# **Crisis Communication: Casey Jones’ Caboose Restaurant**

## **Description**

This is the original simulation created for online or hybrid delivery, and has been successfully delivered multiple times in online and in-person classes. Students are given this case as a capstone assignment and it provides an opportunity to apply the concepts they’ve learned about crisis communication. Learner feedback suggests that while they find the role play challenging, they also find it a lot of fun, sometimes thinking of it as a mystery to be solved.

This is an intense scenario, in which the crisis develops in real time over the course of the simulation. It usually runs for about forty-five minutes, but should end when participants lose energy. The level of difficulty can be modified depending on the rate at which messages are delivered, and can vary from group to group. The case requires team cohesion, application of crisis communication concepts, analytical and problem-solving skills, and ethical decision-making in an evolving crisis.

## **Notes to Facilitator**

While four-to-six group members is optimal, up to eight per group can work, depending on class size, as well as facilitator support (e.g., TA or co-facilitator). Each group works cooperatively to discuss the evolving information and plan their crisis communication deliverables. Teams can be uniform, with all group members receiving all communication prompts simultaneously, or each member can be assigned a role. Suggested roles for group members include: communication liaison (i.e., the person receiving incoming messages for the team), advisers, notetakers and writers. It is advisable to allow participants the opportunity to timeout if they feel overwhelmed. It is also advisable to select alternates when using a communication liaison, in the event of absence.

If delivering this role play with a TA or other co-facilitator, it is advisable to establish a back channel for communication. This allows facilitators to check in with each other over the course of the role play and coordinate when the opening five prompts have been delivered, how many of the randomized prompts have been delivered, and when it is time to end the role play.

What are your learning objectives for this exercise or course? What prompts could you add to extend or expand the simulation in that direction? What additional resources or assignments might you add?

## **Preparation**

Prior to the simulation, ensure participant contact information (e.g, emails, selected chat platform, or phone numbers for texting) is easily accessible; having digital information is easiest when delivering prompts for online or hybrid role play. If using one communication liaison per group, only those individuals need to be contacted; if delivering prompts to groups as a whole, contact information will be required for all group members, or it can be pasted into a shared chat function. Advance planning is helpful to avoid delaying the beginning of the role play. If online, you can copy and paste prompts using email or a chat function. If delivering the simulation in person, you could continue to use email or chat for hybrid delivery. Depending on class size and facilitator support, using cue cards or slips of paper to communicate may not be practical. Be aware of your organization’s PIPA position. **Discuss privacy issues in advance and modify accordingly.**

## **Notes for Participants**

You will take the role of a crisis communication team, hired by Casey Jones’ Caboose Restaurant to help them navigate an evolving crisis. Depending on the size of the class, you will be in groups of four-to-eight participants. You may decide on various roles for group members, e.g., communication liaison (i.e., the person receiving incoming messages for the team), advisers, notetakers and writers. Alternatively, you may all be receiving incoming messages, and may act collaboratively on these responsibilities.

Once you have reviewed the foundational scenario, you will receive additional messages over the course of the role play. You are not expected to respond to these messages in real time; however, the information provided should be discussed with your group as you start to understand the situation, and develop your ideas towards possible outgoing crisis messages.

## **Warm-up Exercise**

Ask participants to introduce themselves to each other, and come up with a name for their crisis communication company in role. If assuming different roles, discuss what roles you will assume, e.g., communication liaison, advisers, notetakers or writers. This is also an opportunity for the group to have a preliminary discussion about the practical application of crisis communication, and any previous experience they might have in this area.

## **Foundational Scenario**

The founder and CEO of Casey Jones’ Caboose has called your crisis communication company due to concerns about a developing situation. Casey Jones’ Caboose is an upscale Canadian chain restaurant, similar to Milestones or Jack Astor’s. Founded in 1996, the chain now has 46 restaurants, spread across all provinces. Casey Jones’ Caboose is centrally managed, so all restaurants receive the same ingredients from the same suppliers. It is a publicly traded company with shares on the Toronto Stock Exchange. Casey Jones’ Caboose has no previous experience with crisis communication, and hasn’t developed a crisis communication manual.

The CEO has requested your advice on how to proceed, and is receiving regular updates that they will provide to you in real-time throughout the simulation.

