

# Stakeholder Communication

(CONCEPTS, TIPS, AND WORKSHEETS)

HELLO THERE

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# How Storytelling Affects the Brain

## DOPAMINE

The brain releases dopamine into the system when it experiences an emotionally-charged story, making it easier to remember and with greater accuracy.

## CORTEX ACTIVITY

When processing facts, two language centers of the brain are activated (Broca's and Wernicke's area). A well-told story can engage many additional areas, including the motor cortex, sensory cortex, and frontal cortex.



## NEURAL COUPLING

A story activates parts of the brain that allow the listener to turn the story in to their own ideas and experience thanks to a process called neural coupling.

## MIRRORING

Listeners will not only experience similar brain activity to each other, but also to the speaker.

Storytelling is fundamental to the human experience. It is central to how history is recorded, how values and culture are passed down through generations, how families bond, and how communities are formed.

Stories that are emotionally compelling and relatable to the listener make information far more memorable than simply stating facts. This is because stories also affect us at a biological level. As you hear a story, your brain starts to fire in multiple areas, and hormones are released that incite pleasure, generosity, empathy for the subject of the story, and a willingness to bond with the storyteller.

# Narrative Structures

**THE MOUNTAIN** There are two key aspects to an effective story and the Mountain structure delivers both. First, a story must capture and hold attention. Second, it must transport us into the character's world. The Mountain uses rising tension to draw in the listener and hold their attention. Like the Hero's Journey, it may include a protagonist that must overcome challenges. But unlike the monomyth, the Mountain narrative can — but does not always — have a happy ending. We often see this structure in TV series that build tension to a grand finale such as *Lost*, *Succession*, *Breaking Bad*, and *Game of Thrones*.

## GOOD FOR

*Showing how someone overcame a series of challenges*

*Delivering a surprise twist*

*Creating a cathartic effect*

## USE FOR

*Communicating the history, challenges, and triumphs of your institution*



# Narrative Structures

**THE HERO'S JOURNEY** This story structure, also known as the monomyth, is universal across cultures. In it, a hero is called to adventure. They move from a familiar setting into the unknown where they encounter challenges, overcome them, and return to their home or community a transformed and better person. Often, the hero is helped on their journey by a guide or sage. Hollywood loves this story structure and it can be found in examples like *Star Wars*, *The Lion King*, *Hunger Games*, *Harry Potter*, and *The Matrix*.

**GOOD FOR**

*Taking the audience on a journey*

*Sharing your own newfound wisdom*

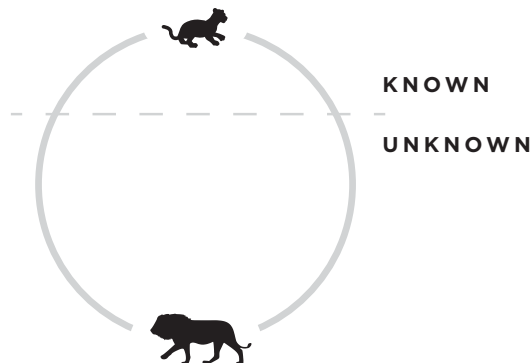
*Demonstrating the value of taking risks*

**USE FOR**

*Fundraising*

*Student recruitment*

*Recognizing accomplishments of faculty & staff*



# Narrative Structures

**SPARKLINES** Sparklines are a relatively new narrative structure created by communications expert Nancy Duarte. She visually analyzed famous speeches such as Martin Luther King, Jr.'s *I Have a Dream* and the *Gettysburg Address* and identified a pattern where the best presentations contrast “what is” with “what could be.” This form of narrative takes the listener on an emotional journey to a better future and often includes a call to action.

## GOOD FOR

*Inspiring the audience to action*

*Creating hope and excitement*

*Building a movement*

## USE FOR

*Inspiring alumni to stay connected*

*Annual and capital campaigns*

*Articulating your school's value proposition*



# Narrative Structures

**THE PIXAR PITCH** Pixar Animation Studios is arguably one of the most successful movie companies in the world. The studio has produced 26 feature films from *Toy Story* (1995) to *Buzzyear* (2022), and has garnered 23 Academy Awards with 11 of them for Best Animated Feature. Not to mention earning \$14 billion for its feature films worldwide. It is fair to say Pixar knows a thing or two about storytelling.

When she was a story artist for Pixar, Emma Coats used a method of pitching her ideas that can be found in the DNA of every Pixar film. Now commonly known as ‘The Pixar Pitch,’ this narrative structure is useful for clearly and concisely stating what it is we want from the listener and where we want them to go. It organizes our thoughts, gives structure to a compelling narrative, and makes an emotional connection with the audience.

