

Mission Under Pressure: A Crisis Communications Playbook for Public Funding Challenges

A Playbook for Staying Grounded When the Ground Shifts

Presenters: DeRondal Bevly • RubyRose Strategies
Gordon Mayer • Gordon Mayer Communications



“In every community, trust is a nonprofit’s most valuable currency—and it has never been more fragile.”

The Headwinds

Today's nonprofit landscape is more precarious than ever. Funding streams are tightening as donor priorities shift and economic uncertainty looms.

Public scrutiny has intensified, with social media amplifying every misstep. Perhaps most dangerously, misinformation now travels faster than truth, creating narratives that can spiral beyond your control before you've even had a chance to respond.

The Stakes

A single headline, tweet, or unexpected budget cut can jeopardize years of mission-driven work. The organizations that survive are those that prepare before crisis strikes.

Today's Goal

To give you a comprehensive playbook to **protect your reputation, stabilize your teams, and lead with clarity and confidence** when the pressure hits hardest.

Session Roadmap: Your Path to Readiness

The Anatomy of a Crisis

Understanding how challenges escalate from spark to inferno, and the framework that helps you recognize the tipping point before it's too late.

The Comeback

Rebuilding trust and forging organizational resilience. Discover how to transform crisis into credibility and emerge stronger.

The Funding Crisis Playbook

Mastering the art of messaging when financial pressures threaten your mission. Learn to balance transparency with stability.

Plus: Live scenario analysis and audience Q&A to address your specific challenges.



Part I

The Anatomy of a Crisis: From Spark to Inferno

The Framework That Builds Your Foundation

From Problem to Crisis: Knowing the Tipping Point

Not every challenge is a crisis: A *problem* is manageable through normal channels and existing resources. A **crisis** threatens the very existence of your organization and demands immediate, coordinated action.

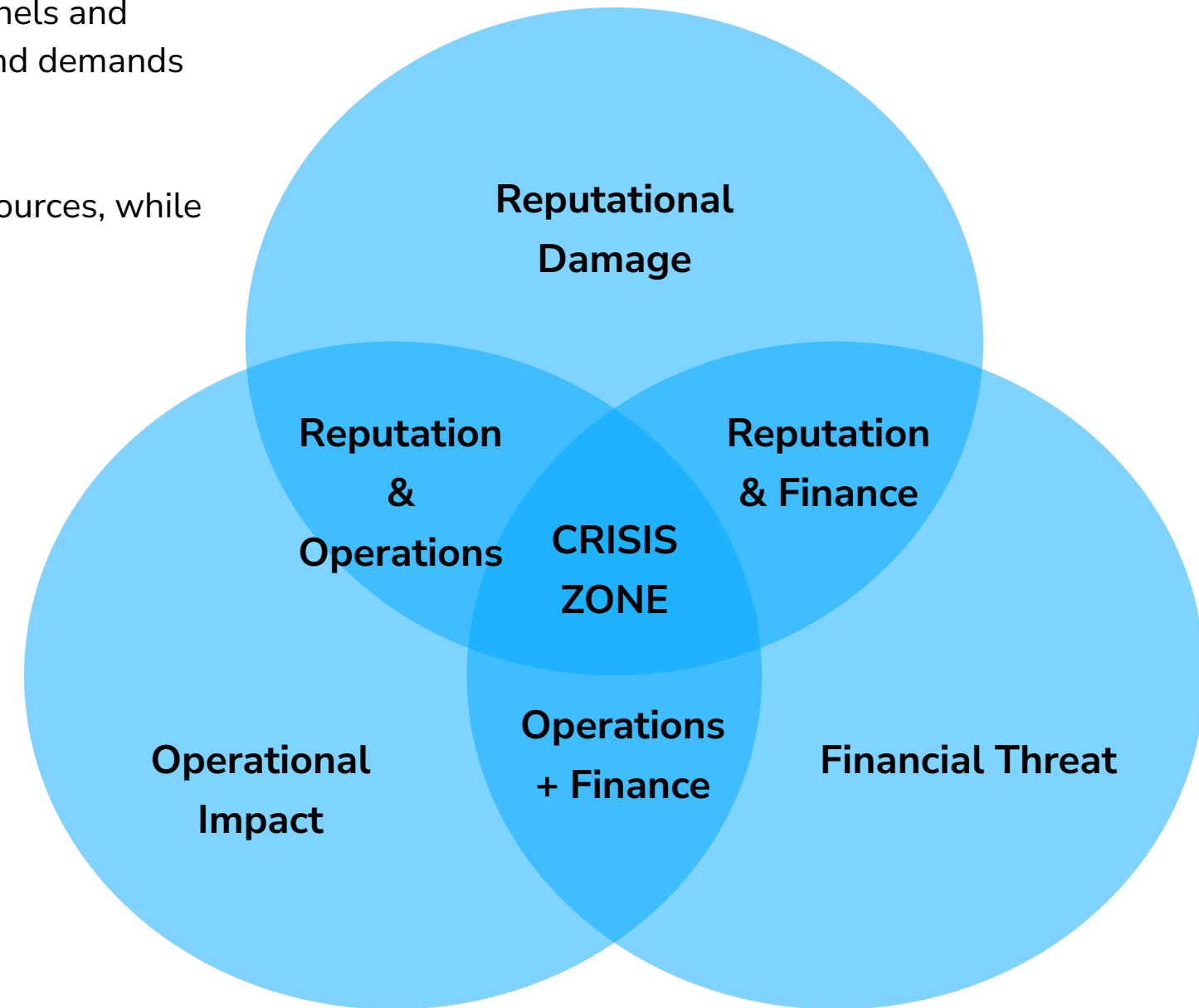
Understanding this distinction is critical—overreacting to problems wastes resources, while underreacting to crises can be catastrophic.

