

WHO Communications Training

Flexible Unit D: Crisis Communication



**World Health
Organization**

Group 1

You are the executive council of Global Airlines. Air traffic controllers have lost track of one of your jumbo jets in a densely forested mountainous region. The last communication from the pilot was an S.O.S. that two of the plane's three jet engines had failed. Among the plane's 128 passengers is the leader of a powerful indigenous religious community, a children's choir, and 20 barrels of radioactive waste, which was being secretly shipped for disposal at a government facility.

Villagers in the region report having seen a fire and hearing a loud noise. The plane is now 30 minutes late at its destination. The national television network has called to ask whether any of the company's planes have gone missing in the region. What do you do?



Group 2

You are the executive council of Tas-tee frozen chicken products. The company is best known as a major supplier of chicken dinners to schools, and Tas-tee promotes its family-friendly image by sponsoring school athletic events. It is less well-known that Tas-tee is also the principal supplier of dinners to the nation's brutal prison system, where health conditions are very poor and disease is rampant.

Much of Tas-tee's product originates in a country where thousands of chickens have recently been slaughtered due to avian influenza. Tomorrow is the company's biggest public relations event of the year...a national school athletic competition at which Tas-tee will serve 10,000 free chicken dinners to students and their families.

A well-known journalist has called regarding reports that a number of prisoners have fallen seriously ill with a mysterious disease that some are blaming on the chicken dinner served in the facility. The journalist wants to know whether Tas-tee supplies the prisons, and if so whether the chicken dinners could have been tainted with bird flu. The head of the children's athletic competition is also calling to report rumors that the dinners to be served at tomorrow's games may be unsafe. What do you do?



Crisis

- From the Greek word meaning “decision.”
- It does not have to turn out badly...many organizations emerge stronger and better
- Preparation and planning is key to making the right decisions quickly



Coming Attractions

- Obligations in a crisis situation
- Transparency
- Rapid response
- Dealing with facts...and perceptions



Competing Objectives?

- Communicating the information the public needs (or wants) to know
- Not communicating inaccurate information that make the situation worse
- Protecting the reputation of the company or organization



Trust = Transparency

- Key objective: Share all info? Minimize the problem?
- Build trust in the organization and its response
- Trust is rooted in the perception of transparency



Panic...or just concern?

- Panic -- “a sudden overwhelming fear, with or without cause, that produces hysterical or irrational behavior,” and
- Anxiety -- “distress or uneasiness of mind caused by fear of danger or misfortune.”



Transparency

- Information should be candid, easily understood, accurate and complete
- This may require acknowledging uncertainty
- Preparing senior decision-makers for candid communications is key



Early disclosure

- Get bad news out, ASAP
- Will it all “blow over?” Crisis situations have no wind.
- Delay is a magnifier: The longer bad news is withheld, the worse the perception



Perception is reality

- Public fears or concerns must be taken seriously
- Acknowledge and address concerns, even if irrational
- Deal with concerns factually but respectfully



Speed counts

- News travels fast...bad news travels faster
- The first few hours are key to how the entire situation develops
- How do you act quickly? By planning in advance.



Coming Attractions

- Planning ahead
- Establishing roles/spokesperson
- Ensuring consistent information – inside and out



Plan ahead for crisis communications

- Establish a crisis communications group and determine responsibilities in advance
- Anticipate, plan and rehearse different scenarios
- Develop core message and Q&A documents in advance, then quickly update these as needed
- Meet regularly to update scenarios, and each other
- Know where to find everyone
- Ensure that leadership understands, supports and participates in crisis planning

Who's in charge?

