



**WSU COMSTRAT 701 Capstone**  
**Crisis Communications: The Cincinnati Zoo and Harambe**  
**Ayla Hudson**  
**March 23, 2020**

## Executive Summary

Any and every crisis response is required to have at least a Public Information Officer (PIO) as part of the incident or unified command. The PIO will support the Emergency or Incident Commander and the Unified Command. They will advise on public information issues and concerns and keep the media and public informed of ongoing operations. If the Emergency/Incident Commander is unable to act as the spokesperson for the response, the PIO shall be the spokesperson with the support of subject matter experts.

For the PIO or any other spokesperson, a general code of ethics such as the one outlined by the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) should be followed before, during and after a crisis incident. Ethical practices include honesty, advocacy, expertise, independence, loyalty, and fairness. Honesty with both the internal and external audiences should be at the forefront of all communications.

On Saturday, May 28, 2016 a three-year-old boy climbed through a barrier and fell between 10 to 12 feet into a gorilla enclosure at the Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden. Harambe, the zoo's 17-year-old male western lowland gorilla, found the boy and dragged him around the enclosure. Within 10 minutes of the boy falling, the Dangerous Animal Response Team deemed the situation "life-threatening," and fatally shot the gorilla. Firefighters removed the boy from the enclosure, and he was taken to Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center and was treated for serious injuries. This was the first incident of its kind at the zoo and subsequently, the gorilla exhibit was temporary closed for the investigation and safety improvements.

According to a CBS News article, the incident quickly became a national topic and created numerous petitions for the protection of endangered animals in captivity and charges against the mother of the boy for child endangerment. The following is an assessment of the response to the incident by zoo officials, a risk and crisis analysis along with a three-month crisis communications plan with a focus on roles and responsibilities, key messages and methods of communication.

## Public Safety vs. Organizational Image

When there is a crisis incident that involves a safety breakdown or violation, there is a delicate balance that must be done between demonstrating dedication to public safety and protecting the organizations image. Along with a message of sympathy if appropriate, the first action to happen should be a clear explanation of what happened and what is being done for public safety before any other communication strategies are implemented for organizational image. Moreover, having public safety at the forefront of communications should be part of the strategy for public image communications.

A news brief was done the day after the incident by Zoo Director Thane Maynard. While having regular messaging of safety for the child, the brief could have been more organized with more structure to allow for the safety message of people and animals to be the first and most frequent message given to the media and general public. The blog was also a well-intended attempt to speak to safety but failed to gain the sympathy and support they were hoping for.

From the Cincinnati Zoo, (2016) blog post, the statement, “the safety of our visitors and our animals is our #1 priority,” is not seen until nearly the end of the article whereas it should have been in the beginning. In review, had the article been flipped to address first how the incident occurred, what the zoo did and was continuing to do for public safety, followed by their grief for Harambe, there may have been less negative reaction. Additional communication to the public through the media and their own outlets addressing safety concerns for visitors and animals could have improved the recovery time of the organizations image.