A True Crisis:

- **Threatens your core** — Puts mission delivery, financial stability, or public trust at immediate risk
- **Paralyzes operations** — Disrupts normal decision-making processes and daily functions
- **Commands the spotlight** — Draws sustained media attention and public scrutiny

Crisis Examples:

Sudden leadership exit | Program failure with client impact | Client safety allegations | Major funding collapse | Data breach exposing donor information | Workplace scandal | Legal investigation



The Stakeholder Matrix: Five Audiences, Five Frequencies

In a crisis, you're not addressing one room—you're broadcasting on five distinct frequencies simultaneously.

1	Donors & Funders Core Question: "Is my investment safe?" They need reassurance about financial stewardship and mission continuity. Respond with transparency and concrete action steps.
2	Staff & Board Core Question: "Are we stable? What's my role?" Internal stakeholders need clarity, consistency, and clear direction. Uncertainty among staff creates secondary crises.
3	Clients & Community Core Question: "Can I still count on you?" Those you serve need to know their services won't be interrupted. Lead with empathy and service commitment.
4	Media Core Question: "Who's accountable?" Journalists seek facts, context, and human interest. Be accessible, accurate, and authentic in your responses.
5	Partners & Officials Core Question: "Are you still a reliable ally?" Institutional partners need confidence in your organizational capacity and collaborative commitments.

"You can't tell five different stories—only one story told in five different ways."

The First 60 Minutes: Owning the Narrative

The “Golden Hour” isn't about crafting the perfect message—it's about **establishing control** of the narrative before speculation fills the void. Research shows the first message stakeholders receive becomes their anchoring narrative, even if later corrected.

Your First Message Follows A-E-S-O-P:



Acknowledge Immediately

Show awareness of the situation. Silence breeds speculation, and speculation becomes "fact" in the vacuum. Even "We are aware and gathering information" is better than radio silence.



Empathize First

Lead with humanity before process. Acknowledge impact on people—clients, staff, community. People before paperwork, always.



State Facts Only

Confirm what you know with certainty. Never speculate or guess. "We don't yet know" is an acceptable and credible answer when true.



Outline Next Steps

Explain specifically what's being done to investigate, resolve, or address the situation. Action demonstrates leadership and competence.

