



Behind the Headlines:
Crisis Communications
from the Frontlines

Elaine Driscoll, Director of Communications and Policy at the
Massachusetts Executive Office of Public Safety and Security

ABOUT ME:

I'm Elaine Driscoll, Director of Communications and Policy Massachusetts Executive Office of Public Safety and Security.

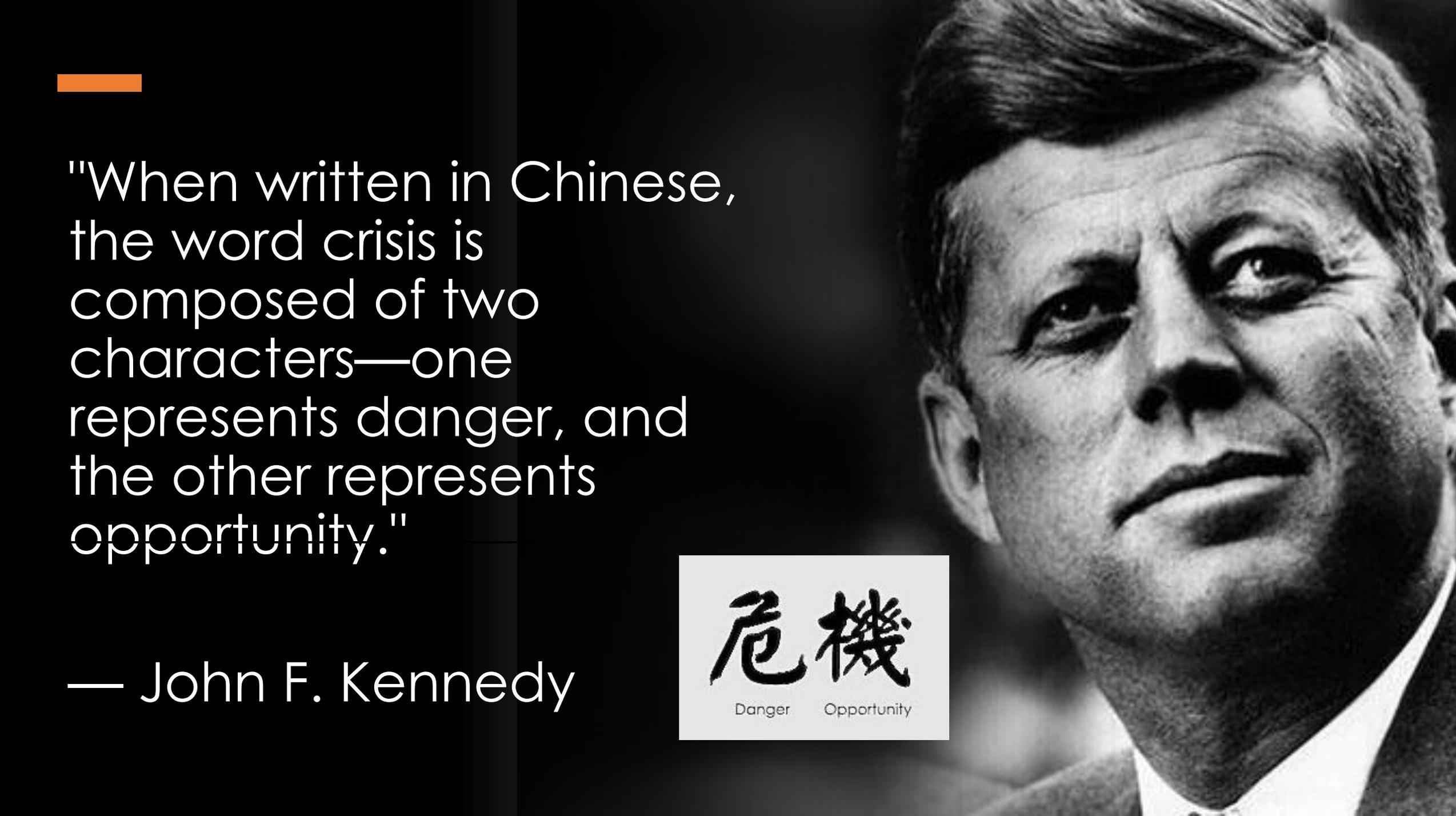
For nearly twenty years, my role has been to help high-visibility public safety and regulatory agencies exceed organizational goals, enhance transparency and accountability, and adeptly manage inevitable crises.





"When written in Chinese,
the word crisis is
composed of two
characters—one
represents danger, and
the other represents
opportunity."

— John F. Kennedy



危機

Danger Opportunity

What is Crisis Comms and why does it matter?

"It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it." —

Warren Buffett



Crisis Comms 101:

Strategies, tactics, and practices used to communicate effectively during a crisis or emergency situation.

The Goal:

Manage and mitigate its impact on an organization or individual's reputation and operations, while ensuring clear, accurate, and timely information is delivered to key stakeholders, such as the public, employees, media, and partners.

