



Crisis Mode: How Organizations Prepare, Respond, and Recover

A 90-minute session on building organizational resilience: before, during, and after a crisis.

Presented by: IRONWOOD BUSINESS CONSULTING

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Today's Presenters

Kevin Reynolds

Crisis preparedness, operational response, and DOT case study

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HR and people response, investigations, and people-related cases

Kyle Heslin, SHRM-CP

Crisis communications, recovery, rebuilding trust, and wrap-up

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What Do We Mean by "Crisis"?

We're not just talking about natural disasters. A crisis is any event that exceeds normal operating processes and requires coordinated organizational response.



Safety & Violence

Workplace fatality, injury, or threats



Misconduct

Employee or leadership misconduct



Regulatory & Legal

Regulatory action or major compliance problem

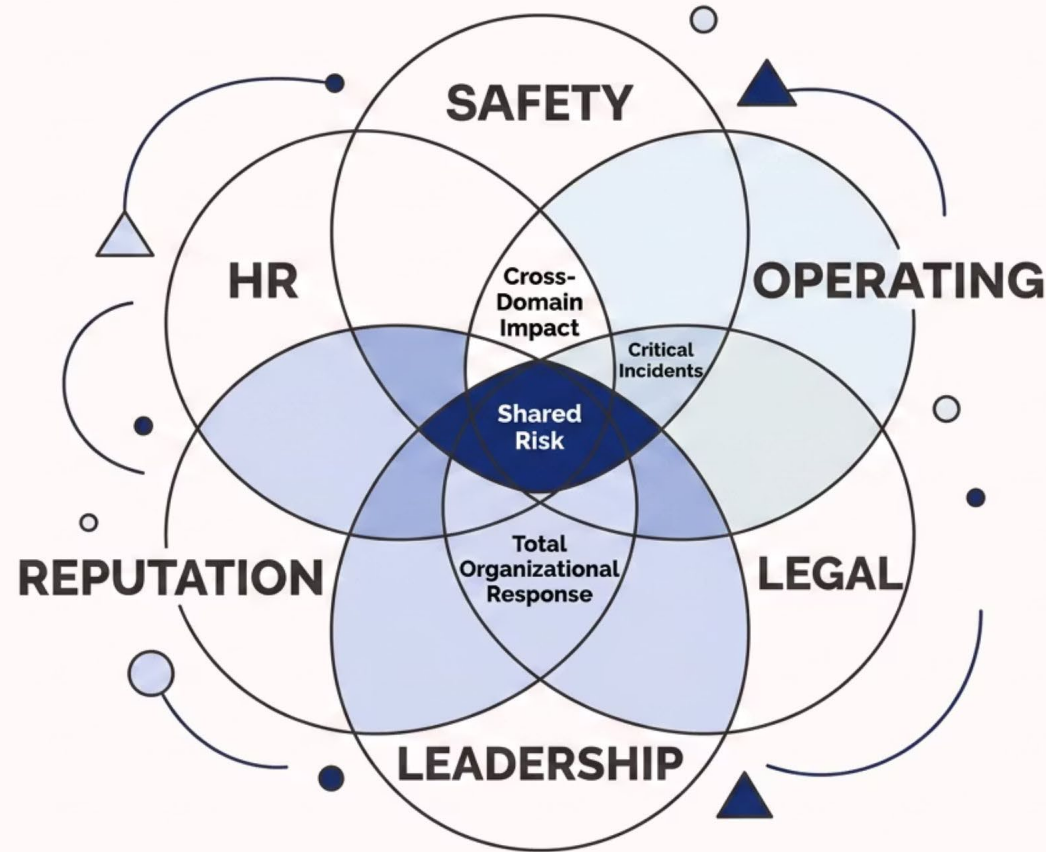


Reputation & Continuity

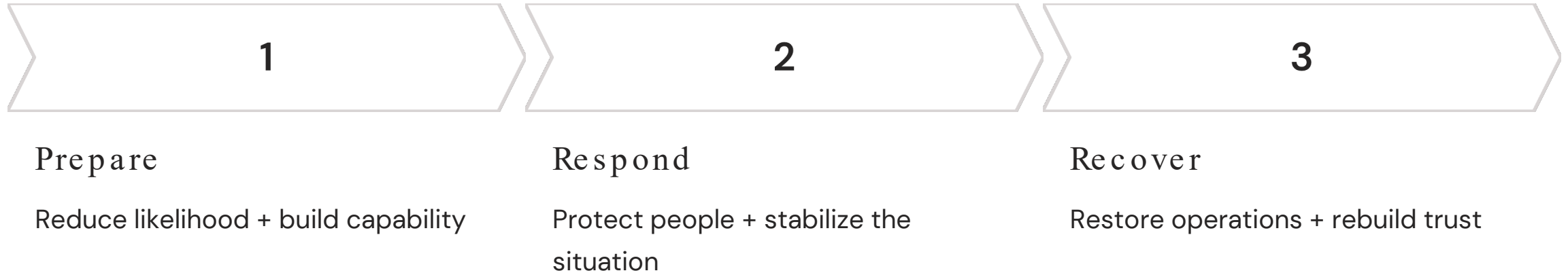
Reputational event or business continuity threat

A Crisis Rarely Stays in One Lane

Something might begin as a safety issue and become an HR, communications, legal, and operational crisis within hours. Every function is connected.



Prepare → Respond → Recover



This three-stage framework is the foundation for everything we'll cover today.

Crisis Readiness Starts Before the Crisis

You do not want to meet your crisis-response team for the first time during a crisis.

Preparedness means having the right elements in place **before** anything happens: policies, procedures, training, reporting channels, defined roles, outside resources, and communication plans.

The Infrastructure of Preparedness

A prepared organization has documented systems across every critical area:

Policies & Procedures

- Emergency/crisis policies
- Workplace violence
- Safety procedures
- Investigations

Systems & Protocols

- Reporting channels
- Escalation protocols
- Business continuity
- Documentation expectations
- Crisis communications

Know Who Owns What Before Something Happens

Ambiguity about authority is one of the most dangerous gaps in crisis preparedness. The critical question: **Who has authority to make decisions?**



Leadership



Safety



HR



Legal



Insurance



Communications



Operations



Outside Specialists

Warning Signs: Crises Aren't Always Sudden

Not every crisis arrives with flashing lights.

- Repeated safety incidents or near misses
- Rising claims and regulatory indicators
- Unusual turnover, complaints, or manager concerns
- Escalating employee conflict
- Repeated compliance failures

