



WHITE PAPER

The Critical Communications Cycle

PROLOGUE

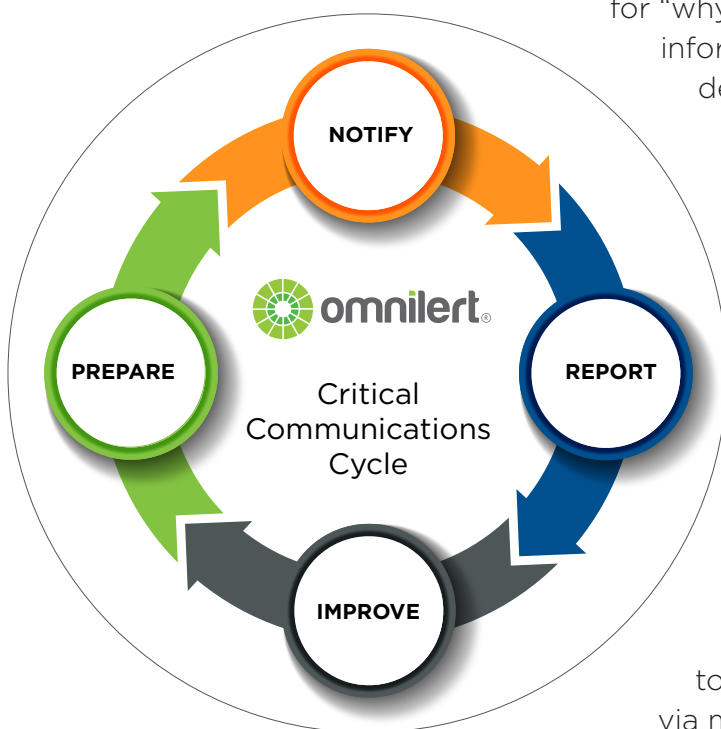
It's been a long day and you're ready to go home. You've worked a ten hour shift and no longer have the ability to focus. You try to organize your desk and pack your bag while your computer attempts to shut down. You're one of five people who are left in the office. Suddenly, you hear gun shots, which are followed by screaming down the hall. Your co-workers begin to panic. What do YOU do?

This scenario is no longer a "what if" situation. It has become an unfortunate reality which takes place way too often. It's not unusual for us to fantasize about our reaction during a crisis, be it man-made or a natural disaster. But, when the real crisis comes, being completely focused and ready to react calmly and consistently is easier said than done.

The people with the best chance of survival are the ones who are prepared and take practical action within seconds. There can be no time for panic. But how can this be accomplished?

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, more and more organizations have invested in an Emergency Notification System to quickly communicate with their people should an incident occur. Much of the focus has been on the basic purchase and core "send message" training for authorized personnel. Unfortunately, much of the purpose for "why" it is important to communicate critical information gets lost in a multi-departmental debate.



Having a broader perspective on the stages of any critical incident that requires communication will help ensure a successful outcome. This holistic perspective translates to a practical blueprint from which the entire organization can coalesce and deliver a coordinated and well orchestrated emergency response.

The "Critical Communications Cycle" is the blueprint that maps each phase of incident communications with the associated actions required for each. There are distinct aspects of preparation, before an incident, that all need to be addressed. It is essential to notify people via multiple modalities during the first minute of an incident. It is also very important to continue collaborating and monitoring during the incident. After every incident, it is important to review the response and look for ways to improve.

BEFORE | Prepare

The evolution of alerting from the smoke signal to the modern Emergency Notification System has produced many ways to communicate almost instantly with masses - regardless of where they are. Leveraging these advancements, it is much more efficient to communicate with anyone during a crisis - and it all begins with an initial plan.

1. Assemble Critical Communications Team

It's important to assemble a Critical Communications Team (CCT) that will take the lead in developing and delivering critical communications when a sudden emergency events occur. Each CCT should include at least one person from an authoritative level of the organization.

For example, a college campus CCT could include a leader from the following groups:

- **Campus Safety**
- **Student Affairs**
- **Public Relations**
- **Administration**
- **Legal Representation**
- **Local Law Enforcement and First Responders**

Having the right people participate in the planning is crucial. You'll need members who have the confidence and steadiness to help with the planning AND take complete charge when quick decisions need to be made. The clarification of the roles and responsibilities of the individuals during this time is an important element.

