



Communication – the key to crisis control

Dennis Sleigh

Did Australia really need the BER? In debating the Australian Government's response to the global economic downturn, few will deny Labor made some serious mistakes. However, were they as bad as some media outlets argued? Time will probably show far less failures than suggested. If this does happen, however, it won't mean the fault lies only with the media; at least some blame must go to the politicians themselves on both side of Parliament who failed to sell the plan. The underlying problem may well turn out to be poor communication.

In discussing communication, it is a truism to claim it can make or break any organisation – including a school. Handled effectively, communication can invigorate a school; handled badly, it can be totally destructive. This particularly applies during a crisis. When managing a crisis, I'd rather have a skilled communicator on my side than a skilled problem-solver.

Don't get me wrong – I'd want someone to help me solve the emerging problems but even more I would want someone who could convince the stakeholders that the crisis was in fact manageable.

What exactly would I be looking for in this crisis-defusing communicator? I think there are three essential qualities and a few others that would certainly be useful. The 'big three' would be *integrity*, *clarity* and *availability*. The others

will have to wait for now because I don't want them to become a distraction. Let's look at each of the three and assess their value.

The value of integrity

It is fair to say that mishandled communication underpins many disasters in our world. Whether we are discussing the invasion of Iraq, the Vatican's reaction to the paedophilia scandal, or the oil industry's response to the Gulf of Mexico oil spill, there were major weaknesses in the way they were handled. In each case, the immediate response seemed to be "How can we disguise the seriousness of this issue until the air clears?"

It might seem brutal to say so, but I believe that the instances cited were based on a determined decision to lie. Someone in a senior position decided that to avoid their own demise, they had to present half-truths as real facts, and no matter how we view this strategy it involved manipulating the truth; predictably, the resultant after-shocks were aggravated by this laxity. Few of us will ever deal personally with a major oil spill, a search for weapons of mass destruction, or an Enron financial scandal – but even at our level, if we are loose with the truth, this weakness will return to haunt us.

This haunting might well occur at a time when we most need public support – and the support will be absent because we lack credibility. As we reflect on ways to deal with a crisis at school, we

need to take this thought on board: the truth will set us free but lies will snare us badly.

If people know that they can trust you, they are more likely to stick with you in a crisis; if they lack confidence in your veracity, they are less likely to take your word for anything. Sadly, once we shatter a person's belief by lying to them, it is very hard to regain their trust. To avoid this, we must act with integrity all the time so that when we are faced with serious issues, our effectiveness is not reduced by a litany of minor faults from the past. A pattern of untruths quickly erodes both personal and communal confidence so that when a real crisis occurs, there is no chance that someone who lies will gain the trust of their stakeholders. Trust is a rare commodity today, and we have to be very careful that whatever we say is credible.

The value of clarity

People have the right to be told the truth, but they also have the right to be told things simply. Have you ever listened to a politician being interviewed by an astute questioner, someone like Kerry O'Brien? So many of the politicians, seemingly afraid to admit that they cannot answer a question, try to disguise this fact in convoluted phrases and obscure references. They avoid the question, bring in their own slant, and then expect the interviewer (or the audience) to be satisfied with their responses. You can hear the same scripts in boardrooms at annual general

meetings, in dressing rooms after a lost match, and in lounge rooms when parents interrogate their teenagers. What you are hearing is spin; what you want to hear is clarity.

In a previous article in this series, I wrote about the importance of openness in handling a crisis; my current call for clarity is a development of that same theme. However, clarity is more than just openness. Openness implies sharing with people the information that is available; clarity goes further, requiring the disclosure to be made in such a way that everyone actually *understands* what is being said. Since teachers are professional communicators, it is not too much to expect that in a school-centred crisis, there should be someone who can explain the situation simply and honestly.

If a retaining wall in the playground has collapsed, and two children have suffered serious injuries, parents want to know this. They *don't* want to hear that “following extensive deterioration to certain infrastructure, pre-existing support mechanisms have been found to be unstable, and their malfunction has resulted in unexpected physical alterations in the post-natal structure of certain educational aspirants”. Tell it like it is, and people will know where they stand. In turn, they will be more likely to support you as you try to deal with the tragedy.