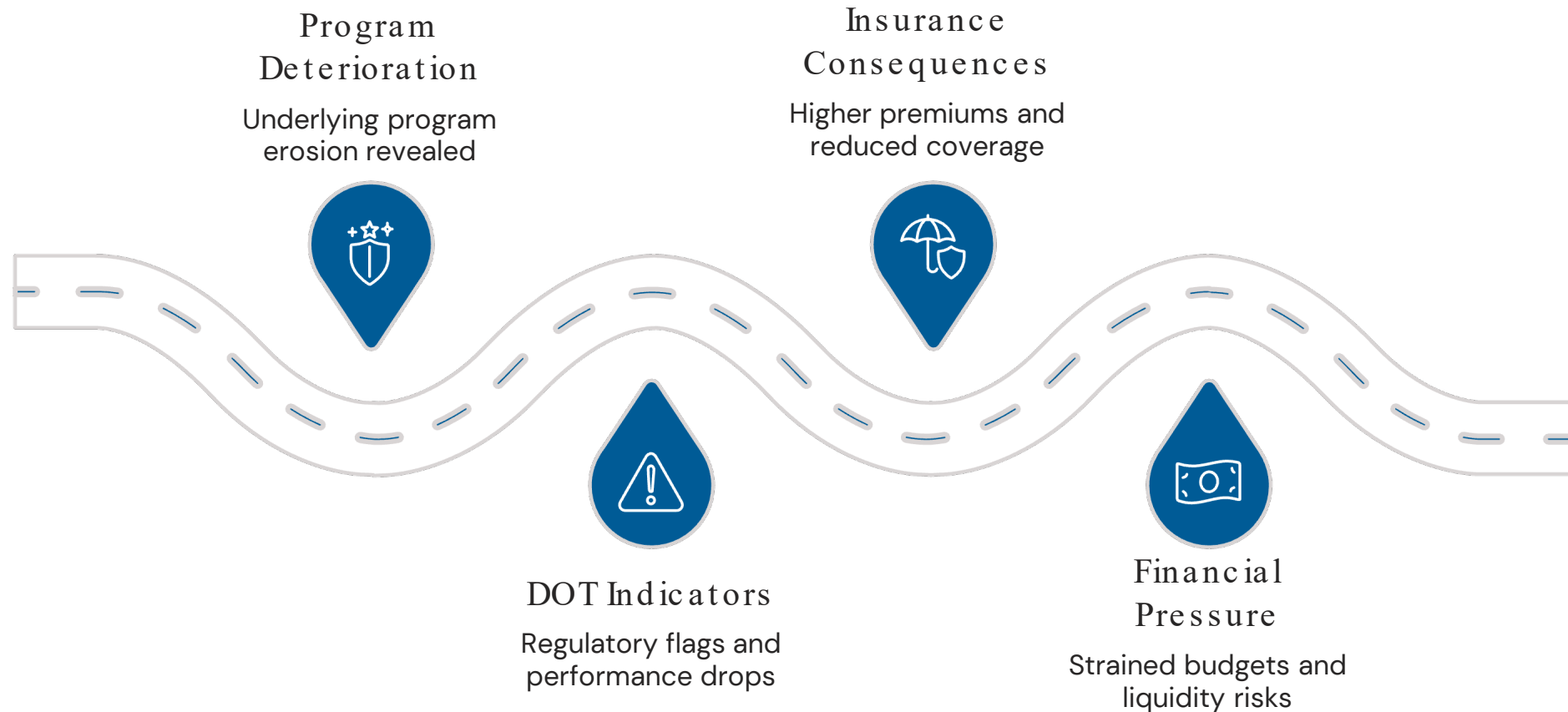
CASE STUDY #1

Real IRONWOOD Case: The Crisis That Built Slowly

A transportation client faced a rapidly escalating insurance and DOT compliance problem that ultimately **threatened the viability of the organization**. The warning signs had been present for months — but went unaddressed until the situation became critical.



How a DOT Program Became an Existential Business Risk



Surface-level fixes weren't enough. IRONWOOD found that the underlying program had eroded significantly — and that the consequences were compounding across insurance, finance, and operations simultaneously.

11 Months Later: From Crisis to Recovery

Before

- Unsustainable risk exposure
- Weak DOT compliance program
- Severe insurance pressure
- Company viability threatened

After IRONWOOD Intervention

- Program fully rebuilt
- Accountability established
- Performance measurably improved
- Risk controlled
- Company able to continue operating

When the Crisis Actually Happens

Preparation buys you time. Eventually, however, something may happen that requires immediate action.

The transition from slow-moving risk to acute crisis can happen in an instant. What you do in the first minutes and hours defines the outcome.



The First Hours Matter

Minutes and hours —not days —can determine:

Employee Safety

Immediate physical and psychological protection

Evidence Preservation

Facts and documentation secured early

Regulatory Response

Timely notification and compliance posture

Organizational Liability

Legal exposure shaped by early decisions

Employee Confidence

Trust built or broken in the first response

Public Perception

Narrative shaped before media arrives

The First Five Priorities

1 Protect People

Physical safety and psychological wellbeing come first, always.

2 Stabilize the Situation

Stop the bleeding — prevent the crisis from expanding.

3 Preserve Facts and Evidence

Secure documentation, witnesses, and physical evidence immediately.

4 Establish Command

Clarify who is leading and who has decision-making authority.

5 Communicate Intentionally

Say what you know, when you know it — deliberately.



Every
organizational
crisis eventually
becomes a
people issue.

