For Malaysia Airlines, every hour counts as it deals with the loss of flight MH370 with 227 passengers and 12 crew on-board.

The first 48 hours of a crisis are the most critical for an organisation as it aims to reassure people that it can deal with, and resolve, the crisis.

It is in this time period that people will decide whether or not to support the organisation in trouble. A failure to act decisively and with leadership can result in inflaming outrage and blame.

For Malaysia Airlines, that time is now up. It is now entering a reputational minefield.

Flight MH370 lost contact with air traffic controllers at 2:40am local time (5:40am AEDT) on Saturday after it left Kuala Lumpur and headed for Beijing.

The worst-case scenario of an accident is compounded by the uncertainty of what happened, where it happened and why it happened. There are so many questions but few answers.

In the context of crisis management and communication, this information vacuum equates to a doomsday situation for the airline.
Dealing with a crisis

Although scholars are yet to agree on a definition of a crises, each event shares common themes – surprise, uncertainty, danger, reputation and relationships. All these facts have come to bear on Malaysia Airlines.

Crises can impact on individuals, families, organisations, communities and even nations.

Unprepared, organisations often collapse under the weight of three “crisis” realities – a lack of information, a lack of time and a lack of resources.

This creates what has been termed a “crisis smog”, where organisational leaders are blinded by pressure they have never previously experienced.

An effective response to a crisis demands accurate, timely and trusted information. Armed with the facts, an organisation can address many of the issues that surface in the hours after a disaster.

Information helps reduce the outrage and the blame felt by victims and relatives. Information helps people make sense of what happened, and information forms the foundation of the recovery process for all involved.

But Malaysia Airlines is facing a “black swan” event – an unprecedented and unexpected situation.

The reaction so far

The airline’s senior management has done the right thing in fronting the media early on and releasing the passenger list.

Some things are known but many questions still remain – in particular, how could a modern Boeing 777-200 vanish at 35,000 feet over the South China Sea without any distress signal before impact?

Feeding into speculation – symptomatic of an information vacuum – are questions over two passengers who boarded on stolen passports. How could this happen when air safety and security was supposed to be tightened following the 9/11 hijacks?

As time goes by, more questions will be asked, expectations for answers will be increased and tension will be heightened between anxious relatives and the airline. Anger will overtake grief as people seek to attribute responsibility. The blame game is likely to be overwhelming.

So, the airline must focus on two key areas. The first is to work closely with the search efforts – being seen to do something – as more countries, including Australia, join in.

Secondly, the airline must ensure it meets the communication and emotional needs of the relatives. This will be challenging. Communication must take a people-first empathetic approach from the perspective of the families.

The Singapore Airlines crash in Taiwan in 2000 is a good example of how this can be done. The airline provided counselling services at the destination airport for relatives waiting for the
a aircraft. It also offered a “buddy” system to support relatives.

Knowns and unknowns

There are some basic “rules” the airline should follow:

Ensure as much as possible that family and friends are informed about developments before the media is informed. Keep family and friends together and have airline representatives on hand to offer support.

Be consistent with information. The basic tenant of speaking with “one voice” is even more critical. Conflicting information adds to speculation and destroys trust and credibility.

Anticipate the questions and concerns of family and friends. Although answers may not be known, it is important to acknowledge the impact of uncertainty.

Address speculation quickly, particularly if it is circulating on social media. The danger is rumours can take control of the communications agenda.

With such uncertainty, Malaysia Airlines could adopt the communication model used by New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani in the days following 9/11.

*This is what we know. This is what we don’t know. This is what we are doing. This is what you can do.*

People are more supportive of an organisation that admits “unknowns” in a crisis, at least in the early stages. Therefore, the “this is what we don’t know” approach builds transparency and trust. It removes doubts that there may be something to hide.

But for Malaysia Airlines, people will be patient only for so long. The airline industry will be watching to see if the airline has what it takes to emerge unscathed from this disaster, and what crisis management lessons there are to be learnt for the future.