## GOOD FOR

*Connecting emotionally with your audience*

*Focusing on the key point you want to make*

*Clearly stating where you want the audience to go with you*

## USE FOR

*Fundraising*

*Articulating your school's value proposition*

*Helping student prospects see themselves as graduates*

# The Pixar Pitch Structure

## ONCE UPON A TIME...

*Establishes context*

*There was a widowed fish named Marlin who was overprotective of his young son, Nemo.*

## EVERY DAY...

*Habits of daily life*

*Marlin warned Nemo of the ocean's dangers and implored him to never swim too far away.*

## ONE DAY...

*The catalyst for change*

*In an act of defiance, Nemo ignores his dad and swims out into the open water.*

## BECAUSE OF THAT...

*The protagonist does something different*

*Nemo was captured and ended up in a dentist's fish tank in Sydney.*

## BECAUSE OF THAT...

*Moving toward a good outcome*

*Marlin sets off on a journey to find Nemo bringing other sea creatures with him along the way.*

## UNTIL FINALLY...

*Story climax and meaning*

*Marlin & Nemo find each other, reunite and learn that love depends on trust.*



# Create Your Own Pixar Pitch

**ONCE UPON A TIME...**

*Establishes context*

---

---

**EVERY DAY...**

*Habits of daily life*

---

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**ONE DAY...**

*The catalyst for change*

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**BECAUSE OF THAT...**

*The protagonist does something different*

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**BECAUSE OF THAT...**

*Moving toward a good outcome*

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**UNTIL FINALLY...**

*Story climax and meaning*

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**INSTRUCTIONS** To experiment with the Pixar Pitch, think about a standout student or successful member of your alumni. How does their story represent to a student prospect the best of what your institution has to offer? Or perhaps their story is relevant to a donor you want to inspire to make a gift. Maybe the story is about you and your journey to leadership and why you're passionate about your school's mission. There are numerous possibilities and there are no 'right' or 'wrong' stories. Your story simply needs to be compelling, authentic, and relevant to the audience and your goals.

## Issue v. Crisis

**ISSUE** An issue is any internal or external trend, event, controversy or public development that might affect an organization. Issues typically have a public policy orientation and often require closing the gap between an organization's actions and stakeholder expectations.

May impact, may not be critical or immediate

Decisions can be thoughtful and considered

Sustained over time

Managed in the course of business operations

May not be tied to a specific incident

**CRISIS** A crisis is a significant threat to operations that can have negative consequences if not handled properly. A crisis can create three related threats:

**1** public safety, **2** financial loss, and **3** reputation loss. Some crises can result in injuries & even loss of lives.

Immediate critical impact

Urgency: decisions must be made immediately

Clear start and end

Not business as usual, all hands on deck

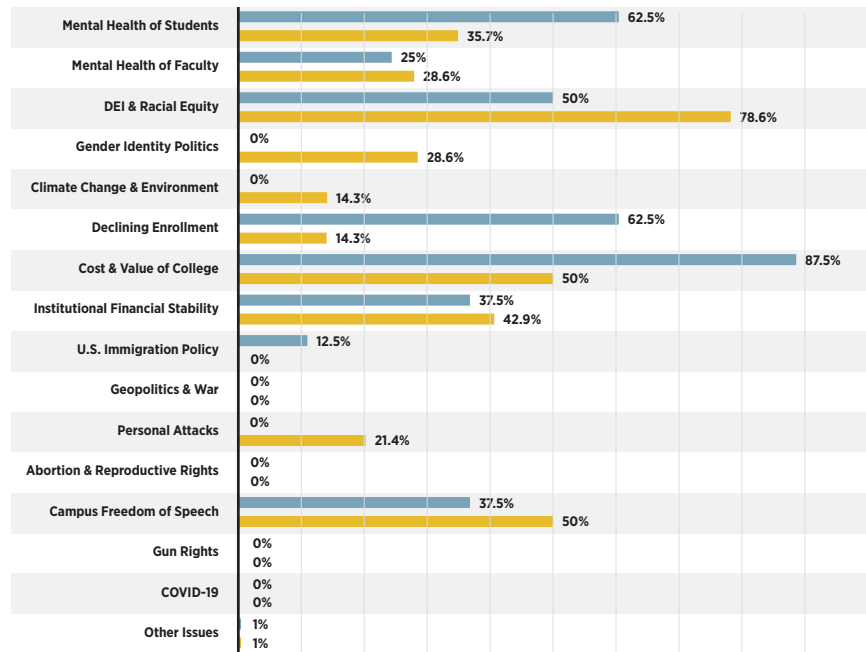
Usually tied to a specific incident

**POORLY MANAGED ISSUES CAN BECOME CRISES, AND POORLY MANAGED CRISES LEAD TO LONG-TERM DAMAGE TO BUSINESS & REPUTATION.**