CHRISTINE BELDNER — HR & PEOPLE RESPONSE

HR's Role in Crisis Response

HR rarely manages just one thing during a crisis. The function must simultaneously hold multiple responsibilities:

Employees

Leadership

Investigations

Policies

Documentation

Leave &
Accommodations

Confidentiality

Retaliation Risks

Employee Support

Employees Need a Way to Raise the Alarm

Reporting systems only work if employees trust them and can actually use them. Key elements include:

- Multiple reporting channels available
- Ability to bypass the direct supervisor
- Anonymous channels when appropriate
- Clear communication about what happens after a report
- Demonstrated trust in the process

Managers Are Often the First Line of Detection

Managers don't have to solve everything. But they must act when they see something. The framework is simple:

1

Recognize

Notice warning signs and changes in behavior or environment

2

Document

Record what was observed, when, and by whom

3

Report

Escalate through the appropriate channel immediately

4

Escalate

Ensure the right people have the information they need

When Leadership Makes the Problem Worse

Often the original event isn't what turns an incident into a crisis. The response does.

Leadership missteps — inappropriate responses to employee photos, sexual relationships with subordinates, or mishandled accommodation requests — can transform a manageable incident into an organizational crisis. The response is always part of the story.

Investigate Without Making the Crisis Bigger

A poorly conducted investigation can cause as much damage as the original incident. Key principles:

Process Integrity

- Neutrality and appropriate investigator
- Preserve evidence early
- Confidentiality — not secrecy
- Interim protective measures

Decision Standards

- No retaliation — zero tolerance
- Avoid premature conclusions
- Document every decision made
- Involve legal counsel appropriately

CASE STUDY #2

Real IRONWOOD Case: The Bathroom Camera

A bizarre discovery becomes a workplace crisis.

What happened when a hidden camera was discovered in a workplace restroom — and how the organization had to respond across multiple dimensions simultaneously.



One Incident. Multiple Risks.

The bathroom camera case illustrates exactly why crises don't stay in one lane — every function was activated at once.

Employee Relations

Privacy violations, broken trust, and managing workplace reaction

Investigation

Securing evidence, conducting interviews, and establishing facts

Leadership

Escalation decisions and authority under pressure

Communication

Managing rumors and responding to employee questions

The crisis ends. The impact doesn't.

Resolving the incident is not the same as recovering from it. The human and organizational aftermath requires its own deliberate response.

CASE STUDY #3

Real IRONWOOD Case: The Onsite PTSD Incident

What happened when IRONWOOD was onsite for a service, but something else took place — and what it took to support employees experiencing acute psychological distress.



Who Else Is Affected by a Crisis?

The impact of a workplace crisis radiates far beyond the person directly involved. Organizations often underestimate how wide the ripple extends.



Supporting Employees —and the Leaders Supporting Them



Resources & Leave

EAP access, leave options, and accommodations for affected employees



Manager Support

Leaders need guidance too —
trauma awareness and
communication coaching



Return-to-Work

Thoughtful reintegration with
follow-up and ongoing
employee communication

During a crisis,
communication isn't
separate from the
response. It is part of
the response.



KYLE HESLIN — COMMUNICATIONS & RECOVERY

Communication Becomes Part of the Crisis

What Happened

The facts, the timeline, the decisions made — the operational reality of the event.