The value of availability

It is important to be *honest* when dealing with a crisis; it is important to be *clear*; it is even more important to be *present*. How often do we hear on news reports that the spokesman for a particular organisation was not available for comment? Sometimes this is valid – the key people were so busy saving lives they couldn't take time off to discuss their actions with a deadline-driven reporter – but sometimes you feel “no comment” signals cowardice, not busyness.

As far as possible, it makes sense to have someone who can respond to genuine inquiries, especially from those most directly involved. If a child has been hurt in a school bus accident, every parent with someone on that bus would want to know how their child is. It is very frustrating when concerned parents seek clarity from the school, only to be told that “the principal is in a meeting just now”. Since principals cannot be in several places at once – contrary to some parental expectations – it makes sense to ensure that an authorised spokesperson is delegated and available whenever a crisis emerges.

While looking at that point it is also worth remembering that the principal is not necessarily the person who *should* be the spokesperson, at least not all of the time. During the devastating Queensland floods earlier this year, it was interesting to note how the communications process panned out. The Queensland Premier, Anna Bligh, was clearly involved with the process and she made frequent appearances in the media, consoling her people and assuring them that they were uppermost in her mind,



It is important to be honest when dealing with a crisis

but it was senior SES and local Council officers who were given the priority role of explaining what was happening and what would be done to help them. It was a very skilful delegation of duties, where the best informed were used to pass on information. It has been suggested that flood victims appreciated this departure from the increasingly common presidential style of leadership that has invaded Australia in recent decades. There is a lesson here for school leaders.

Alongside integrity, clarity and availability, there are some lesser virtues that merit serious attention when handling a crisis. *Calmness* is clearly called for, because the last thing we need is a leader rushing around and aggravating an already critical situation. *Compassion* is also very essential – the victims and their families need to know that someone actually cares about them and will do something to alleviate their distress. *Forward thinking* is also called for, with clear evidence that the present crisis is being viewed from a long-term perspective that will care for the needy even after the TV cameras have been rolled away. Additionally, *affirmation* is important, so that the often-anonymous contributors to the solution are publicly

recognised, reminding all stake-holders that their concerns are being handled by people who are genuinely seeking to alleviate distress and pain. This recognition of the support staff reduces the victims' sense of loneliness and desperation, and reminds them that in their distress they are not being ignored or forgotten.

There is nothing particularly new in these comments; they simply offer a checklist against which you can measure your own behaviour when a crisis occurs. It's worth remembering, though, that there are also some qualities that should never seep into your crisis management, negative qualities that exacerbate the situation you are trying to defuse. Again, they are not particularly novel, but it is worth asking yourself now whether these issues might arise if there was a genuine crisis in your school. If the answer is 'Possibly', then leaders should take steps now to eradicate them before they become millstones around our already strained necks.

Grand-standing is the tendency by some people to turn a crisis into an opportunity for personal publicity. You can see this trait most commonly among minor politicians, but the occurrences are not limited to one field. You can see the same weakness when a tragedy, such as a drive-by shooting, occurs in a city – the telejournalists always seem to find someone who will use this opportunity to let the world know (“Hi, Mum!”) that they were personally involved – even if they arrived on the scene ten minutes after the ambulances left. I think we know the sort of person I am talking about – someone whose insecurities are obvious to everyone except themselves. They seem to think that their views on a topic are all-important, even though they might be totally inappropriate and unhelpful. From grand-standers, O Lord, protect us.

Even worse are *blamers*, people who hover around a crisis scene so that they can find someone to blame. Opposition leaders are famous for this; insecure managers are, too. They need to assert their own importance by making it clear that they would never act wrongly, and they do this by sheeting home some blame even if blame is not warranted.

Finally, there are the *deniers*. They cannot accept the reality of life and so they try to retell the story. These people often seem to be intent on convincing others that the alleged problem didn't really occur at all. While conscientious professionals try to overcome the effects of a serious bullying incident, deniers try to convince everyone that there was really no issue at all – it was just a beat-up. Small wonder that some countries have made it an offence to deny the reality of the Holocaust. I wish we could deny the existence of the deniers instead.

Coping with a crisis is never easy. However, to prepare yourself for one, nurture the positive qualities listed here; eliminate the negative ones; and then rest assured that your efforts are more likely to win the day when tragedy strikes. **ET**



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