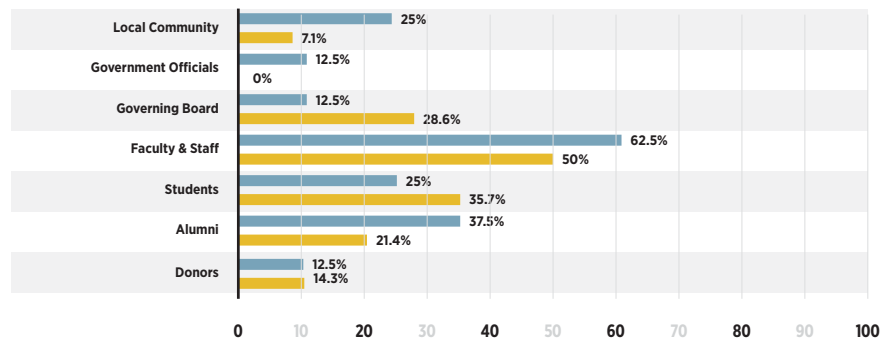
# Survey Responses

COMMUNICATIONS OFFICERS  
PRESIDENTS

**Q1** What are the most challenging communication issues you expect to face in the coming academic year?



**Q2** From a communications perspective, which stakeholder groups do you find the most challenging to navigate?



# Decision-Making Framework

The issues a school might face can often be controversial, politicized, and highly polarizing, even within the campus community. This makes virtually any response guaranteed to offend someone.

With that in mind, a decision-making framework is an important tool for discerning when to weigh in on various issues. Deeply understand your stakeholders and then use the framework to set clear boundaries about what and when the organization will speak or act.

Remember that not every issue in the public sphere requires the school or its leaders to take a position. Using a decision-making framework, and explaining that framework to stakeholders so they understand the rationale, the institution and its leadership can give themselves permission to NOT respond to certain issues. This is especially important when confronted with bad faith actors on social media where any response could lead to negative amplification that does not serve the school's best interest (i.e., *don't feed the trolls!*).

Despite the pressure to take a stand that may come from various interest groups, an issue must not just be present. It should be directly relevant to the school, its ability to live up to its mission and values, and its ability to serve its most important stakeholders.

*Not every issue in the public sphere requires you to take a position. Using a decision-making framework, and explaining that framework to stakeholders so they understand the rationale, the school and its leadership can give themselves permission to NOT respond to certain issues, and then explain why.*

A	B	C	D	E
Q: Does it directly impact us?	Does it hinder our mission?	Can we help by responding?	Is responding in line with our values?	Can we tie action to our response?

# Issues Threat Matrix

LIKELIHOOD	POTENTIAL CONSEQUENCES				
ALMOST CERTAIN	Medium	High	Very High	Very High	Very High
LIKELY	Medium	High	High	Very High	Very High
POSSIBLE	Low	Medium	High	High	Very High
UNLIKELY	Low	Low	Medium	Medium	High
RARE	Low	Low	Low	Low	Medium
	INSIGNIFICANT	MINOR	MODERATE	MAJOR	SEVERE

MONITOR

PREPARE

ACT

An Issues Threat Matrix is a simple tool that can help you predict, prioritize, and prepare for issues you may need to manage during an academic year. The basic structure allows you to identify internal and external issues and plot them according to how likely the issue is to impact your campus and stakeholders, and the severity of that impact. Using that information, you can then determine if an issue should simply be monitored, prepared for, or if immediate action (or comment) is required.

# Crisis Communications Plan

A crisis communications plan is a critical part of pre-crisis preparation and an important tool to have readily available, up-to-date, and easy to navigate.

Perhaps the greatest benefit of having a crisis plan is that it saves time when quick decision making and rapid responses matter. The plan should preassign responsibilities, and include crisis scenarios and pre-drafted holding statements. Update your plan at least annually, and review roles, responsibilities, and procedures with the crisis management team a couple times a year.