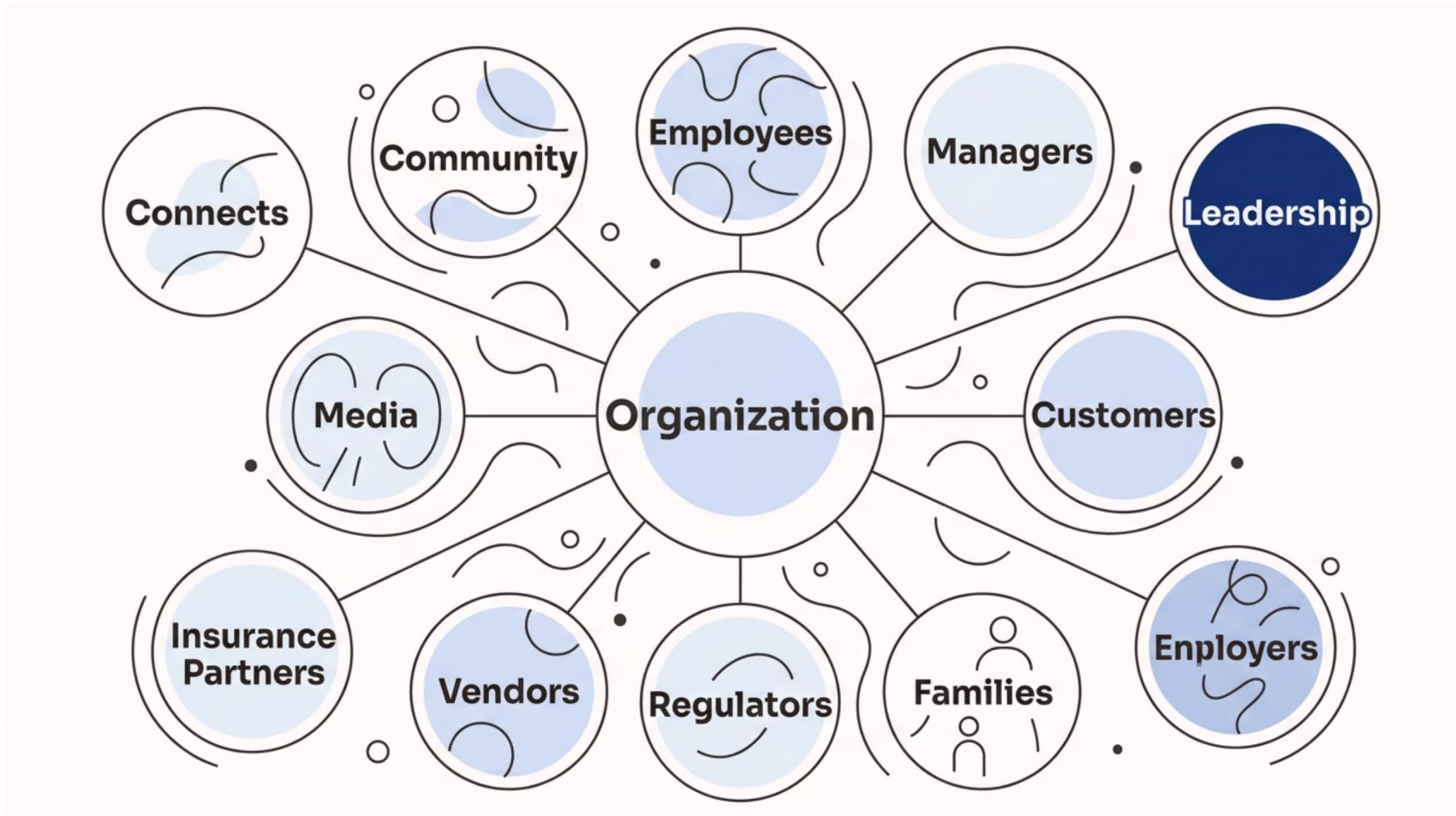
What People Believe Happened

The narrative forming in real time among employees, media, and the public — often without your input.

Organizations must manage both simultaneously. Failing to communicate is itself a communication decision — and rarely a good one.

One Crisis. Multiple Audiences.

Each audience needs different information, delivered differently, at different times. A single message rarely serves everyone.



What Do We Say When We Don't Have All the Answers?

You don't need every answer. You need to communicate what you know — and what you're doing about it.

01

What is known

Share confirmed facts clearly and without speculation

02

What isn't known yet

Acknowledge gaps honestly — silence creates worse problems

03

What is being done

Demonstrate active, organized response

04

What employees should do

Give people clear, actionable guidance

05

When they'll hear more

Set a specific timeline for the next update

Four Questions Every Crisis Message Must Answer

What do we know?

Confirmed facts, timeline, and scope of the situation

What are we doing?

Active steps being taken right now to address it

What can we share?