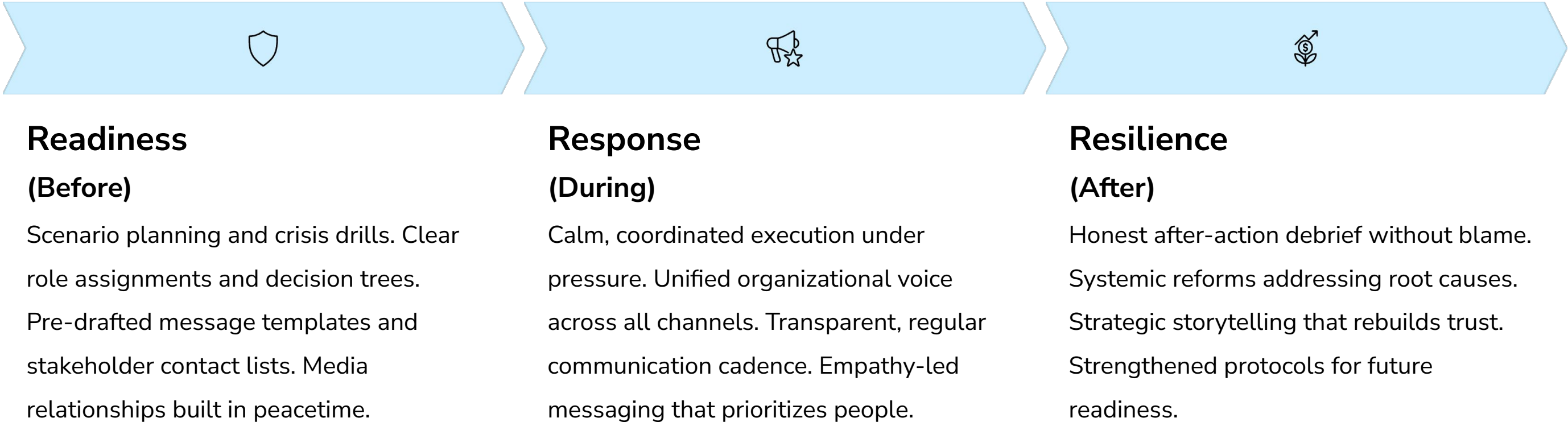


Promise Updates

Set clear expectations for when stakeholders will hear from you again. Then meet that deadline without fail. Predictability builds trust.

The 3R Framework: Your Crisis Management System

Effective crisis management isn't a single moment—it's a continuous cycle that builds organizational muscle memory. This framework ensures you're prepared before crisis strikes, responsive during the storm, and strengthened afterward.



Peace-time preparation wins the war-time moment.

Organizations that invest in readiness respond with confidence. Those that skip preparation respond with chaos. The difference is visible to every stakeholder within the first hour of crisis.

Part II

The Funding Crisis Playbook

Messaging When It Matters Most: Navigating the Intersection of Mission, Money & Media

