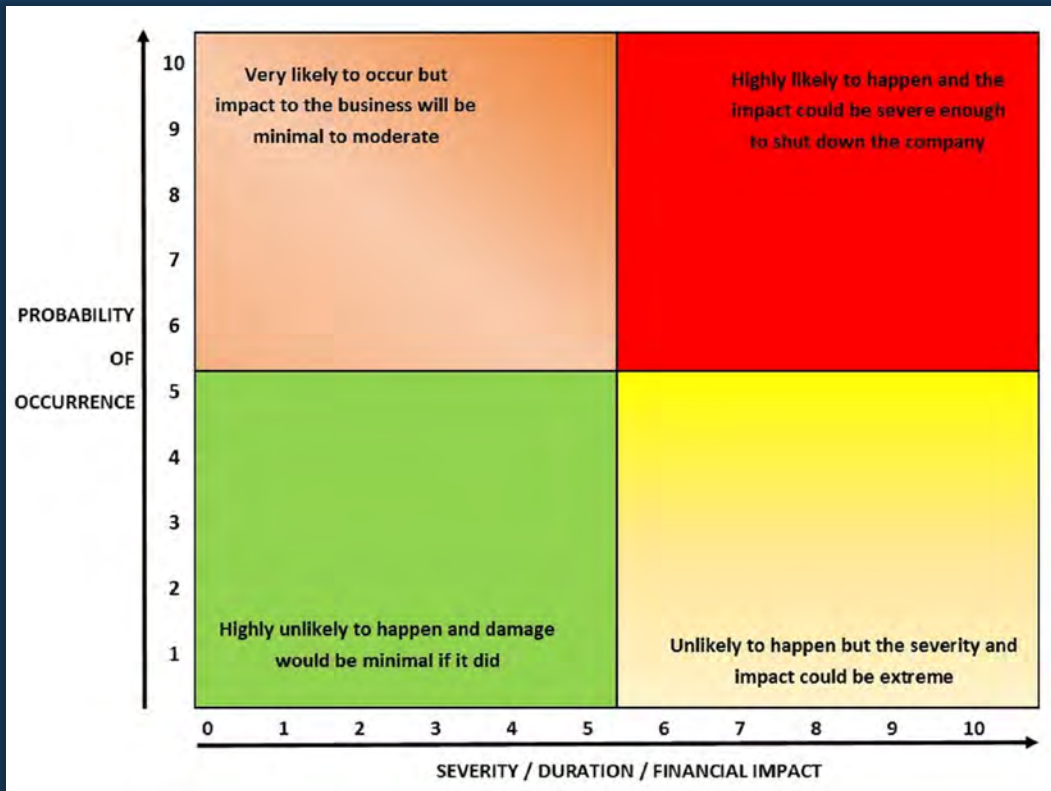
- **Best Practice:** Start with a vulnerability study
 - Multi-faceted assessment and audit
 - What events have made headlines
 - What keeps leaders “awake at night”
 - What kind of events are most likely or most damaging



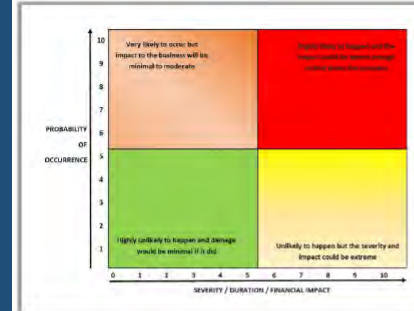
Risk and Vulnerability Assessment Informs Crisis Communication Planning

- Ongoing process
- Multiple internal and external data sources
- Input across the organization
- Assessing for probability and potential impact
- Focus on the most likely, most harmful
- Understand culture and how it relates to the reputation risk gap

Assess Each Possible Crisis: Probability and Impact



ORGANIZATIONAL RISK/CRISIS PROBABILITY AND IMPACT MATRIX



TYPES OF THREATS

Strategic (S): Risks taken for superior strategic returns

Preventable (P): Risks arising from within the organization that generate no strategic benefit

External (E): External to the organization, uncontrollable

PROBABILITY: 10 = Almost Certain
8 = Very Likely 6 = Probable
4 = Unlikely 2 = Remote
0 = Not applicable

IMPACT: 10 = Material 8 = Serious
6 = Significant 4 = Low 2 = Negligible
0 = Not Applicable

Rank these possible reputational risks/crises from 0 to 10 (see key above) for type of threat, probability each may occur and the likely severity and impact on your organization. Then, plot them on the matrix above to determine those threats that should be the highest priorities in your crisis management and communications plans.