- Establish a clear line of communications authority
- Avoid conflicting messages or spokespeople
- Keep the person in charge visible



Avoid multiple information sources

- A process for rapid response to media questions should be developed in advance.
- Decide before a crisis who will take media requests, how they will be reviewed, and who will decide how to address them.
- Make sure the official source is the best source



Be consistent internally and externally

- The internal audience is key. Make sure they know that the responsible officials are:
 - aware of the issue(s)
 - working to determine and communicate the facts
 - committed to rapid and candid disclosure
- Unauthorized staff should not communicate with any external audience
- Any information or inquiries should be shared with the communications team immediately



Starting point

- Outbreaks inflict harm
- Outbreak communications cannot undo the harm...but they can help prevent further damage
- Poor communications can do more damage...often a lot more



Unique features of an outbreak

- The impact may not be known for weeks or months, which leads to speculation and uncertainty
- Decisions are often made when reliable information is limited: Initial information will be incomplete and may be wrong
- Outbreaks cause social and economic disruption, and therefore have strong political dimensions
- Worry about public panic may lead to over-reassurance

Common beliefs v. realities

- Say nothing and the problem will go away – **Loss of trust is greater when information is revealed first by another source**
- The public will panic – **Panic is rare, but manager's anxiety made be costly**
- Concern about economic impact – **An outbreak inflicts harm, don't make it worse**
- Reassurance is the way to go, even if it's unrealistic – **Over-reassurance will undermine trust when surprises occur**
- We know our reporters and can handle them – **International events bring in new reporters**



U.S. CDC Message Guidance

- Base your message on the three components of descriptive epidemiology:
- Who?
- How many people are ill?
- How many people have been exposed?
- Are contacts being followed?
- What are the genders, ages, and occupations of those affected?



Where?

- Where is the outbreak?
- Is it near other population centers or geographic features?
- What public health/health care facilities are available at the site?
- Is there a cluster in a community or within a family?



When?

- Date first and last cases identified?
 - Onset of symptoms
 - Date of hospitalization
 - Time of lab confirmation and reporting publicly
- Presumed exposures and estimated incubation period?
- How has the disease spread over time?



Remember key message principles

- Get the facts right
 - Repeat them consistently
 - Ensure credible sources have the same facts
 - Speak with one voice: inconsistency will diminish trust
- Key messages: 3 maximum; short, clear, memorable
- Pre-test on individuals and groups, if possible



Risk communication lessons

- Openness → Trust → Credibility
- Openness requires recognition of uncertainty, where it exists
- Scientific investigation of risk should be open and transparent
- Potential risks should not be downplayed; the public should be trusted to respond rationally to openness



In the first few hours

- Determine as much information as possible
- Notify and coordinate with the crisis response group
- Update Q&As, key messages and talking points; remember: short and clear; never speculate; acknowledge uncertainty
- Ensure that media and internal audiences know who is in charge
- Ensure key partners know your messages; they should either echo these or refer questions back to WHO



Case study: WHO/SARS

- A WHO spokesman said today: "People are not responding to antibiotics or antivirals. It's a highly contagious disease and it's moving around by jet. Until we can get a grip on it, I don't see how it (can be) slowed down. It's bad."

-- As reported by the Associated Press (March 17, 2003)



BSE in the U.K.

"The Government did not lie to the public about BSE. It believed that the risks posed by BSE to humans were remote. The Government was preoccupied with preventing an alarmist over-reaction to BSE...It is now clear that this campaign of reassurance was a mistake. When on 20 March 1996 the Government announced that BSE had probably been transmitted to humans, the public felt that they had been betrayed. Confidence in government pronouncements about risk was a further casualty of BSE."

-- The BSE Inquiry 2000



Smallpox

- You work as a communicator in the WHO office in country A
- Country A has just been informed that smallpox has broken out in Country B, which shares a border with Country A.
- Country A MOH has issued a high alert
- Country A MOH has ordered border security agents to identify anyone entering from country B with a fever and rash, which are features of smallpox, and place them in quarantine.
- Country A's Minister of Health has said there is no stockpile of smallpox vaccine and if the outbreak reaches Country A it will be a disaster.
- WHO's head of office is being asked to a press conference with A's Minister of Health which will begin in 30 minutes
- What are your messages?