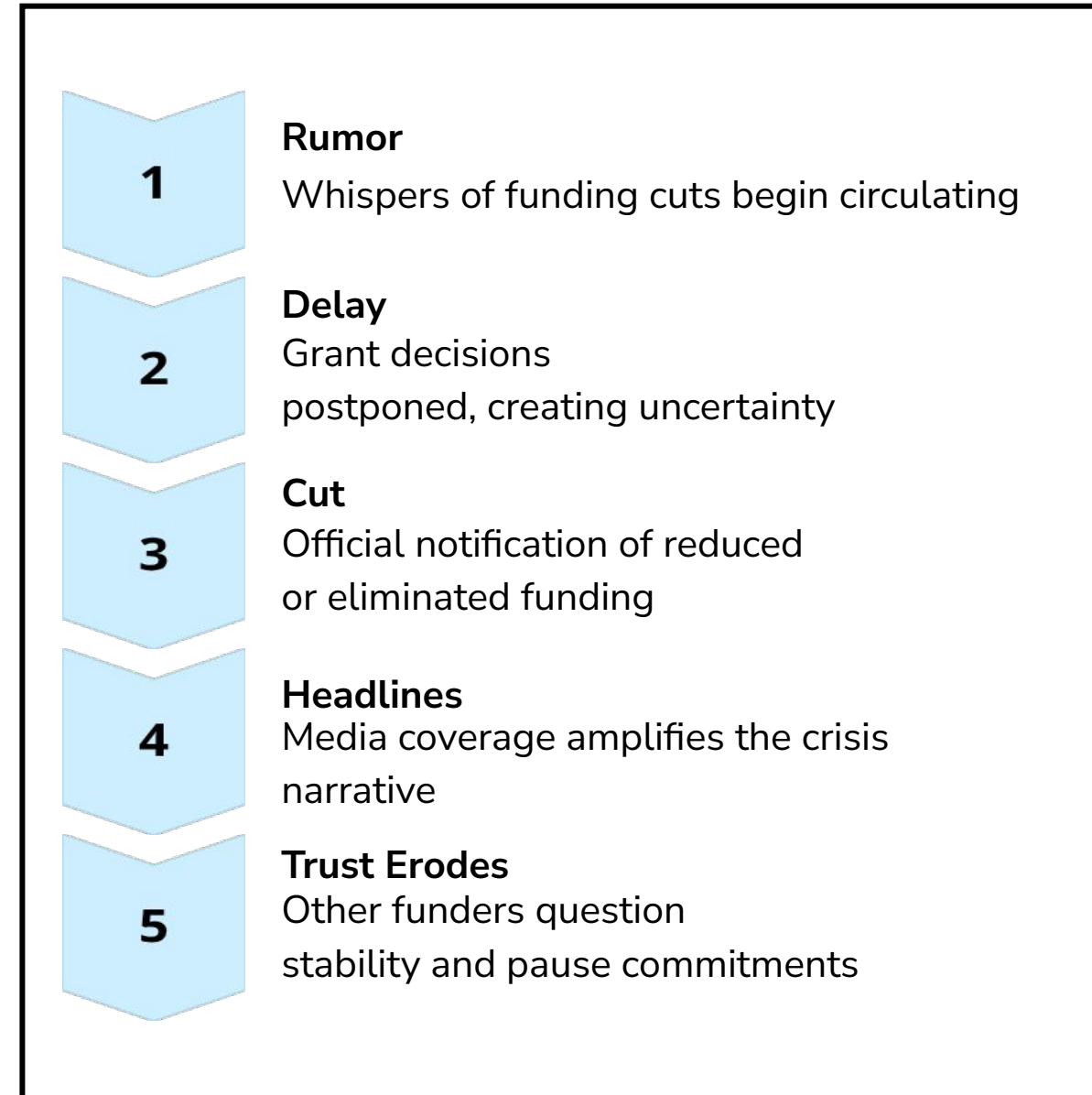


Why Funding Crises Hit Differently

Financial shocks are **communications earthquakes** that ripple through every aspect of your organization. Unlike other crises that may be contained or resolved quickly, funding uncertainties create sustained stress that erodes morale, confidence, and capacity over time.

The Unique Challenges

- **Public Theatre:** Budget crises often play out in political arenas and press coverage, removing your control over timing and framing
- **Slow-Burn Stress:** Financial uncertainty corrodes staff morale and donor confidence gradually, making it harder to detect the tipping point
- **Existential Threat:** Unlike reputational issues that can be repaired, funding gaps directly undermine mission delivery and staff livelihoods
- **Cascading Impact:** One funding loss triggers others as funders perceive instability and hedge their bets



The Messaging Tightrope: Transparency vs. Terror

Funding crises create a communications paradox: stakeholders demand transparency, but raw financial fear can trigger the very panic you're trying to prevent. The solution isn't choosing between honesty and optimism—it's being *transparent enough* to sustain trust while remaining *measured enough* to prevent panic.



Public Candor

What reassures donors?

Acknowledging challenges while emphasizing concrete plans. Demonstrating leadership through action, not just words. Showing fiscal responsibility and strategic thinking.



Internal Clarity

What keeps staff steady?

Honest assessment of the situation. Clear timeline for decisions. Specific information about their roles and job security. Regular updates, even when there's no new information.



Leadership Discretion

What must stay contained?