THREAT	PROBABILITY	IMPACT	TYPE (S,P,E)
1. Severe weather/ natural disaster			
2. Health, safety & environmental issue			
3. Cyber breach / confidential data/ security leak			
4. Product defects/ recalls			
5. Transportation incident			
6. Labor disputes/ work stoppages			
7. Workplace violence			
8. Medical emergency / casualty/ fatality			
9. Bomb threat			
10. Threat by a member of the public			
11. Civil disturbances			
12. Employee/ management alleged wrongdoing			
13. Loss of a key executive			
14. Damaging rumors/ criticism			
15. Litigation or class actions			
16. Activism/ boycotts			
17. Whistleblower threat			
18. Other:			
19. Other:			
20. Other:			

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Kinds of Crises for Which to Plan

1. Damaging rumors/ social media attacks
2. Natural disaster/catastrophe
3. Financial mismanagement
4. Allegations of abuse by church leader(s), pastors, elders, program directors
5. Workplace violence/kidnapping/ robbery
6. Cyber event / information security
7. Lawsuits
8. Whistleblowers





Plan Elements

1. Purpose statement
2. Crisis team members /chain of command
3. Crisis team contact list- primary and alternates
4. Escalation/ activation guidelines & notification system
5. Line and staff roles/ responsibilities
6. Designated spokespersons and disclosure guidelines

Plan Elements

7. Information verification and approval procedures
8. Document control process
9. Approved background information/photos
10. Procedures for securing needed staff, services
11. Crisis response policies (privacy, news media, etc.)
12. Scenario plans
13. Chronological and logistical checklists/ action steps
14. Local, national and trade news media contact info
15. Checklists, forms and guidelines



Communication Strategy

Resolve immediate primary threats

- Don't underestimate the time it will take to uncover all the facts and determine how to resolve all the issues
- Avoid overpromising on timelines
- Allow time to assess magnitude of the problem, define potential solutions

Repair the root cause

- Governance, culture, performance management, policies, training
- Important to communicate intent early on
- Repair often a multi-year exercise

Restore the organization over time

- Seeds of recovery should be planted early; don't wait till the dust settles

Crisis Communications Cycle



Quick Action with Playbooks

Scenario strategy plans for
the most probable/
impactful crises

- Classify the crisis to determine if you activate the entire crisis team or a subset
- Outlines initial strategy/ steps to take as crisis unfolds
- Anticipates likely questions
- Pre-approved initial/ holding statements

APPENDIX 2-G: WEATHER EVENT/NATURAL DISASTER Communications Playbook

Overview

A sudden, unexpected disruption in the organization's operations would be costly in terms of unbudgeted expenses and, on occasion, threats to life and personal injury. This type of crisis has the potential to cause great concern among employees, volunteers, Church members, donors and strategic partners. A natural disaster that causes significant injuries and/or fatalities means the news media may already be on-scene. Some may broadcast live from the site within minutes, especially if they are already in the vicinity. As a result, Network disaster operations will be carried out under a very public eye, and Crisis Management Team members will be challenged to respond quickly and accurately.

Communication Priorities

Communications during a natural disaster should be carried out with consideration for victims and their families.

- No announcement should be made until the person's family has been notified.
- All media communications shall be handled by the Crisis Management Team. Injuries or fatalities are needed for communications.

At the same time, Mission Network should be informed as soon as possible and that everything possible should be done to protect their privacy.

- At all times, ensure that messages are not released publicly without the approval of the Crisis Management Team.
- Reception/front desk staff may be asked to direct them appropriately.

Key Stakeholders

1. Employees
2. Volunteers
3. Victims and their families
4. Visitors
5. Board members
6. Donors
7. Strategic partners/ NGOs
8. In-country government officials
9. MCUSA

Likely Questions

Crisis Management Team members should prepare to respond to questions such as:

1. Can you tell us the extent of the damage?
2. Are people out of danger? Is the area now safe?
3. How many are injured? How many were killed?
4. Can you tell us the names of those who were killed/injured?
5. Are the victims all Network staff or volunteers? Do they all work in the same area?
6. What can you tell us about those injured? How serious are the injuries? To which hospital were the injured transported?
7. How many staff and volunteers do you have in this location? How many people were in the area when this happened? Where are the uninjured now?
8. How long until you resume operations?
9. Are there preventive steps the Network could adopt for future disasters?

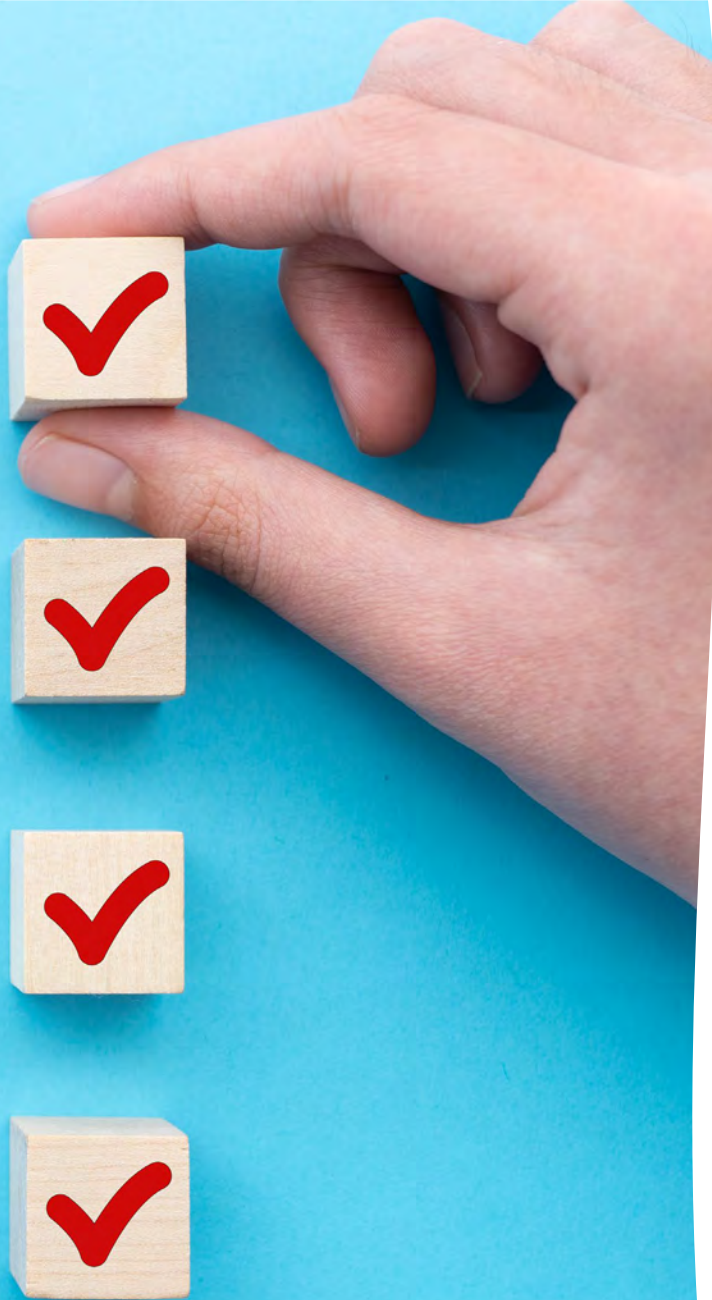
Key Messages

1. First and foremost is to express concern and sympathy for victims and their loved ones. This statement should be at the beginning of all communications.
2. Confirm the Network's impact immediately following and provide brief details on what is being done to assess the damage and a time estimate to perform repairs and return to full operation.
3. If possible, advise the media how often they can expect updates. This may range from every hour to daily for several days, depending on the extent of the crisis.