2. Define and Document

A well-coordinated response to an emergency requires the establishment of guidelines that will direct what happens in an emergency. During this step, try to determine all possible scenarios you might encounter (such as shootings, a gas leak, and severe weather), and have the appropriate communication defined to deliver to the public, customers, and other stakeholders. How you will be made aware of the incident -- phone call, SMS tip, feeds from the National Weather Service, desktop alerts? Which mechanisms will you put in place to introduce awareness?

Consider the following questions when creating a plan:

- **What warrants a full mass notification?**
- **Who is authorized to send a notification?**
- **What information should be communicated?**
- **What information do different groups and notification methods required?**
- **How do you actually send the message?**

BEFORE | Prepare

3. Craft Your Message

Messaging that needs to go out to different groups should be crafted prior to any incident. The initial message should be scripted to provide enough detail to provide awareness and directives to the entire population.

Decide which of your CCT members will be responsible for sending this notification when a crisis occurs and how will it be done. Choosing someone with a sense of urgency and a calm nature is always better than just picking the highest person on the totem pole to deliver an organization's notification during a crisis. Emails, text messaging, phone calls, and social media should all be evaluated - including consideration of who is on the receiving end. You must also define performance standards. Discuss the right time to initiate each notification, what you want the delivery success to be, and when it's time to engage external parties. This will be best achieved by employing automation - setting up in advance a set of pre-configured actions that can be initiated with one click from the web, mobile app, or via an external trigger based on each of the possible situations you have defined. Using automation empowers a quick response using thoughtful language for messages, with a logical set of actions to invoke in the event of an emergency. Scenarios can be configured to enable instant unified command for the CCT to collaborate on the emergency response.

Below is an example of how, for instance, a school can use automated scenarios to initiate a lock down within seconds:

- **A text message is sent to all students informing them of the lock down**
- **Students receive a mobile app notification, inviting them to interact via the app and potentially provide more information back to the CCT**
- **The school homepage is updated with the lock down notice**
- **Telephones on campus are dialed with an automated, defined staff voice message**
- **Digital signs in the Student Union have an audible and full-screen alert**
- **A tweet is posted to Twitter with the lock down notice**
- **A new post is created on the school's Facebook page**
- **Campus-wide televisions display a notice of the lock down in place**
- **An audible message is broadcast through the fire alarm system**
- **The local police department and fire rescue receive a call from the school requesting their presence on campus**
- **An outbound conference call and web conferencing session is initiated to connect the Crisis Communications Team**
- **Lock down procedures are delivered to mobile devices**

BEFORE | Prepare

3. Craft Your Message (cont.)

Trying to orchestrate all of these actions under duress - once the lock down incident has been confirmed -- can be very nerve wracking. If these actions are created prior to an incident in collaboration with the CCT using well-defined policy and procedures as a guide, what once took 15 minutes can happen in well under 15 seconds. No emergency is the same, so you need to have a response plan that can adapt to new situations and circumstances. This means your approach should reflect this always-evolving reality by constantly making improvements to your procedures.

It's also important to realize that no one technology has 100 percent reach. The best way to approach touching everyone is to provide redundancy by applying multiple modalities in your notification. You can and should use a variety of platforms when communicating your message, but be aware that different platforms have different capabilities and constraints. For instance, making sure the same message can reach both a tablet device and an office phone is essential when using a multi-modal approach to notification.

Establishing policies, creating processes, defining scenarios, and providing training on deploying the emergency response is paramount to ensure a swift and successful response.

Training for emergency response can be achieved in the following ways:

- **Table-Top Exercises:** Team members participate in a facilitated execution and analysis of the crisis communications plan, and reviews the process in a stress-free environment without pressure.
- **Full-Scale Exercise:** Incorporates all stakeholders in the crisis communications plan in an all-hands on deck drill to respond to an incident.

Remember, a well-trained team must apply their knowledge in the form of frequent testing and drills to ensure that they are well-prepared to cope with a real emergency. Training exercises provide a practical way to assess the outcomes of the emergency response plan, decide what needs to be done differently, and identify any additional training that is required moving forward.

DURING | Notify - Mobilize - Collaborate

No one ever wants to experience a crisis, but having a defined and documented plan in place is imperative. When an incident does occur, you want to be prepared to handle it in a calm and cool fashion.