## **For Facilitator**

All prompts should also include the name of the source sending the message. These can be copied and pasted into an email or chat function. The first five prompts, which help establish the foundational scenario, are delivered to every group in the same order, one at a time, in the first five minutes of the role play. Although only one scenario is provided, customization is created by randomizing the order of delivery of the middle prompts. It is not necessary for all of the middle prompts to be delivered, meaning that each group will have a unique experience, receiving messages from a variety of stakeholders in randomized order. The final prompt, which confirms the source of the problem and solves the mystery, should be delivered to every group, at a similar time, and marks the end of the role play. Although it may not be realistic that this information would be clarified so quickly, it is provided to allow students to draft their assignments.

## **Required Prompts**

*Delivered in this order to all groups in the first five minutes*

1. CJC Restaurant Manager Fredericton location: Just got a call from some guy saying his girlfriend got sick a couple days after eating here. I’ve checked the kitchen and asked staff, but as far as I can tell, everything’s okay. It might be from something she ate somewhere else, or maybe she picked up the flu. Just thought you should know.
2. CJC Restaurant Manager Toronto location: Message from someone who ate here on the weekend saying they’re sick. Really angry.
3. CJC Marketing Manager: A few bad reviews on BlogTO and Yelp since the weekend. Not the usual moaning. I count six giving lowest ratings and complaining of illness. Something to follow up?
4. Fredericton ER Doctor: I’ve got 8 people in my ER who all say they ate at Casey Jones’ Caboose in Fredericton on the weekend. It’s the only thing they have in common, so I suspect some kind of contagion or food-borne illness from this location. Still too early to know exactly what the problem is, but we’re running tests.
5. CJC Restaurant Manager Alberta: What the hell is going on? I just had someone tear a strip off me claiming they got sick after eating here. I just had a look on social media, and it’s blowing up! Please advise!

## **Random Prompts**

*Delivered in any order to progress the scenario; not all prompts need be delivered*

1. CJC Marketing Manager: Not sure what’s going on, but now I’ve got bad reviews and complaints about illness in almost all provinces. Ratings are way down. What do you want me to do?
2. Toronto ER Doctor: We’ve had several people come into Emerg saying they ate salads at Casey Jones’ Caboose downtown on the weekend. We’ve alerted Toronto Public Health.
3. CJC Restaurant Manager Toronto location: We’ve got an inspector here from Toronto Public Health. Cooperating, but not sure what he expects to find.
4. CBC News: We’d appreciate the opportunity of an interview. We’re noticing a lot of activity on social media regarding concerns about illness derived from your restaurants right across the country. We’d like to provide balanced reporting, so please get in touch.
5. CJC Marketing Manager: Social media is blowing up! We’ve got hundreds of bad reviews now. Some indicate they had salad, but it’s not consistent.
6. Vancouver Coastal Health Authority: We are currently investigating your Vancouver restaurant location.
7. Global Media: We’d like to invite you to come on air tomorrow morning to discuss the illness outbreak at your restaurant chain.
8. Toronto Star: We were wondering if we could line up an interview about the food poisoning incidents connected to your restaurants. A few people have already come forward to talk to us, and we’d like to hear your side of the story.
9. Bank Manager: I’m hearing bad things in the media about Casey Jones’ Caboose. Just a reminder that we extended you a loan of $500,000 to support opening the most recent restaurants. We may need to review our loan terms if you don’t get this cleaned up.
10. La Ville de Montreal, Inspection des aliments, Plaintes: “Lors de sa visite à l'établissement l'inspecteur doit vérifier un ensemble de points critiques dont la maîtrise offre une garantie quant à l'innocuité de l'aliment. Ces points portent sur l'aliment, les méthodes de travail, les manipulateurs, le matériel utilisé et le milieu dans lequel les opérations sont effectuées.”
11. Landlord West Edmonton Mall: We’ve just been informed that the franchise of your restaurant in our location has made a number of customers sick. At the West Edmonton Mall, we’re proud of our reputation, and don’t appreciate it being challenged by tenants. If this issue isn’t resolved quickly, we will be obliged to close and perhaps evict your restaurant from our premises.
12. Meat supplier: We understand that there have been issues with some of the food served at Casey Jones’ Caboose. We have carefully reviewed our product and procedures, and don’t believe we are the source; however, please keep us informed if you hear otherwise.
13. Toronto Public Health: After numerous complaints, we’re inspecting your downtown Toronto location. Until we complete our investigation, this location will be temporarily closed.
14. New supplier: We understand that you’re experiencing some issues with contaminated food throughout your restaurant chain. We’d like to offer you a 10% discount on new food orders to replace contaminated food.
15. CJC Restaurant Manager Edmonton location: Don’t know if you’ve heard yet, but we’ve got a food inspector on the premises. He’s suggesting that staff has been negligent in their cleaning duties. That isn’t the case. We use checklists to make sure everything gets properly cleaned every shift. I wanted you to hear that from me.
16. Transportation company manager: I understand you’ve had issues with some of your food supplies. I just want to confirm that all our refrigerator trucks are in perfect working order. I personally guarantee that all our trucks, throughout the chain and across the country, are working properly.
17. Board member: I’m hearing bad things about Casey Jones’ Caboose today. I’ve been checking the TSX, and people are dropping stock fast. Share price is down over 30% in the last hour. Fix this!
18. Your lawyer: Just got a call from a lawyer representing someone who claims to have gotten food poisoning at your St. John’s location. Claims that a whole lot of people are sick right across the country. What’s going on? Do we need to prepare for a lawsuit?