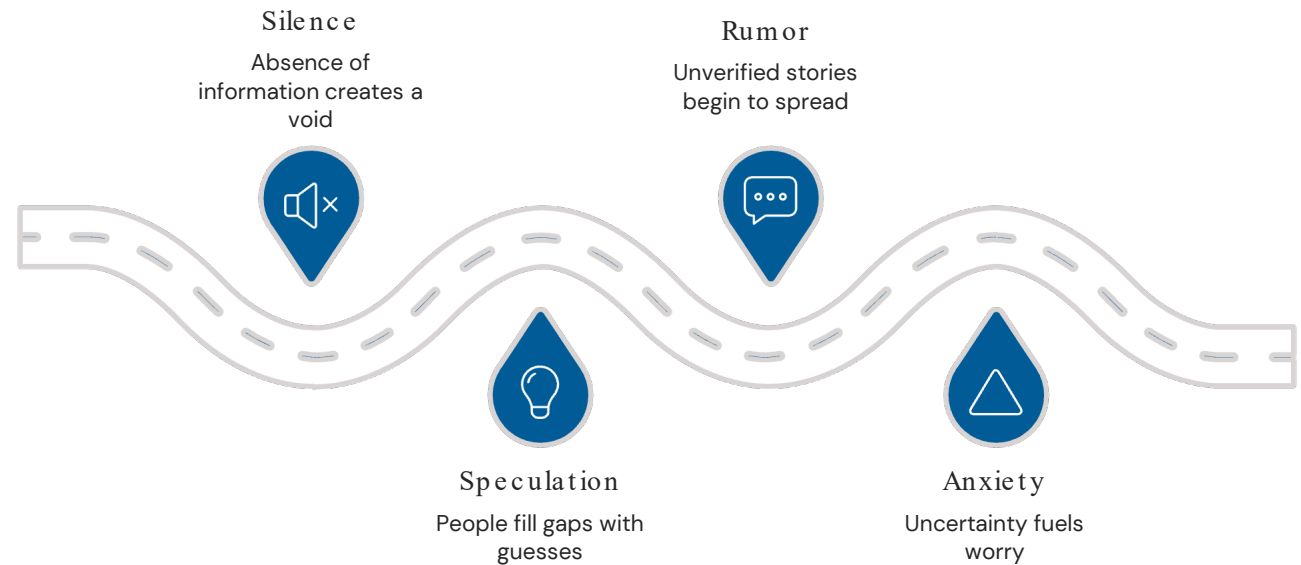
What is appropriate to communicate given legal and operational constraints

What happens next?

When will people hear more, and from whom

The Information Vacuum

When organizations don't provide information, people create it.



Common Crisis Communication Failures

These mistakes are avoidable — but only if you plan ahead and resist the instinct to go quiet.

Speculation & Conflicting Messages

Guessing publicly or letting different leaders say different things

Defensive or Premature Responses

Overpromising outcomes or drawing conclusions before facts are confirmed

"No Comment" as a Strategy

Silence is perceived as guilt or incompetence — it is never neutral

Disappearing After the Acute Phase

Allowing managers to improvise and going quiet once the immediate crisis ends

Recovery Is More Than Returning to Work

Operational recovery
and organizational
recovery are not the
same thing.

Getting the building open and the systems running again is only half the job. The harder work — restoring confidence, trust, and culture — takes longer and requires deliberate effort.

Two Types of Recovery

Operational Recovery

- Resume work and restore staffing
- Repair systems and correct deficiencies
- Meet compliance obligations

Organizational Recovery

- Restore confidence and address employee concerns
- Rebuild trust and support leaders
- Demonstrate meaningful change

Both must happen. Organizations that focus only on operational recovery often find the organizational damage lingers — and compounds.

Rebuilding Trust After a Crisis

Trust is rebuilt through sustained behavior over time — not a single announcement. Four pillars make it possible:

Transparency

Share what happened honestly, even when it's uncomfortable

Accountability

Hold the right people responsible — including leadership

Change

Make visible, meaningful changes that address root causes

Consistency

Follow through over time — trust is earned in the long run

The Post-Crisis Review: What Did We Learn?