1. Notification

Once an incident has been reported and the situation has been validated or confirmed, your crisis communications plan commences. It is critical to communicate with people via the means that they consume information. Applying a multi-modal approach provides the greatest reach and ensures redundancy.

There are two types of endpoints for notifications:

Personal Notifications:

Messages sent to individuals via their personal devices. This includes:

- SMS (text messages)
- Mobile notifications (push messages)
- Phone calls (voice)
- Email

Mass Notifications:

Information broadcasted to widely accessible communications:

- Website
- Social media
- Public address system
- Digital signs
- Televisions

As a best practice, initial messages can be initiated from scripted scenarios which provide the most fundamental alert information, with more detailed

information to follow.

2. Mobilize

It is critical to summon the necessary first responder resources to support the overall emergency response. By incorporating internal and external first responders into your CCT they can be included in your scenarios so they are notified once an incident occurs.

Resources to mobilize during the commencement of an incident can include:

- Local law enforcement
- Ambulance and Emergency Medical Technician
- Federal law enforcement
- Internal security or safety team
- Fire and rescue
- HAZMAT team

Every single second counts in resolving an incident. An ambulance arriving even one minute sooner can affect the successful outcome of the response.

DURING | Notify - Mobilize - Collaborate

3. Collaborate

As the incident is confirmed, quickly pulling together the CCT to collaborate and assess the situation, while determining the next steps, becomes paramount. As a best practice, we recommend creating a reservation-less telephone conference bridge, and a web conferencing meeting that is recurring or instantly engageable. The link to the web conference meeting can be included in the outbound message along with the telephone conference information. Most smart phones will allow the recipient to click on the link to initiate the web conference session. This instant unified command allows the sharing of live video feeds, maps, and other relevant data that will help the CCT make informed decisions.

As the incident unfolds, there will be feedback from the community providing ground-level insights that may require additional decisions, communications, or actions. This feedback can be monitored as it happens.

There are several mechanisms for monitoring feedback:

- **Mobile Apps:** Apps provide a powerful platform for gaining additional intelligence. You can receive reports (“tips”) from your community, provide them with instant, rich communications during an incident, and poll them to assess their individual status and gain a better aggregate visualization of the situation. This information can provide thousands of eyes and ears to help inform next-steps in the response.
- **Social Media:** What are people tweeting about? It is very easy for individuals to create their own imagined storyline and use social media to share that (potentially inaccurate) information with the world. This is where it is important to keep the public informed with official information to prevent inaccurate social storylines from emerging. An information vacuum will be filled by someone - if not your organization.
- **Inbound Text Messages:** Your community can reply to notification text messages, or generate new direct messages.

When an emergency occurs the need to communicate is immediate. Employees, visitors, and customers will want to know how they will be impacted, local government officials will want to know what is going on in their community, families will be concerned, and neighbors living nearby will seek information. Using scenarios will be the key advantage in communicating quickly and accurately during any emergency situation.

AFTER | Report and Improve

When the incident has been resolved, there will be data and practical experiences that can be reviewed to improve the crisis communications plan and response for the future.

The process of collecting data and reviewing these reports will help you to assess how the incident unfolded, how effectively the response was executed, and the reach of the communications. With this new information you can now go back and refine the crisis communications response process.