## **Required Final Prompt**

*Delivered to end the role play; coordinated between facilitators*

**FINAL PROMPT**: Canadian Food Inspection Agency: We can confirm that there has been an e-coli outbreak due to contaminated romaine lettuce across the Casey Jones’ Caboose restaurant chain coast-to-coast. The source of the contaminated romaine has been isolated and the supplier has been informed. The company does not sell romaine to grocery stores, and Casey Jones’ Caboose is one of their few commercial clients. We are informing media.

## **Debriefing**

### *Interpersonal*

* How did the role play go for you and your group?
* What was your group’s plan before beginning the simulation? Did that plan change as the simulation progressed? How?
* Who took initiative or was it shared by all? Did an informal leader naturally emerge?
* Did you actively listen to one another? Did everyone feel heard?
* How well did team members adapt to this rapidly evolving situation? How well did your group manage the crisis? What might you do differently next time?

### *Issues*

* Were you able to see how theories of crisis communication might be applied to such a situation?
* Who are the audiences for the crisis communication messages you will draft?
* Are some stakeholder interests more important than others?

## **Assignments**

The following suggestions could be undertaken either as a group or individually. They could be written as reflections, offered for discussion, or submitted as assignments for grading.

1. What do you know about what has happened at Casey Jones’ Caboose?
2. Who are the stakeholders in this developing crisis? What do you know about your audiences? How will this knowledge help you draft a message informing them of the situation?
3. Considering these audiences, what messages would be most appropriate for this circumstance?
4. Write an individual or group reflection on your experience with this simulation. Some of the questions from the debrief might also be used here as prompts.
5. Individually or as a group, draft a news release that offers a quick and meaningful response on behalf of Casey Jones’ Caboose in light of this crisis. What information do you share? Who are your audiences?
6. What follow-up messages, longer-term responses, or alternative media channels might you suggest to Casey Jones’ Caboose?

## **Readings**

[Claeys, A., Coombs, W.T. (2020). Organizational Crisis Communication: Suboptimal Crisis Response Selection Decisions and Behavioral Economics, *Communication Theory, 30*(3) 290–309.](https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtz002)

Coombs, W.T. (2007). *Ongoing Crisis Communication: Planning, Managing, and Responding*. Sage.

Coombs, W.T. & Holladay, S.J. (2015). *Handbook of Crisis Communication*. Wiley.

Lundgren, R. & McMakin, A. (2018). *Risk Communication: A Handbook for Communicating Environmental, Safety, and Health Risks* (6th ed.). Wiley.

Seeger, M. & Sellnow, T. (2019). *Communication in Times of Trouble*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Ulmer, R. R., Sellnow, T. L., & Seeger, M. W. (2015). *Effective Crisis Communication: Moving* *from Crisis to Opportunity* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage.