

Executive Crisis Readiness

Why the first 72 hours are a decision problem before they are a messaging problem



ARTEFACT91

Campaign Intelligence + Strategic Communications

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ARTEFACT91 BRIEFING 02

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HOW TO READ IT

A briefing, not a report: the executive brief carries the argument, the numbered sections carry the evidence and the method, and every external figure is attributed to its source.

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Executive Brief

Crisis communications is often imagined as a writing challenge: produce the statement, prepare the spokesperson, monitor reaction. In practice, the first hours of a serious incident are dominated by decisions under uncertainty. What happened? What is verified? Who could be harmed? Who owns the decision? What must be disclosed? What can be corrected now? Which stakeholders cannot learn about this from the media? Should the chief executive speak—or should someone closer to the facts?

The quality of the public response is constrained by the quality of the internal decision system. A polished statement cannot compensate for contradictory facts, unclear authority, operational inaction or an organization that promises what it cannot deliver.

Artefact91 defines crisis readiness as the institutional capacity to detect, decide, coordinate and communicate under conditions of incomplete information and elevated consequence.

SECTION 01

The First Failure Is Often Internal

Most crisis plans describe channels, spokespeople and contact lists. Fewer describe the actual decision pathway.

When an issue emerges, teams can lose critical time establishing whether it qualifies as a crisis, who has authority, whether legal and communications advice conflict, what operational action is possible, and what facts are sufficiently verified for release. That delay produces a dangerous vacuum: external audiences form interpretations while the institution is still organizing itself.

The better question is not “How quickly can we publish?” It is “How quickly can we establish a reliable decision picture?” Speed without verification can compound the crisis. Verification without escalation can leave the organization silent while consequences grow.

SECTION 02

The Artefact91 72-Hour Model

0–2 HOURS — ESTABLISH THE FACT BASE

Separate known facts, credible but unverified information, assumptions and unknowns. Identify immediate human, operational, legal and reputational consequences. Open a decision log. Assign one source of truth.

2–6 HOURS — DEFINE THE DECISION

Clarify what leadership must decide now versus later. Identify stakeholders requiring direct contact. Set the first public posture: acknowledge, correct, disclose, pause, investigate, act or combine these.

6–24 HOURS — STABILIZE

Align internal and external communication. Close obvious information gaps. Prepare executives and frontline teams. Monitor not just volume but narrative shifts, authoritative entrants and stakeholder action.

24–48 HOURS — TEST THE TRAJECTORY

Ask whether the issue is expanding, stabilizing or changing category. Revisit assumptions. Model plausible next developments. Determine whether the organization's response is changing stakeholder behaviour.

48–72 HOURS — MOVE FROM RESPONSE TO RECOVERY

Define the proof points that will matter after attention declines: remedy, accountability, operational change, independent review, restitution, policy revision or ongoing disclosure.

SECTION 03

Five Decisions That Cannot Wait for a Crisis

Decision one: activation threshold. What combination of harm, uncertainty, stakeholder authority, velocity or operational consequence activates the crisis structure?

Decision two: decision rights. Who can authorize public acknowledgement, operational changes, executive deployment and proactive stakeholder outreach?

Decision three: evidence standard. What does “confirmed” mean, and who confirms it?

Decision four: messenger logic. The CEO is not the automatic spokesperson. Messenger selection should follow proximity to facts, accountability, credibility and stakeholder expectation.

Decision five: correction protocol. When information changes, how will the organization correct itself without creating the impression that uncertainty equals deception?

SECTION 04

Simulate Decisions, Not Press Releases

Many exercises are too orderly. Participants receive a scenario, draft messages and discuss what they would do. Real crises do not arrive as coherent case studies.

A useful simulation introduces contradictory information, a leaked internal message, a regulator inquiry, an employee post, a false image, a stakeholder demanding an answer, a reporter deadline and an operational team that cannot yet confirm the central fact. The test is not whether participants can write. It is whether the institution can maintain decision quality while the information environment deteriorates.

Measure time-to-escalation, time-to-verified-fact-base, decision ownership, contradiction rate, stakeholder sequencing and whether actions match public commitments.

SECTION 05

The Readiness Test

An executive team should be able to answer these questions without opening a 60-page binder: What activates the crisis structure? Who is in charge? Where is the verified fact base? Which decisions require CEO or board approval? Which stakeholders receive direct contact? What is the threshold for public acknowledgement? How are rumours and synthetic media handled? How is every major decision recorded? When is the crisis structure deactivated?

If the answers depend on one experienced individual being available, the organization has expertise but not readiness.

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Artefact91 Point of View

The first 72 hours should be designed as a decision system.

The purpose of crisis communications is not to make a difficult situation sound better. It is to help the institution act coherently, communicate what it knows and does not know, protect credibility while facts evolve, and demonstrate that its public posture is connected to real decisions.

The statement is an output. Readiness is the infrastructure that makes the statement believable.

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Sources & Research Base

[World Economic Forum — Global Risks Report 2026](#)

[Edelman — 2026 Trust Barometer](#)

[Reuters Institute — Digital News Report 2026](#)

RESEARCH NOTE

This briefing synthesizes current public research and Artefact91 analysis. External statistics are attributed to their source. Strategic frameworks and recommendations are Artefact91's analytical interpretation and should be adapted to the facts, jurisdiction and risk profile of each engagement.