Crisis Lifecycle

Pre-Crisis

- Have a crisis communications plan
- Read the room: Social listening, stakeholder feedback, risk assessment

During the Crisis

- Manage real-time communication
- Establish response team for centralized decision-making
- Timeliness and Transparency

Post-Crisis

- Work with leadership team to identify policy adjustments, operational changes
- Focus on a trust rebuilding strategy
- Conduct of post-crisis review

8 Key Elements of Effective Crisis Comms

1. PREPAREDNESS

2. MESSAGE CONTROL

3. TRANSPARENCY

4. RESPONSIVENESS

5. SPEED AND ACCURACY

6. EMPATHY

7. LEADERSHIP PRESENCE

**8. RECOVERY AND
REPUTATION MANAGEMENT**

7 Action Steps When Crisis Hit

1. Gather the decision-makers **immediately**
2. Assess the Mess
3. Develop Key Messaging: What does the organization want to communicate?
4. Stakeholder Assessment: Who are the stakeholders and what information will they expect to hear and deserve to know
5. Determine Mode of Message Delivery
6. Respond in a **PROPORTIONAL** Manner
7. Keep moving **FORWARD!**



There is no “one size fits all” formula, but there is a process.

7 Action Steps When Crisis Hits

1. Gather Immediately

- **Speed and Accuracy:**
Time is of the essence
- Gather department decision-makers ASAP
- Report out publicly with appropriate level of substance in short order

2. Assess the Mess

- Nature of the issue?
- Internal/External ramifications?
- Requires a policy review?
- What answers are needed?
- Who can get them?
- How long will it take?

7 Action Steps When Crisis Hit

Message Legend:

- Consistent messaging
- Transparent & Honest
- Empathetic
- Clear, calm, direct
- Forward-thinking and proactive



7 Action Steps When Crisis Hits

4. The Assessment informs Message Delivery and Tactics

- Is the media already aware of the situation?
- Is the info exclusive to one reporter?
- Does issue require a press conference?
- Is it a complex topic?
Maybe a reporter roundtable would mitigate potential for inaccuracy.

5. Tools and Channels: Deliver Updates Via Multiple Platforms

- Traditional Media
- Digital and Social Media
- Internal Communication
- Monitor Social Media
- Engage in Two-Way Communication – *when possible, demonstrate listening*
- Leverage Video and Visuals – video messages, infographics, visual updates

7 Action Steps When Crisis Hits

6. Provide a **PROPORTIONAL** Response to the Incident

1. Do not overreact, do not under react
2. Do not think the news coverage will eventually just go away
3. Take steps to shorten the life of the news story by issuing a clear action plan
4. Maintain influence over the story.



Analysis

BP's clumsy response to oil spill threatens to make a bad situation worse

Tim Webb

Chief executive Tony Hayward's comments have done little to aid attempts at damage limitation



Tony Hayward's comments in a Guardian interview made the company appear aloof and unconcerned about environmental damage. Photograph: Gerald Herbert/AP

The public relations strategy for dealing with a disaster such as the Gulf of Mexico spill, now officially the worst in US history, was always going to be about damage limitation.

With each failure to stem the flow, BP's credibility has taken another blow.

7 Action Steps When Crisis Hits

Bad News Happens to **Good Organizations!**

7. Don't stop moving forward.
 - Bad news is contagious.
 - Assign a "business as usual" team member.
 - Crisis Day 2 is more complex than Crisis Day 1



10 Most Common Pitfalls

1. Lack of Preparedness

No Plan

Not Trained

2. Delayed Response

Appear unresponsive or unprepared

The absence of a quick, initial statement allows misinformation and speculation to spread

3. Failure to Communicate Transparently

Withholding or distorting information can damage credibility and trust

Overly defensive

4. Ignoring Stakeholders

Not identifying and addressing key audiences

Neglecting to communicate with internal stakeholders, feed rumor mill

5. Inconsistent Messaging

Contradict across platforms or from different spokespeople

Lack of a single, unified message

10 Most Common Pitfalls

6. Overreliance on Social Media

Misusing social media by posting inappropriate or insensitive messages.

Not monitoring social media effectively.

7. Failure to Follow Up

Not providing regular updates or staying silent once an initial statement is made.

Failing to demonstrate ongoing efforts to resolve the crisis, which can lead to a loss of public trust.

8. Overpromising Solutions

Committing to solutions or timelines that are unrealistic

Not being clear about what the organization is doing to rectify the situation.

9. Lack of Empathy

Focusing solely on defending the organization rather than addressing the concerns of those affected.

Using corporate or legal jargon that seems impersonal and detached, rather than human and relatable language.

10. Neglecting to Learn from the Crisis

Failing to conduct a post-crisis analysis to understand what went wrong and how to improve.

Ignoring lessons learned, leading to repeated mistakes in future crises.

Role of Comms Director in a Crisis

What should they do:

1. Pre-crisis planning and crisis training- assist with risk assessment and clear messaging
2. Assess the situation – gather info, collect and verify information
3. Evaluate public perception – media and stakeholder assessments
4. Craft clear and consistent messages – inform tone, advocate for transparency, balance empathy and accountability and **ADAPTION**
5. Media management – spokesperson and damage control, monitor and respond
6. Post-crisis analysis
7. Rebuilding Trust



Role of Comms Director in a Crisis

What don't they do:

- Not the ultimate decision-maker
 - Not in charge of operational decisions
 - Don't handle legal matters (but DO coordinate with legal team)
 - Don't manage the physical or operational response to the crisis
 - Not IT, HR
 - Not responsible for fixing service issues
 - Can't make bad news just disappear
 - Can't tell reporter not to write something that is true or "give them another story instead"
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