## **Risk vs. Crisis**

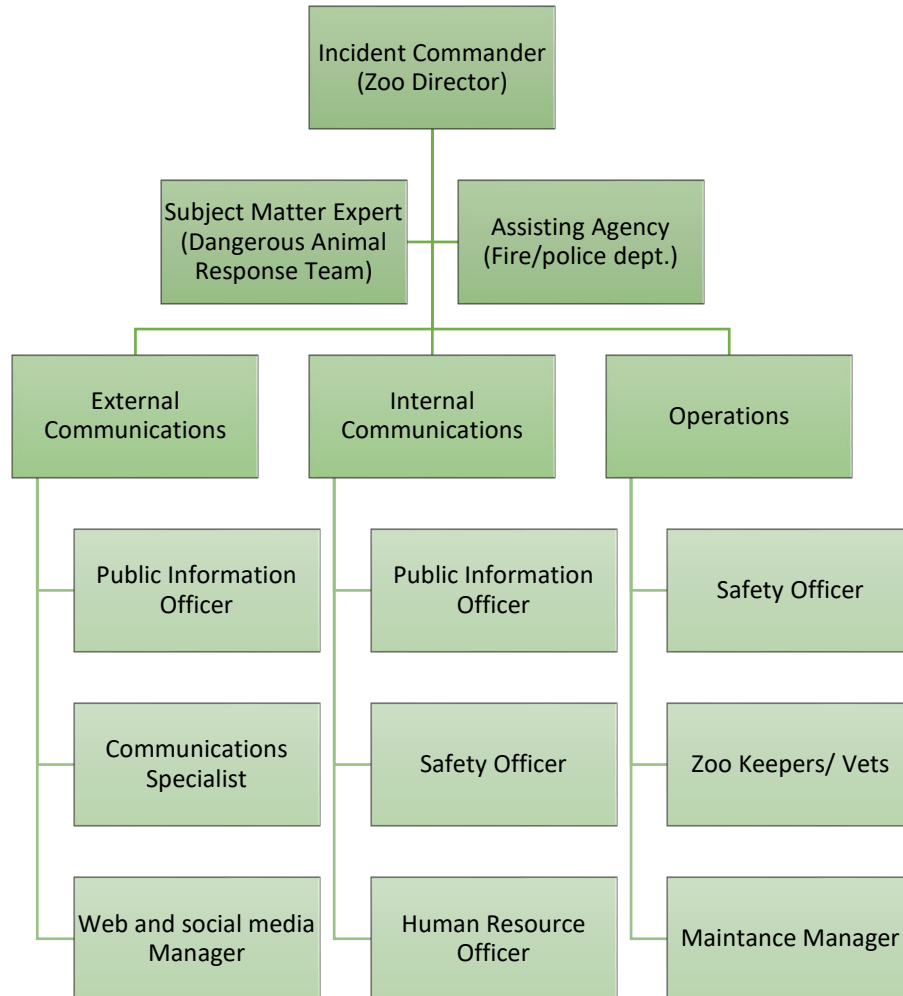
People, organizations, and businesses must address the risks of hazards on a regular basis with the aim of preventing them from becoming an emergency or a crisis. According to Emergency Media and Public Affairs (2018), a risk is exposure to a hazard and an emergency is when the exposure requires a response. Because of the nature and speed of the risk to the child from the gorilla, this risk became a crisis when a time-sensitive response was required, and the potential of serious damage to the zoo once the situation was over. The initial treatment of the situation was as risk information communication rather than a crisis. The zoo had some key messaging but were not timely or robust in the immediate response to the crisis.

Within four days of the incident, CBS story “Outrage” (2016) found that, “Facebook pages like ‘Justice for Harambe’ are quickly spreading. The Facebook page currently has more than 11,000 likes [and] A petition on Change.org asks for new legislation to be passed to protect animals like Harambe. The petition has garnered nearly 4,000 signatures so far.” The crisis could have been communicated better in the immediate aftermath and followed through in the coming days to deescalate the outrage of the public that came after the incident.

## **Crisis Communication Plan**

The following is a three-month crisis communication plan based off the Cincinnati Zoo Harambe and child incident. A crisis plan should be utilized anytime there is an immediate response needed for an emergency regarding the safety of the public, employees and animals that requires immediate action from the dangerous animal response team and emergency responders. Provided is a crisis communication team structure, an action plan with key messages and channels for methods of communication.

## Crisis Communication Team



### Key crisis team members

*Incident Commander:* The incident commander is the person responsible for the overall response to the crisis. This would be the zoo director and while they will be occupied with oversight of operations and logistics, they should also be the primary spokesperson when addressing the internal and the external audience utilizing various media outlets.

*Public Information Officer:* The Public Information Officer will support the zoo director in timely responses with the most accurate information available. They will advise on public information issues, keep the media and public informed, and analyze coverage and public perceptions to develop information strategies. If the zoo director is unable to act as the spokesperson, the PIO shall be the spokesperson with the support of subject matter experts.

*Subject Matter Expert(s):* The subject matter expert(s) will be the one with the most knowledge and experience with the crisis and will likely have first-hand experience. While they may be unavailable in the immediate response to the crisis (dangerous animal response team), they will be important to more in-depth coverage throughout the crisis response. The SME can provide interviews and other responses that the plan outlines. The SME may also be from an assisting agency such as the fire or police department.

## **Three-Month Crisis Communications Plan**

### **First 24 hours**

Within the first few hours of the incident a press release should be done with updates to all corresponding zoo social media accounts. Information should stay with the known facts and a safety message. Following the press release, a media briefing should be held at the zoo away from the area of the incident. The briefing should be moderated by the PIO and will introduce the zoo director as the spokesperson. If possible, include a spokesperson from the fire department. The zoo director will cover the facts of the events, provide any new information not included in the initial press release, and speak to the key messages of safety (see below).

### **First Three Days**

Traditional and social media will be monitored for information accuracy, tone, rumors and questions. A frequently asked questions page will be created on the zoo website addressing questions and rumors with links posted to social media. An internal meeting or a least e-mail will be sent to all staff and include major stakeholders with information updates. A press release and social media post will be available before the evening news broadcast with updates to the investigation, steps being taken, and an update to the boy's condition- with parent permission. Additional press briefing should be held if interest is high and inaccurate information needs to be addressed.

