

## [155-305] Employee communications during a crisis

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In a crisis and times of heightened stress, communication mechanisms are often stretched and run the risk of breaking down.

Organisations in Australia and around the world are increasingly aware of the need to be able to communicate with their staff and the public in times of a crisis. The current instability of the financial markets has highlighted the importance of keeping staff and customers informed. Some organisations already have plans in place to deal with issues that may involve a product recall, a critical incident or a safety issue. The success of these crisis communications when implemented in a “real situation” depends on the pre-planning that has occurred, employee’s familiarity with the plan and the culture within the organisation.

One organisation which has developed and successfully implemented a Crisis Response Plan on a number of occasions — most recently during the cyclone season in Western Australia — is Horizon Power. Horizon Power is a commercially focused, state government-owned power company that supplies power (electricity from start to end) to Western Australia’s booming regional economy. Horizon Power is responsible for generating, procuring, distributing and retailing electricity to meet the needs of residential, industrial and commercial customers and resource developments in their service area. Horizon Power has 38,000 customers and services an area of 2.3 million square kilometres covering the Kimberley, Pilbara, Gascoyne, Mid West and southern Goldfields (Esperance) regions. Horizon Power’s regional offices are located in Kununurra, Broome, Port Hedland, Carnarvon, Esperance and Perth with the Head Office located in Karratha in the state’s Pilbara region.

Horizon Power employs approximately 300 staff to cover this area. Approximately 30 staff are based in the head office at Karratha and another 150 are located in Perth. The remaining 120 staff are based in the regional sites in groups of about 20 people. Most employees at these regional sites are linesmen, engineers, power station workers and customer service staff.

Adrian Blackburn, Manager — Safety and Health, People and Corporate Services indicated that their crisis plan has to take into consideration:

- the remoteness of their locations
- the spread of their depots and offices (in some cases many thousands of kilometres apart), and
- the fact that they are located in cyclone areas and their power stations and electricity grid is exposed to floods and other natural events/disasters.

Horizon Power’s management team places great emphasis on communicating with staff on a regular basis. They believe that communication builds the foundation on which their crisis plan is developed and helps to create trust in the company and its messages.

The vast distances they need to cover, the remoteness of the locations and the need to keep all staff informed about what is happening in the business means that Horizon Power needs to be clever about the way it communicates. Wherever possible, leaders try to communicate face-to-face with staff. One way of doing this is through the team briefing session. This is a method of communicating information from the managing director (MD), the executive and leaders to staff on a regular basis. Communication is carried out in teams with leaders receiving a written brief at their meetings to ensure that the message they deliver is accurate and complete. Video conferencing provides a useful link between the regions with Blackberries, and satellite phones provided to field staff who work in remote locations.

When there is a significant change or an important business matter/initiative to be announced, the MD will send out a written notice to all staff. This may be supported by a video which is sent to each location with a requirement that all staff will be brought into the local depot to watch the video. Just recently, Horizon Power facilitated a series of training programs and committee meetings for safety representatives, via video link

which has worked extremely well and reduced the amount of travel for those involved. Previously, staff would have had to travel to Perth for training.

The management team places a great deal of emphasis on face-to-face communications which they believe helps to build trust and commitment to the business and improves service delivery to the customer. When visiting a location for a business meeting, managers are encouraged to “walk the job” and to meet with as many locally-based employees as possible, to review safety matters and to generally encourage feedback on matters of concern.

Horizon Power has a very comprehensive Crisis Management Strategy which outlines the processes to advise key stakeholders about damage to infrastructure in the area, likely duration of power outages and safety precautions to take. For this they use a variety of mediums, including local television and radio stations, the internet, and newspapers.

During the most recent cyclone season, the Karratha-based Crisis Management Team were in regular contact with the Bureau of Meteorology. The weather forecasts were used to prepare local equipment and power stations for potential damage and or flooding. Managers were briefed on a regular basis via videoconferencing and maintained ongoing contact via their Blackberries through phone call and emails. Staff were also brought into the regional depots which made communications considerably easier and ensured that all staff were safe. Horizon Power believes that one of the reasons they were successful in restoring power quickly to local residents, was that the communication strategy worked. People were prepared in time, local people were kept informed about their power supply and staff felt confident in dealing with local issues because they knew what was happening and they trusted the information that they were given by the senior management team at Horizon Power. He believes that the key to success when communicating in a crisis situation is that:

- there needs to be a willingness from the organisation to communicate, and staff need to be given all the information necessary to enable them to make local decisions
- there needs to be a clear and unified message from the management team in how the issue should be approached
- people need to be told the truth because it creates trust and builds community within the workplace (even if the news is negative), and
- where customers are involved, it is vital that they are given as much information as possible so that they can act appropriately.

Another key may be promoting involvement from all staff and customers in dealing with issues. This then promotes accountability, self-management and a greater sense of control in a crisis situation. It also decentralises responsibility as much as possible down to the depots and regions.

In many organisations, where there is a well prepared Crisis Management Plan in place, the plan usually includes steps to respond to and addresses the personal issues and trauma for staff and their families. These may have been caused by a natural disaster, an accident or some other incident. Julie Sim, the State Manager Qld for Davidson Trahaire Corpsych says: “it is really important that crisis counselling, to help employees deal with the immediate shock (that results from an incident), be addressed as quickly as possible.” She states that not only is it important for an employee to be able to develop a rapport and trust with their counsellor but the psychological support and counselling needs to be provided approximately over a period of 7–14 days from the onset as this is the critical time for the management of traumatic stress symptoms. Ongoing support from colleagues, team leaders and family is vital in the longer term if an employee is to be able to make progress and action their own self-help strategies. The follow-up support from professional counsellors can be in place for up to two years.

Julie indicated that a number of key principles underpin the organisation’s approach to dealing with workplace traumas. These are listed as follows:

- Incident management is integrated with managerial and team interventions. It is not a stand-alone psychological treatment.

- A specialist assessment of the individual and the situation is the basis on which appropriate organisational and counselling responses are identified and recommended.
- Appropriate responses for individuals may include tailored individual brief “treatment”, work support strategies, management responses and action.
- Any psychological interventions at the individual level are more beneficial where they are “focused”. The “shot gun” approach of “one session group therapy”, creates a risk that less affected group participants may become more distressed or traumatised, and “at risk” individuals and their specific needs are not identified and addressed appropriately.
- Team/group “debrief/discussions”, to engender peer support and communicate operational plans and strategies ensuing from the incident, are best conducted by a manager/team leader with appropriate training and coaching.
- The psychological health and wellbeing of staff, post-incident, is closely linked to maintenance and confidence at work, supervisory/organisational support.

The *Harvard Review* published an article in 1996 by TJ Larkin<sup>i</sup> which contained the following comment: “in periods of high stress and uncertainty, people fill communication voids with rumours; rumours end up attributing the worst possible motives to those in control; and communication lowers employee’s stress and anxiety even when the news is bad. In other words uncertainty is worse than bad news.”

The examples of the various incidents presented in this article demonstrate the importance of not only communicating with staff on a regular basis, but also during a change or crisis situation ensuring that the most appropriate methods of communication are used. Organisations and their staff can benefit from a crisis plan that includes when, where and how, information will be shared with staff.

Barbara Holmes — Director — Managing Work | Life Balance International

#### Footnotes

<sup>i</sup> Larkin TJ and Larking S (1996) “Reaching and Changing Frontline Employees” *Harvard Business Review*, May–June edition.