Crisis Communication: Give the Intervention Room to Work

By Dr. Peter Beddow, BCBA-D

When a student is in crisis, the adults nearby usually want to help. Someone offers a reminder. Someone else suggests a break. An administrator walks in and asks what happened. A colleague stops in the doorway to watch. Each person means well, but the student may now be hearing four voices, seeing six faces, and trying to figure out who is in charge.

In a behavioral crisis, the team often helps most by **reducing competing signals**. One person leads. Other adults take clearly defined support roles, and only when the lead asks. Afterward, the team debriefs so the next response is safer and more coordinated.

This is a practical communication framework drawn from my experience in school settings. It is not a research-validated protocol or an official requirement. Adapt it to your team, your students, and your local rules.

A Note on Safety and Scope

This framework covers communication and role clarity only. It is not a crisis-intervention procedure and includes no physical intervention instructions.

Every response to a student in crisis should follow:

• The student's approved behavior support plan or crisis plan

• The training each staff member has actually received

• School and district policy

• State and federal law

• Emergency services, when the situation calls for them

Restrictive responses are governed by law, policy, training, and approved plans, and any escalation should be led by trained, authorized personnel. **Safety comes first, always.** Nothing here should delay a call for help.

For BCBAs and RBTs, your professional ethics code is the foundation for client protection and for working within your competence and role. The code does not prescribe the structure below. This framework is simply meant to support those same commitments.

Lead: One Clear Voice

In this framework, the staff member who was working with the student when the behavior began is the **lead** and stays the lead unless there is a clear transfer. That person usually knows what came before, what has been tried, and what the student is responding to. Keeping them in the lead gives the student consistency when it matters most.

While someone is leading, other adults hold back from giving the student directions, making a point of eye contact, or offering support unless the lead asks. This includes administrators, with one exception covered below.

The original staff member might not be the right lead if:

• They have not been trained on the student's specific plan.

• They cannot carry out the plan safely.

• They are injured, exhausted, or overwhelmed.

In these cases, the right move is a clear transfer to someone trained and able. **Handing off the lead is a professional judgment**, and a good one. It protects the student and the staff.

The question to ask first

Any adult entering the space can ask the lead one quiet question before doing anything else:

> "Do you need anything?"

If you don't want to require an answer, try:

> "Let me know if you need anything."

That version lets the lead stay focused on the student and respond only if help is wanted.

Support: Four Defined Roles

Any staff member in the environment may support the intervention, as long as support follows the lead's request. Each of the four roles is tied to a short, plain request.

Extra Eyes: "Stay here."

Sometimes the lead doesn't need anything right now but would feel better with another adult nearby. Aim to be present without becoming part of the scene. Avoid fixing your attention on the student, and position yourself so you don't seem to be hovering. Turning partly away or occupying yourself with something neutral can help. You are available, calm, and quiet.

Extra Hands: "Please do X."

The lead may need a task done to support de-escalation, such as moving furniture or clearing items from an area. A clarifying question is fine. If the task is physically beyond you, or you believe it conflicts with the plan or your training, say so briefly so the lead can choose another option. Otherwise, help without debate in front of the student.

Runner: "Please get X."

The lead may need something that isn't in the room: a material named in the student's plan, or a specific person such as the BCBA, a trained colleague, or an administrator.

Tag Team: "Would you be willing to take over?"

This is the main way another adult takes over: the lead asks. A clean handoff might include a brief, quiet summary of where things stand and agreement about who the student is now hearing from. The original lead then becomes support or steps out, depending on what the new lead needs.

When Leadership Must Intervene

Someone may take over without the lead's request in one situation: when school leadership determines that the lead can no longer carry out the intervention safely.

This step is reserved for safety, not preference or impatience. Afterward, talk the reason through privately and professionally with the original lead. That conversation is about learning and support, so the staff member understands the decision and feels respected.

The Problem of Unassigned Adults

I informally call adults who remain in the area without a role "gawkers." It isn't a clinical term or an insult. Most are concerned colleagues who want to be useful, including administrators who arrive to help but don't yet have a defined role.

The concern is what extra adults add. More faces and voices can make a hard moment louder and less predictable. For some students, especially those whose behavior may be maintained in part by attention, a crowd may unintentionally add to what keeps the behavior going.

This does **not** mean a student should be ignored. Safety and communication needs always matter, and the student's plan should guide how adults respond. The goal is a calm environment where the student can more easily hear the one adult helping them.

There's a staff side too. An adult stepping in unasked can undercut the team members who work with that student every day. Agreeing on likely roles ahead of time goes a long way toward preventing that.

Clear Communication Under Pressure

When support staff ask the lead a question, a noncommittal answer leaves everyone guessing about who is in charge, and that uncertainty can unsettle the room.

A useful rule: **the lead gives a clear, honest next step**, even without the full answer. For example:

• "I'm staying with the plan for now. Please stay close."

• "I need the BCBA. Can you get her?"

• "I'm not sure about this part. I'd like to consult before we change anything."

• "I'd like you to take over."

Saying you need consultation or a transfer is a clear answer. It shows a professional working within their training, which is part of protecting the student.

Debriefing as Part of the Intervention

The intervention doesn't truly end when the student is calm. Afterward, the team should review procedures, communication, roles, and strategies. What helped? Where did signals get crossed? Does the plan need review by the BCBA or team?

Strong emotions after a crisis are normal. Debriefing gives people space to process them and get back on the same page. Keep it focused on learning, not blame, and follow your school's procedures for any required documentation or reporting.

Practical Checklist

Before a crisis – Review each student's approved plan and who is trained to carry it out. – Agree on likely roles, including administrators. – Practice the short requests: "Stay here," "Please do X," "Please get X," "Would you be willing to take over?"

During a crisis – Safety first. Follow the plan, training, policy, and law. Call for help when needed. – One lead, one clear voice. – Entering the space? Ask, "Do you need anything?" or say, "Let me know if you need anything." – If you have no role, step away quietly. – Lead: give clear next steps, and ask for consultation or a transfer when you need it.

After a crisis – Debrief roles, communication, and strategies. – Make room for emotions. – Follow up privately on any leadership takeover. – Bring plan concerns to the BCBA and team.

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About the author

Teacher at heart, behavior analyst, and writer, Dr. Peter Beddow has spent more than two decades helping children, families, and school teams navigate autism, behavior, trauma, and learning differences with clarity, structure, and hope. He studied English Literature and Creative Writing at Middlebury College and earned a PhD in Special Education from Vanderbilt University's Peabody College, where his work focused on fairness, learning, and access in assessment. Peter has worked as a teacher, special educator, clinical director, consultant, and board certified behavior analyst in homes, schools, and clinics. He founded Accessible Hope, a Nashville-area practice supporting diverse families, and writes and teaches practical, humane approaches to behavior and learning.

Scope and safety

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