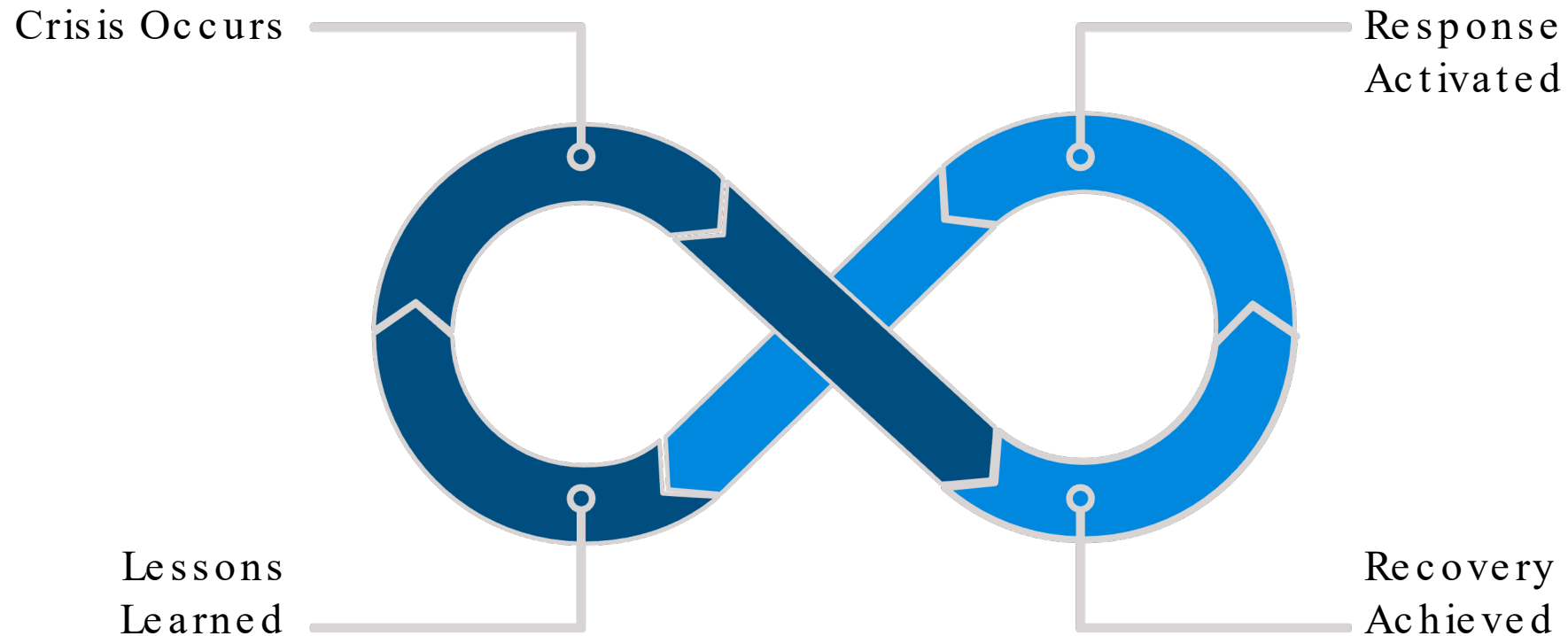
Every crisis is also a data point. Leadership should ask these questions before the lessons fade:

- What happened, and what worked?
- What didn't work, and what did we miss?
- What surprised us?
- Where did communication break down?
- Were roles and authority clear?
- What needs to change?
- How will we know the change worked?

 The post-crisis review is not about blame. It's about building a stronger organization before the next event.

From Crisis Response to Crisis Readiness

Crisis management is not a linear process — it's a cycle. Every event, handled well, makes the organization more capable for the next one.



The Crisis-Ready Organization

A crisis-ready organization doesn't just react — it has built the infrastructure to respond effectively before anything happens.

1

Clear Policies & Reporting Channels

2

Trained Leaders & Defined Escalation

3

Response Roles & Investigation Capability

4

Communication Plans & Outside Experts

5

Employee Support Resources

6

Post-Event Review Process

Prepare. Respond. Recover.

You cannot predict every crisis. You can determine how prepared your organization will be when one arrives.