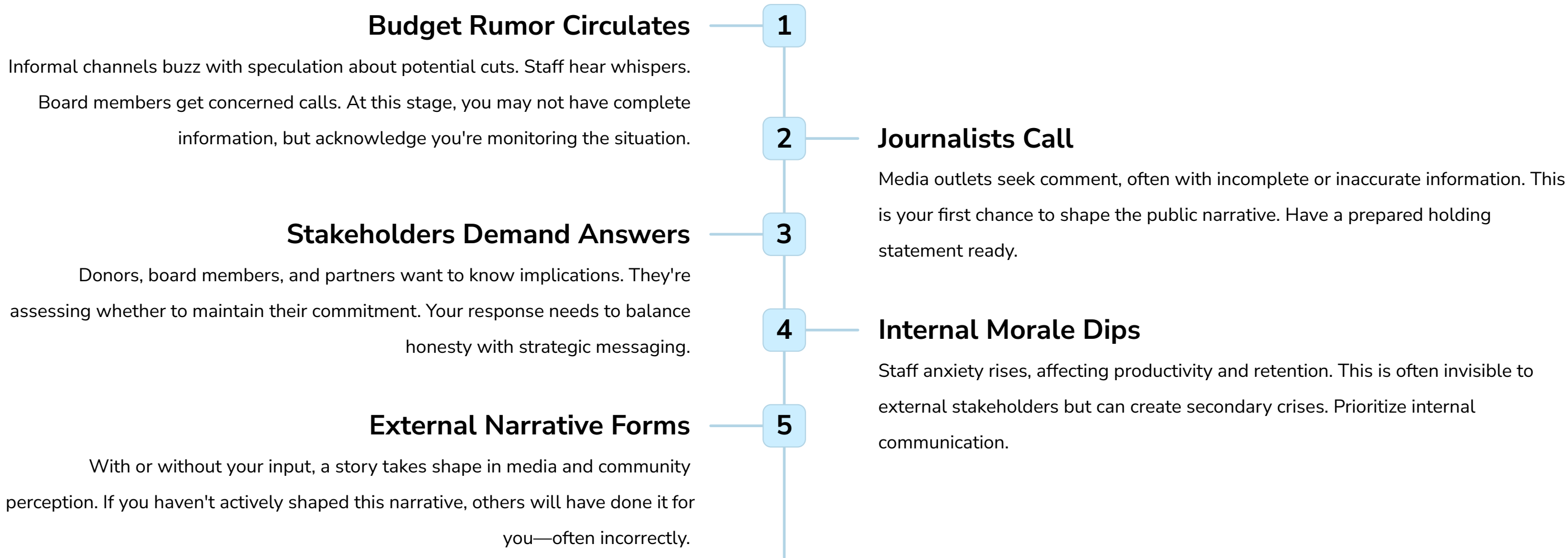
Preliminary discussions with funders. Unverified information or speculation. Sensitive negotiations or legal considerations. Individual staff or program decisions still in deliberation.

Transparency builds trust; oversharing builds anxiety.

The key is identifying what stakeholders *need* to know versus what they *want* to know. Need includes information that affects their decisions or actions. Want often includes details that satisfy curiosity but create unnecessary alarm.

Crisis Sequence: From Shock to Storyline

Funding crises follow predictable patterns. Understanding this sequence allows you to prepare messaging at each stage and insert facts before fiction hardens into accepted narrative.



📌 **Your Critical Task:** Insert facts before fiction hardens.
The organization that controls the first 24 hours of messaging typically controls the crisis narrative throughout.

Building Your Reputational Shield (Before the Storm)

The best crisis communications happen before the crisis. Organizations with strong reputational reserves weather storms that destroy less-prepared counterparts. These five strategies build the foundation of crisis resilience.



Bank Goodwill with Media

Be a resource during normal times, not just when you need something. Offer expert commentary on sector trends. Connect journalists with compelling stories. Return calls promptly. Build relationships with reporters before crisis strikes—they're more likely to give you fair coverage when trouble hits.



Normalize

Transparency
Establish routine updates to stakeholders about both successes and challenges. Organizations that only communicate during crises train stakeholders to expect bad news. Regular transparency in good times makes crisis communications feel less shocking.



Arm with Data

Create a one-page *Mission Impact Sheet* that quantifies your value: clients served, community impact, economic contribution, success metrics. Keep it current and ready to distribute. In crisis, concrete data beats abstract mission statements.