### **First Three Weeks**

Continue to monitor traditional and social media and record any changes in information and perception. Establish a location and method for members of the public to pay tribute to Harambe. Provide links to foundations and other primate conservations organizations. Continue updates to safety improvements to the gorilla exhibit and any other updates.

### **1-2 Months**

Media monitoring continues, and data and stories are collected for an after-action report. Media availabilities are provided to allow in-depth coverage of changes being made for safety at the primate exhibits and elsewhere in the zoo (if necessary) along with interviews with the dangerous animal response team and zoo director. Provide social media and blog updates about safety changes and information for Harambe tribute, and places for conservation contribution. Provide updates to policy, procedure and training to staff and stakeholders regarding new safety precautions. Prepare for re-opening of primate exhibits with new safety features and well-being of animals in exhibits.

### **3 Months Post Crisis**

Complete monitoring of media coverage and complete after-action report with information from exhibit re-opening to include in the final investigation report. Report should include how the incident was covered in the media, social media engagement, response perception changes over time and lessons learned for future responses to the media and public for a crisis. Maintain primate education and information for conservation tributes in Harambe's honor.

### **Key messages**

- The safety of our visitors and our animals is our #1 priority. We will study this incident as we work toward continuous improvement for the safety of our visitors, staff, and animals.
- Tranquilizers do not take effect for several minutes and the impact from the dart could agitate the animal. A child's life was in danger and a quick decision had to be made by our dangerous animal response team.
- The Zoo's dangerous animal response team is zoo staff members trained and certified annually by the Hamilton County Sheriff's Office. They made the difficult decision to put the gorilla down to save the child and we are grateful he is going to be okay.
- We are heartbroken about losing Harambe and we're touched by the outpouring of support from the community. We appreciate your understanding and know that you care about our animals and the people who care for them.

### **Communication Channels**

*Press Conference-* Scheduled as soon as possible following the incident to address immediate concerns with maximum reach to the public. Additional press conferences should be used for announcing new and significant changes and to address inaccuracies to meet objectives and media cycle deadlines.

*Press Release-* Press releases will be focused strictly on factual operations, involved parties/agencies, a timeline of events, evolving safety and pertinent statistics with visuals and imagery.

*Media interviews/ grounds access-* Media interviews and grounds access will be granted on a case-by-case scenario. No exclusives shall be granted to any one media outlet, but original story ideas will not be

shared with competing media outlets. Specific ground rules will be established and adhered to in all instances.

*Zoo webpage-* The existing zoo site will disseminate information for public access. This will include but is not limited to brief update information on homepage (primate section closed to public), frequently asked questions page, video and imagery, fact sheets and blog posts.

*Zoo Social Media-* Social media will be utilized for quick breaking news response and short updates as available. Additional posts will be in conjunction with press releases with links back to full information and hashtags to track engagement for after-action report.

## Closing Remarks

A crisis communication plan should provide enough structure that all parties involved can understand what strategies and tactics will be most useful to meet expectations while allowing flexibility within the crisis. The plan should allow for creativity to solve problems and stay within ethical boundaries of internal and external communication. Lessons learned should always be shared and added to the revisions of any and all communications plans for future use.

## References:

[“Gorilla killed after 3-year old falls into zoo”](#) by Cameron Knight and Mallorie Sullivan (Cincinnati.com Washington Post Network May 28, 2016)

[“Cincinnati Zoo Devastated by Death of Beloved Gorilla”](#) (Cincinnati Zoo Blog May 29, 2016)

[“Outrage after gorilla killed at Cincinnati Zoo to save Child”](#) (Associated Press, CBS June 1, 2016)

Emergency Media & Public Affairs (EMPA). The Pacific Northwest USA EMPA Disaster and Emergency Communication Conference. September 2018. Lower Columbia College. <https://www.empa.org.au/>

The National Response Team Joint Information Center Model for Emergency Support Functions handbook. April 2013. [https://www.nrt.org/sites/2/files/Updated%20NRT%20JIC%20Model\\_4-25-13.pdf](https://www.nrt.org/sites/2/files/Updated%20NRT%20JIC%20Model_4-25-13.pdf)

Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) PRSA Code of Ethics. 2020. <https://www.prsa.org/about/ethics/prsa-code-of-ethics>

Cincinnati Zoo Logo (n.d). Retrieved from <http://cincinnati-zoo.org/>