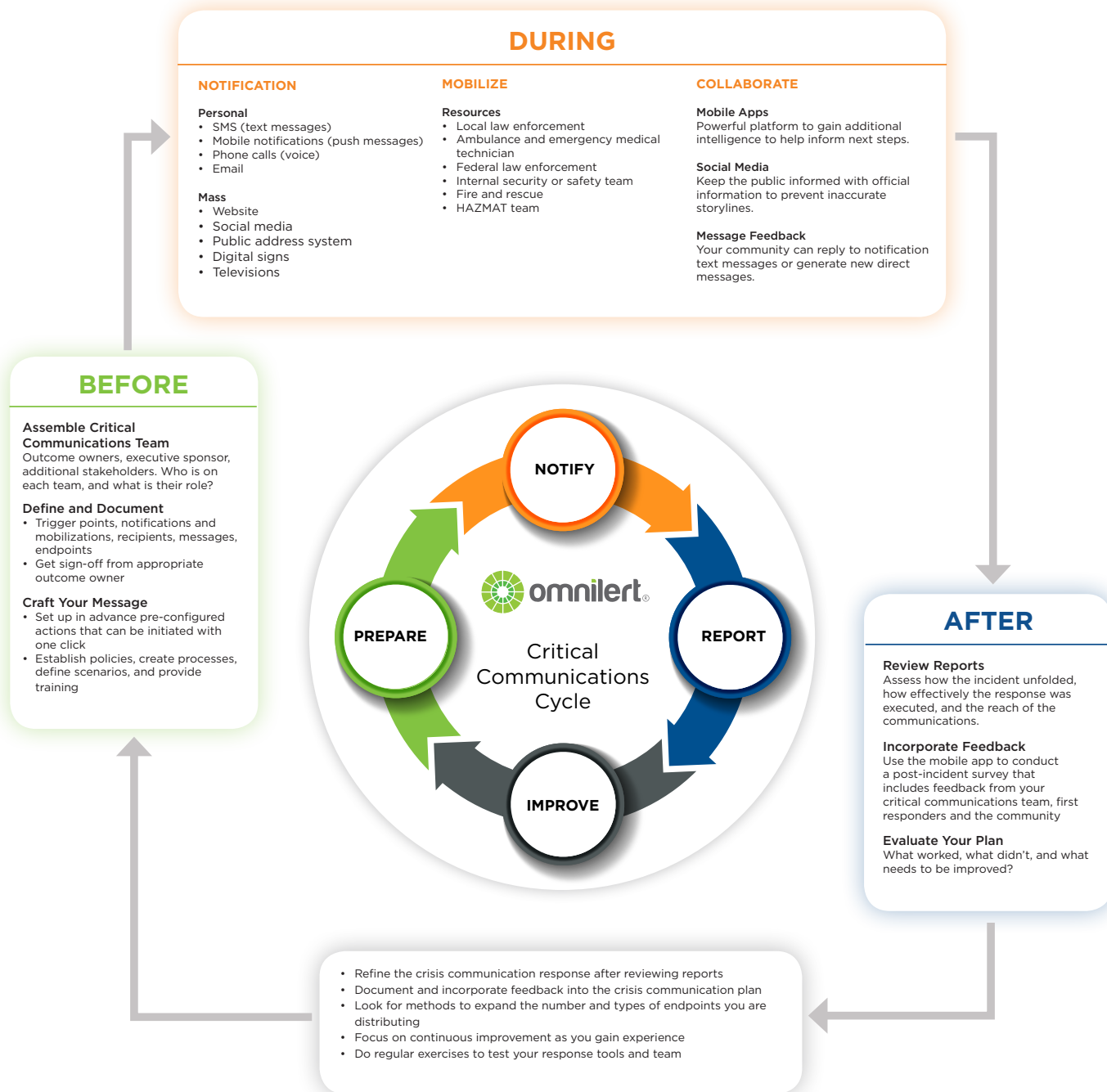
Incorporating feedback from a post-incident survey that includes feedback from your CCT, first responders and the community, will provide additional insights. You should schedule a meeting of your CCT to review the incident and the actions in detail. The improvements derived from the post-incident analysis should be documented and incorporated into the Crisis Communications Plan.

Using the mobile app, you can poll your community to request feedback. You can also utilize Social Media. Don't be afraid to ask for suggestions from those who were active or vocal. They may have input that will help improve your emergency response plan.

Take a critical look at your plan. Determine which parts worked, which didn't, and what needs to be improved. For example, you may realize that key people were left out when it came to the initial notification or the delivery success rate wasn't as high as anticipated. During this analysis look for methods to improve your organization's ability to expand the number and types of endpoints you are distributing notifications to ensure reach and redundancy.

Your plan is never going to fit the actual crisis perfectly but it's important to have it as close to perfect as possible. Focus on the continuous improvement of your plan as you gain experience and encounter new situations. Regular updates are an essential element of any critical communications planning. Do regular exercises to test your response tools and team so when a crisis does occur, you'll be ready.

Remember, there are numerous incidents that can result in a crisis. Having an effective plan in place will not only help to ensure safety but will keep everyone on the same page when communication matters most.



About Omnilert

Omnilert is the pioneer in emergency notification and management solutions and a leader in the higher education market. Its reliable product offerings provide organizations with peace of mind by streamlining instantaneous communications and response efforts to promote safety, security, and compliance.

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