Scenario Simulate

Conduct quarterly "table-top" crisis exercises. Walk through realistic scenarios with your leadership team. Who makes decisions? Who speaks to media? What's the first message? These drills reveal gaps in your plan and build muscle memory for real crises.



Develop Depth

Train two backups for every key communications role. Your primary spokesperson may be unavailable, on vacation, or part of the crisis itself. Cross-training prevents single points of failure and demonstrates organizational capacity.

Sample Funding Crisis Message

Effective crisis messaging follows a proven formula: acknowledge the situation, state your commitment, outline next steps. Here's a template that balances transparency with stability.

Sample External Statement

"We are aware of recent funding changes affecting our programs. Our first priority is maintaining service continuity while working with partners and state officials. We remain fully committed to the communities we serve."

The Formula

Less than 90 words • 3 sentences • 1 headline-worthy concept

- **Sentence 1:** Acknowledge what's known
- **Sentence 2:** State your immediate priority/action
- **Sentence 3:** Reaffirm commitment to mission

Why It Works

- Respects stakeholder concerns without fueling panic
- Demonstrates leadership through action language
- Positions you as solution-focused, not victim-minded
- Short enough to be quoted accurately by media
- Adaptable across multiple communication channels

Customize this template for your specific situation but maintain the structure. Longer statements dilute impact. Vague language creates more questions than answers. This format has been tested across hundreds of nonprofit crises and consistently performs well.

Mini Case: 'The Funding

Freeze' The Situation

A youth development nonprofit faced a three-month state funding delay affecting multiple programs. Uncertainty threatened staff retention and service delivery during their busiest season.

What They Did Right

-  CEO issued calm, transparent update within 6 hours
-  Media quoted them verbatim, controlling narrative
-  Internal staff meetings provided context and
-  ~~Insurance~~ Created contingency budget shared with board

What They Missed

-  Delayed donor engagement until week two
-  Lost opportunity for emergency funding appeals
-  Some major donors heard about crisis from news, not directly

The Lesson

Facts + Mission = Confidence

Organizations that pair honest assessment with clear mission commitment maintain stakeholder support. But timing matters—early, proactive communication prevents relationship damage that delayed communication can't fully repair.

 **Key Takeaway:** Your closest stakeholders should never learn about your crisis from external sources. Donor relationships require the same priority as media relations in the first 24 hours.



Part III

The Comeback: Turning Crisis into Credibility

Forging Resilience from the Ashes

The A-C-T-V Framework for Recovery

Crisis recovery isn't about returning to how things were—it's about emerging stronger, smarter, and more trusted than before. This framework transforms crisis from liability to leadership differentiator.

Assess

Conduct Honest After-Action Review

Within two weeks of crisis stabilization, gather key stakeholders for brutally honest assessment. What worked? What failed? What warning signs did we miss? Avoid blame—focus on systems and processes. Document everything for future reference and institutional memory.

Transform

Implement Policy or Leadership Changes

Take visible action that addresses root causes, not just symptoms. This might mean new policies, leadership changes, technology investments, or structural reforms. Transformation requires resources—budget for it. Stakeholders watch whether commitments translate to action.

Like *kintsugi*—the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery with gold—your organization's cracks become visible markers of resilience and strengthened integrity. Don't hide your recovery journey. Tell it.

Commit

Own Gaps; Make Public Commitments

Identify specific improvements and assign accountability. Don't just acknowledge mistakes—commit to measurable changes with timelines. Share these commitments with stakeholders. Public accountability drives follow-through and demonstrates leadership integrity.

Validate

Show Measurable Progress; Update Stakeholders

Track and report progress against your commitments. Create regular checkpoints with board, funders, and community. Celebrate milestones. Acknowledge setbacks honestly. Validation builds the new trust that replaces what crisis damaged.

From Liability to Asset: Weaponizing Your Recovery

Most organizations treat crisis recovery as damage control—something to move past as quickly as possible. Sophisticated nonprofits recognize that *how* you recover can become a more powerful story than the original crisis.

Publish Your Playbook

Summarize lessons learned in a public document or blog post. Share what went wrong, what you learned, and what you changed. This radical transparency accomplishes three things: demonstrates accountability, provides value to sector peers, and earns stakeholder loyalty through vulnerability.