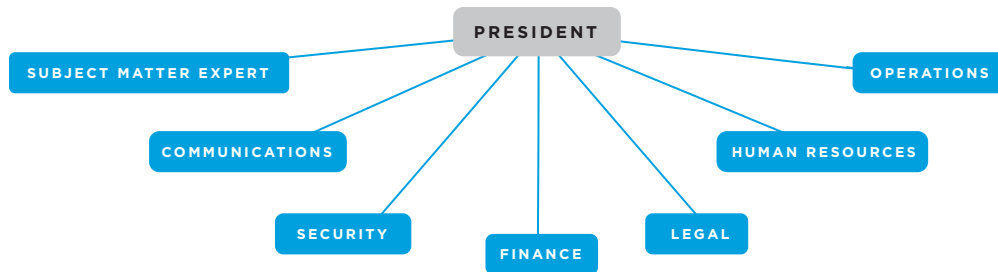
Most experts agree every plan should include the following elements:

- 1 The purpose of the plan;
- 2 Names, contact info, and responsibilities for each member of the crisis management team;
- 3 List & description of key stakeholder groups along with best communication channels for reaching each of them;
- 4 Possible crisis scenarios;
- 5 Pre-drafted holding statements for each scenario. These should be templates with blanks to fill in specific details. Content should include:
  - Cause of the crisis
  - Brief description of what happened, when, where, and who was impacted
  - How and when information will be shared as it comes available
  - Statement of compassion for victims
  - Instructions about actions people need to take if at risk
  - Resources available to those affected (e.g., counseling services)
- 6 Internal communication procedures for keeping faculty, staff, and the board informed, and who is responsible for communicating with them;
- 7 Contact list for media, public safety, trustees, government officials, emergency response groups, and other relevant entities;
- 8 Procedures for all internal and external communication, who is responsible for various stakeholder groups, and the channels they will use to communicate with each;

In an appendix to the plan, you may also include the following information:

- First steps checklist
- Media-trained and authorized spokespeople, and their contact info
- Social media policy
- Fact sheets about the school
- Biographies for key campus leaders
- Operational recovery / continuity plans

# Crisis Management Team



The crisis communications team should be established during pre-crisis planning and is responsible for:

- Activating the plan
- Collecting all available information throughout the crisis
- Creating and disseminating messages to internal and external stakeholders
- Working with the media
- Monitoring what is being said about the crisis on social media and other channels

In your plan, name the members of the crisis team (an example structure is above), and their individual roles and responsibilities.

Include contact information for all team members including personal cell phone numbers.

Identify and media train authorized spokespersons. It is best to have more than one, and your spokesperson will not necessarily be the president.

Unless there is loss of life, significant loss of property, or a major impact to operations, *the president's primary role is to lead the crisis response and direct the team.* That is not to say the president should not serve as spokesperson — they may be the school's most skilled spokesperson. But that role may not be the president's highest and best use when the stakes are high and decisions must be made quickly.

# Crisis Scenario Worksheet

Following are two hypothetical crisis scenarios you could experience on your campus. Our objective is to discuss various issues and responses regarding these sample incidents. Additionally, the exercise will identify strengths and areas for improvement in your crisis response planning. Select one or both of these scenarios and answer the questions below.

## SCENARIO 1

Your chief information officer just informed you that a hacker used a phishing scam to breach a restricted database on an employee's computer in your financial aid office. The database contained the names, Social Security numbers, and financial information for approximately half of your student body. At the time you are informed, the only people aware of the situation are you and your CIO.

## SCENARIO 2

The bodies of two dead students were discovered by another student in a dorm room on campus and reported to campus police. Cause of death was not yet known at the time you were informed and an investigation is underway. There is a rumor going around that the deaths were caused by accidental overdose of illegally purchased Xanax that was laced with Fentanyl. Local media is aware of what happened and multiple reporters are calling for comment.

- 1 CRISIS TEAM** Who will you include in your crisis management team for this incident?
- 2 AUDIENCES** Who are the target audiences you need to reach?
- 3 KEY MESSAGES** What are the most important messages you want to communicate to your target audiences?
- 4 CHANNELS AND TACTICS** Which communication channels and tactics will you use to reach your target audiences with your key messages?
- 5 TIMING** How quickly must you communicate your initial response, and when and how will you provide updates as the situation unfolds?
- 6 PARTNERS** Who, if anyone, outside of your campus needs to be informed of or assisting with the crisis response?
- 7 MONITORING** How will you monitor the situation as audiences learn what happened?



# Thank You.

**ARROW** Arrow is a strategic communications firm based in Austin, Texas. Clients turn to us when the stakes are high and they are at a pivotal moment for their brand, marketing, or reputation. With services including branding, public relations, digital media, and design, Arrow is a trusted partner to colleges and universities navigating this time of change in higher education.

The team is comprised of senior practitioners experienced communicating a school's important moments, such as branding or re-branding for increased distinction in the market, crisis communication, positioning a new president, capital campaigns, recruitment campaigns, tuition resets, anniversaries and milestones, and the introduction of new strategic plans.

Arrow is at its best when clients share our commitment to making the world a better place. What we do can be summed up in this simple idea: We build your brand. For good.\*

**DAVE SHAW** With more than two decades of communications and marketing experience, Dave is an established expert in his field, delivering masterful vision, insight, and creativity to every project at Arrow.

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