DOT Case

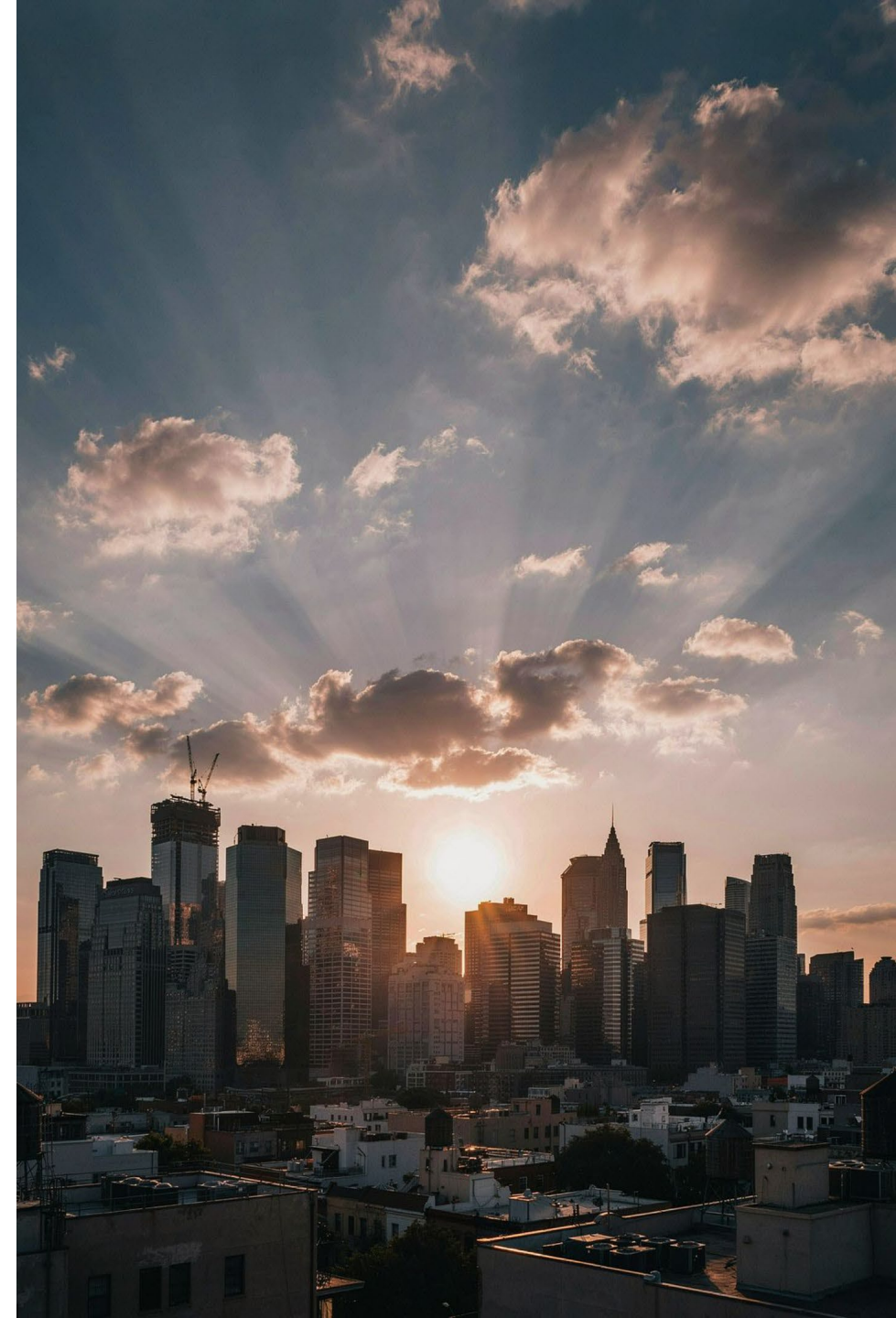
Recognize it — slow-moving crises have warning signs

Bathroom Camera

Respond to it — every function activated at once

PTSD Incident

Recover from it — the human impact outlasts the event



Questions & Discussion

Thank you for joining today's session. We welcome your questions.

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