Lead with Impact

Frame organizational resilience as a core strength in annual reports, funding appeals, and strategic communications. "We faced significant challenges in 2024 and emerged with stronger systems, deeper community relationships, and renewed clarity about our mission" is compelling donor messaging.

Co-Create Solutions

Invite partners, funders, and even critics into your reform process. Turn skeptics into stakeholders by giving them ownership in your solutions. Advisory committees, feedback sessions, and collaborative planning convert adversaries into advocates.

“A crisis doesn't just reveal character—it forges it. Tell that story.”

Your stakeholders don't expect perfection. They expect honesty, accountability, and growth. Organizations that hide their scars lose opportunities to demonstrate the resilience that funders and partners value most. Your recovery narrative is your competitive advantage—use it.

Conclusion — Your Leadership Mandate

Four Core Takeaways

1 Silence is Not a Strategy

Communication vacuums invite critics, speculation, and misinformation. When you're quiet, others fill the space—usually not in your favor. Acknowledge quickly, even when information is incomplete. “We're investigating and will update you by [date]” beats silence every time.

3 Preparation is Performance

Crisis drills determine crisis outcomes. Organizations that practice scenario planning respond with confidence and coordination. Those that skip preparation respond with chaos and contradiction. The best crisis communications feel unremarkable because preparation made them seamless.

2 Empathy First, Facts Second

Lead with humanity before procedure. Stakeholders need to know you understand the impact before they care about your operational response. People before process, always. This isn't soft leadership—it's strategic credibility-building.

4 Recovery is Opportunity

How you emerge from crisis can strengthen your organization and deepen stakeholder relationships. Show your values in action, not just words. Transform mistakes into measurable improvements. Tell the story of your resilience—it's your most powerful asset.

The Mandate

**“The time to fix the roof is
when the sun is shining.”**

— President John F. Kennedy

Your 30-Day Challenge

Within the next 30 days, schedule one hour with your leadership team to ask this critical question:

“If our biggest crisis hit tomorrow, who leads communications—and what's our first sentence?”

If that answer isn't instant and unanimous, you have work to do. Start there. That single hour of preparation could save your organization's reputation, funding, and mission when crisis inevitably strikes.

Connect with Us

DeRondal Bevly

RubyRose Strategies

Derondal@rubyrosestrategies.com

www.rubyrosestrategies.com

Gordon Mayer

Gordon Mayer Communications

gordon@gordonmayercommunications.com

www.gordonmayercommunications.com

We're here to support your crisis preparedness journey. Reach out with questions, scenarios, or consultation requests.



Your Crisis-Ready

Access comprehensive resources to implement today’s frameworks immediately.

Toolkit

Download our complete crisis communications toolkit via QR code or link.

Rapid

Response Plan

Hour-by-hour guide for the first 24 hours of crisis, including decision trees, communication templates, and stakeholder contact protocols.

Funding Crisis

Message Map

Ready-to-customize templates for staff announcements, donor communications, media statements, and board updates during financial uncertainty.

Golden

Hour Checklist

Step-by-step sequence for crafting and delivering your initial crisis statement using the A-E-S-O-P framework. Includes examples from real nonprofit crises.

Crisis Radar

Self-Assessment

5-minute vulnerability scan identifying your organization's crisis readiness gaps across communications, operations, and leadership preparedness.

 **Access the Complete Toolkit:** Scan the QR code on our handout or visit the link provided in your session materials. All resources are free for nonprofit use and can be customized for your organization.

Thank You

Questions & Discussion

Let's Talk About Your Challenges

We've covered frameworks, strategies, and tactics—now let's make this practical for your specific situation.

Discussion Questions:

- What's your biggest communications vulnerability right now?
- Who in your organization approves your first crisis statement?
- What crisis scenario keeps you up at night?
- What's one action you'll take in the next 30 days?

Continue the Conversation

Crisis communications is an ongoing practice, not a one-time workshop. We're committed to supporting nonprofit leaders beyond today's session.

Stay Connected:

Email us your questions, share your success stories, or request consultation for specific scenarios you're facing.

Together, we can build a nonprofit sector that responds to crisis with confidence, compassion, and strategic clarity.