Victim Families Communications

The news media may rapidly gain a scope of the issue quickly after a natural disaster happens. Therefore, it is important to learn the names of specific victims, including the preferred spelling, so that their families can be notified before the information is made public. The Crisis Management Team, in cooperation with Human Resources, is responsible for communicating with victim families.

1. A designated Network representative should contact victim families immediately if available. Encourage the family to refer any inquiries to the designated Network representative. Encourage the family to refer any inquiries to the designated Network representative.
2. In case of death or serious injury, send a Network representative to the victim's home as soon as possible and be prepared to render assistance as required/requested. The representative should:
 - Maintain frequent contact with Mission Network to keep abreast of



Playbook Elements

1. Situation Overview
2. Crisis team participants
3. Communication priorities
4. Key Stakeholders identified and assessed
5. Likely initial questions
6. Key message themes and vehicles
7. Initial media holding statement and social post templates
8. Employee/ volunteer communication considerations
9. Social media needs
10. Additional scenario-specific considerations



Update and Exercise the Plans

- At least annually
- Exercises need not be elaborate
- Opportunities to practice using the plan
- Helps determine if plan works as designed or if changes are needed
- A facilitator can help team focus on the exercise



Crisis Exercise

- How the exercise works: Build a Playbook response
- Q&A format
- Your role
- We will work the exercise as far as time permits



Your Role

- You are a communications professional for your church and ...
- Need to quickly develop and deploy a crisis communication action plan.
- You may need to communicate quickly with a variety of stakeholders.
- What would you do first? Let's make a list.

The Situation

- An 8.2 earthquake occurred three days ago in southern California along the San Andreas fault; more than 30 aftershocks
- Epicenter near Salton Sea in area where officials have long expected a major quake
- Shaking felt as far as Las Vegas, Phoenix, and northern California.
- Severe destruction in Palm Springs, Riverside, San Bernardino, Orange, San Diego and Los Angeles counties
- Damage to structures across the area is severe but it is too soon for estimates
- First responders are still in search and rescue mode in some areas, recovery in others



Congregations Respond

- 78 individual congregations across denominations in the impacted area
- Several reported significant damage to their church buildings and property
- Congregation members also dealing with damage to their homes and places of work
- So far, there are a reported 5,000 fatalities and more than 50,000 injured across the region
- Infrastructure is experiencing intermittent failures
- Churches in Northern California have stepped in to provide immediate support and assistance
- Temporary support centers have been established at several sites





Start with Fact Gathering

- Church leaders across area reach out for assistance
- What do we need to know from them? What facts?
- Who can help us gather information?
- What might be some communication challenges we'll face?

Let's build the playbook

Communication
priorities

Key Stakeholders
identified and
assessed

Likely initial
questions

Key message
themes and
vehicles

Initial media
holding statement
and social posts

Employee/
volunteer
communication
considerations

Social media needs

Additional
scenario-specific
considerations

ICM's Principles of Crisis Management and Communication

Tell	Own the story. Tell the truth. Do it quickly and repeatedly. Apologize when you should.
Prove	Prove it. Walk the talk. Don't just say the right thing, do the right thing.
Listen	Listen to your stakeholders. Carefully and with an open mind.
Manage forward	Manage forward. Anticipate stakeholder reactions to the crisis and be prepared to respond.
Make	Make decisions that consider the impact on stakeholders and their values, expectations and influence.
Understand	Understand where your company's reputation lives; in the words and actions of every employee. Employees are your best ambassadors, and your toughest critics.
Remain	Remain calm and carry on. Build the framework for reputational success with consistent attention to acting and speaking consistent with your core values.



- The **best managed crisis** is the one you never hear about
- **Hope is not a strategy**: pray for the best, but plan for the worst
- Every organization needs **three crisis plans**: response, communication and recovery
- Put **empathy first** always
- **Assess, acknowledge, apologize**
- There are a variety of potential **crisis scenarios** for which **to prepare**
- Regular **updates and training** are critical to success

