

7 Essential Components of Crisis Communication for Leaders

When the servers are down, the building is on fire, or your workforce is quarantined for a global pandemic, customers need information. Leaders often scramble to structure an effective message during an emergency. Use this template to capture the seven essential components of crisis communication for leaders.

First, think like a customer. Instead of crafting your message around what you want to say, anticipate your customer's questions and answer them. Keep the customer's perspective at the center of your message.

I developed this crisis communication template over a decade of leading customer support teams and communicating with customers through escalations and crises. This structure works.

Answer these seven questions every time you communicate with customers during a crisis.

1. What is the problem?

Clearly defining the problem is essential to frame the rest of the conversation.

Briefly state the problem, the effects of the problem, and when it started - from the customer's point of view. Explain the impact to your customers in language they will understand.

Acknowledge the root cause of the problem if known, but skip lengthy technical explanations that aren't relevant to the customer's goals.

Stating the problem is critical in your initial communication and also in subsequent updates. Even if you explained the problem in a previous communication, don't assume that your audience received the communication or remembers what you said.

Example: Customers are experiencing delays in bill processing and cash collection because transactions are not automatically importing into the billing system. The outage started at 7:05am CT when we detected our SFTP server had become unresponsive.

In the example, notice how the problem is stated from the customers' viewpoint. You should still acknowledge that the server is down, but structure the message around the customers' goals of processing bills and collecting cash.

2. Is there a workaround?

After stating the problem, inform your customers about alternative ways to achieve their goals.

Whether your customers are trying to watch a movie or process financial transactions, they prefer the temporary inconvenience of a workaround to unproductive downtime.

This is the most urgent question to answer after you've acknowledged the problem. If you can empower customers with a workaround, they may no longer perceive this as a crisis.

Example: During this outage, you can manually import transactions through the "Transaction Import" feature of the application. If you need assistance using this feature, please contact our technical support agents at 1-800-555-1212.

3. What Has Been Done?

Explain what actions you've taken to address the crisis and detail any progress you've made toward a resolution. Answer this question to accomplish three goals:

1. Indicate that you understand the severity of the customer impact by the swiftness of your response
2. Inspire confidence that you are in command of the situation and are taking the appropriate steps to resolve the problem
3. Acknowledge any impediments that have interrupted or slowed your progress since your last update

Customers appreciate honesty and transparency. Be forthcoming about your progress and any setbacks you've encountered.

Example: When we were alerted to the unresponsive server, we immediately suspended processing to prevent additional import failures. Then we attempted to restart the server. Unfortunately, the server did not restart, further delaying our ability to restore service.

4. What You Are Doing Next?

Now that customers understand the timeline of events, you are ready to talk about the future.

Outline the next steps you are taking to resolve the crisis. Include details about any workarounds you're developing, as well your plan to resolve the root cause and end the crisis.

Explain your plan and what customers can expect in the time ahead. Also communicate the Estimated Time of Arrival (ETA) for any commitments or milestones.

Example: We are currently diagnosing the problem with the server in an attempt to repair it. Meanwhile, we are provisioning a second server in case we are not able to repair the existing server. We estimate that one of these servers will be functional in the next 2 hours. After that, we will process all the imports that have queued during this outage and resume importing transactions normally.

5. When Will the Crisis Be Over?

Customers always want to know when the crisis will be over, so provide a realistic estimate. Anticipate this question and be ready to answer it. They will surely ask for an ETA if you don't provide one.

Estimating a resolution time is an art form. Underestimate, and customers become more frustrated when you don't deliver on time. Overestimate, and customers may be pleasantly surprised when you deliver early. However, overestimate too much and customers may doubt your sense of urgency or question your competence.

As a guideline, take the best estimate from your most confident problem-solvers, multiply that by 1.5, and use that estimate in your customer communication. You'll be thankful for the extra time if you encounter any unexpected problems.

Example: *We estimate that service will be fully restored and all transactions imported at 7am CT tomorrow.*

6. What are the Risks?

Explain any known risks that could threaten the estimated timeline. Risks can come from reliance on third parties, equipment malfunctions, and even the weather.

When customers understand the risks, they are better equipped to make decisions. If you communicate risks up front, you gain credibility because of your honesty and transparency.

If you don't outline the risks beforehand, your customers may think you're making excuses when you miss ETAs.

Example: *While we do not anticipate any problems, an inability to locate replacement parts for the server could delay our ability to restore service.*

7. When Will You Provide Another Update?

Lastly, tell your customers when you will provide the next update. Allow customers to plan around your communication timeline.

Commit to a regular cadence of communication throughout the emergency to build confidence that you have the situation under control. In a crisis situation, you cannot over-communicate.

When you do resolve the crisis, explain that this is your final scheduled update and remind customers how they can contact you if they require additional support.

Example: *We will provide the next update on a customer conference call at 3pm CT, followed by email and a notification on our website. In the meantime, our technical support agents are available by phone at 1-800-555-1212.*

Don't be caught in a crisis without a communication plan. Think like a customer and use this template to address the seven essential components of crisis communication.