The Four 'Gaps' in Crisis Communication

A framework for energy sector leaders

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Why This Matters Now, In This Room

Grid instability, outages, delayed infrastructure projects, hydrogen uncertainty, the pace of net zero build-out - the energy sector is operating in a period where the gap between an incident happening and the public forming a judgement about it has collapsed to minutes, not hours.

Every organisation in this room will face a crisis. The question is whether you'll be the source people trust in the first hour, or the subject other people are explaining.

A Note on Where This Comes From

Before moving into corporate communications coaching and training, I spent more than twenty years in TV and radio newsrooms at the BBC and ITV - nationally and locally, reporting, producing and presenting, including time at BBC Westminster.

Today I help senior leaders, boards and communications teams prepare for media interviews, develop presentation and public speaking skills, and improve leadership communication.

I've also just published my first book 'The Heart of Communication' that shows how emotional connection strengthens clarity, trust and persuasion.

One of my focuses is with energy sector clients navigating live incidents. I've run numerous multi-agency crisis media response events, most recently with National Gas with another scheduled for this October.

Over the past decade this experience has crystallised into a framework I call The Four 'Gaps' of Crisis Management Communication - organisational barriers that repeatedly prevent capable firms from communicating effectively when it matters most.

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1. The Knowledge Gap

The greatest misconception in crisis communication is that you need all the facts before you can say anything. That thinking belonged to a different media age.

Today, the first version of events is often written within minutes by witnesses or self-appointed experts on social media. AI-generated content can blur fact and fiction further.

The danger is not simply misinformation. The danger is silence.

Even organisations that understand the need to communicate early often find themselves paralysed by their own governance. Meanwhile, the story continues without you.

When organisations wait for complete certainty before communicating, they unintentionally hand the role of primary source to someone else.

The role of senior leaders and comms professionals is not to provide answers they don't yet possess. It is to provide confidence while uncertainty exists - because in those early moments, audiences are making emotional judgements before they make rational ones.

> *Discussion: Where does your organisation sit today - does your governance let you speak within the first hour, or does it require certainty first?*

2. The Authority Gap

For many organisations, the greatest obstacle to effective crisis communication is not the media. It is the boardroom.

Statements circulate endlessly, and every sentence requires another approval or one more briefing before anyone can say anything publicly.

This happens because experienced communications professionals are prevented from doing the job they were hired to do because senior management doesn't trust them, or is worried about stakeholder, regulatory or investor criticism.

This reflects a deeper organisational problem. It means either the wrong spokesperson has been appointed, or they haven't been properly prepared. Neither is the media's fault.

Boards should empower communications leaders with the authority to respond quickly, confidently and within agreed parameters.

Trust is a fragile currency – it is demonstrated best by allowing skilled professionals to use their judgement when time matters most.

> *Discussion: Who in your organisation actually holds the authority to speak in the first sixty minutes of a crisis - and do they know it?*

3. The Familiarity Gap

One of the greatest communications challenges facing the energy industry is structural: unlike many public-facing organisations, it has very little opportunity to build trust before a crisis occurs.

The audience's relationship with the organisation is almost entirely invisible.

For many customers, the only time they engage with an energy company is when something has gone wrong.

Contrast that with supermarkets, the NHS or even rail companies - visible people delivering visible services every day. Energy companies rarely have that advantage. The infrastructure is hidden.

That means trust cannot rely on familiarity. It has to be earned through communication, in the moment.

During a crisis, every spokesperson, interview and social media update becomes the public face of the organisation - for many people, their very first meaningful interaction with your business. They are not simply judging how well you are managing the incident. They are deciding whether your organisation feels competent, honest, transparent and human.

> *Discussion: If a crisis is the first time most of your audience meets your organisation, what impression are you currently set up to give?*

4. The Collaboration Gap

Many organisations still view journalists as opponents. That is often a costly mistake.

In the earliest stages of a crisis, the media is not simply scrutinising your organisation - it is one of the fastest ways of communicating with the people who matter most.

Journalists can tell communities what they need to do, and amplify safety messages.

Against that backdrop, crisis communication becomes less about defending your organisation and more about creating trust with the audience.

Journalists will understandably ask who is responsible and what went wrong - but these questions belong to the investigation, not the initial response. This is why exceptional media communication skills matter so much.

A skilled spokesperson can acknowledge difficult questions without becoming defensive, or drawn into speculation or blame.

> *Discussion: Do your teams currently treat journalists as a channel to the public, or as an adversary to be managed?*

The Crisis Management 'Gap' Principle

At Dark Star, we believe the first few hours of a crisis are rarely won by the organisation with the most information. They are won by the firm that communicates first, with credibility, authority and humanity.

Facts deliver information. Emotion delivers meaning.

In today's digital world, reassurance is often the most valuable message you can deliver while relevant facts are still emerging.

Over to the Room

Four questions worth examining:

1. Which of the four gaps - Knowledge, Authority, Familiarity or Collaboration - is costing your organisation the most right now?

2. What would need to change in your governance for a spokesperson to speak within the first hour, not the first day?

3. Where does your organisation currently build public trust outside of a crisis - and is it enough?

4. Is your relationship with journalists set up as a partnership or a defence?