

In an increasingly global market, communicators face the challenge of communicating everywhere at once. The pressure to do this is severely increased when the organization faces a crisis in a remote location.

MANAGING A LONG DISTANCE CRISIS

Mitigating corporate priorities and local challenges

When communicators in multinational organizations are faced with a crisis in a location far away from company headquarters, they must demonstrate careful planning and mitigating skills. Corporate priorities such as protecting reputation, balancing transparency with legal liability, maintaining customer and shareholder confidence, and managing stakeholder groups with conflicting interests, are often at odds with the cultural, political, legal and ethical considerations of the affected location.

Scenario one

Imagine for a moment that you're the senior vice president of corporate communication for a multinational conglomerate with wide-ranging business interests from energy to property and financial services. Based in London, you're currently attending your company's annual corporate gathering in Johannesburg. At 5 o'clock on a Friday morning you are woken by a call from a colleague in London advising you of the following crisis: Two hours ago an explosion

took place in your LPG depot in Indonesia. The explosion caused a fire. A CNN crew shooting a special report on recent ethnic clashes in the area arrived at the scene shortly after the explosion occurred.

Within half an hour, satellite pictures appeared on CNN News Headlines; the 30-second clip showed heavy black fumes rising to the skies, bursts of flames shooting upwards interspersed with the heavy thuds of half a dozen explosions; people were seen running out the factory gates, with a few fighting against the tide to get inside to look for survivors. A mass of onlookers gathered on the road in front of the gates; cars, buses and trucks stopped to watch.

An unidentified employee of the factory was interviewed live as he walked out of the gates.

The local municipal fire department's trucks only arrived at the scene an hour after being stuck in the rush hour traffic exacerbated by the chaos created by onlookers in the area close to the plant. CNN also reported rumors of two casualties.

As a result of the CNN story, more and more local and international news organizations are calling your London office to ask for updates on the situation. The plant area has now been cordoned off by the fire service department and police, but hordes of reporters and onlookers are trying to get to the scene. Reporters are also storming your Jakarta office.

Initial reports indicate that the fire might have started from a leakage on the filling line.

KEYPOINTS

- Long distance crisis management requires careful planning, strong communication channels and an awareness of global and local issues.
- In order to anticipate and prepare for potential disasters the benefits of scenario planning in a crisis cannot be emphasized enough.
- Whatever the nature of a long distance crisis, common elements apply: distance and time differences; limited local resources; the need to respond to a variety of stakeholders and the media, and upholding the company's reputation.
- The need to have the most reliable and up-to-date information to hand is essential – communicators also need to be able to take advantage of crisis management technology.
- Knowledge of global and local issues is essential if you are to maintain a proactive stance on developments.
- Formulating an effective strategy, incorporating well-defined priorities and clarity on your company's position will ensure your crisis won't become a drama.

Caroline Sapriel is the founder and managing director of CS&A, an international risk and crisis management firm with offices in Aberdeen, Brussels, Hong Kong, Melbourne and New York.

Scenario two

Now imagine you're woken up by this story:

Early this morning, three Beijing County officials were arrested for corruption and one of your senior Chinese executives is being held for questioning. The story has already been reported on Reuters.

Although no official statement has been made as to the reasons for the arrests, an anonymous source said the officials were accused of corruption, possibly linked to one of your investment ventures in the county. Two of the three officials, identified as Mr. Wang and Mr. Lee, would have acquired flats in London, the third, Mr. Zhang, in Vancouver. Mr. Wang's son was scheduled to leave for England tomorrow, where he was to start his studies in biochemistry at Oxford next month.

Rumor has it that your company, after years of discussions without result on a major infrastructure investment, bribed the officials.

The whereabouts of your executive is not known, but your source is being held for "questioning only." Because of the early hour no one was available for comment at your Beijing office.

Reporters are at your door-step demanding statements and your telephone lines are jammed with press calls.

The challenges

Both scenarios present various common challenges. Let's examine them. You're far away from the location of the crisis, and probably have limited local resources to deal with the complex and pressing demands of the situation. You only represent one aspect of the overall crisis management capability. However, you will most likely be expected to act as the link between three levels:

- your crisis management team (CMT);
- communication with stakeholders at the affected location;

- communication with the outside world.

Due to the instant media attention, the potential global impact on your organization's corporate reputation is a risk you will need to attend to urgently. However, you cannot do so without considering the local implications of your global corporate messages.

You will probably have to operate in multiple time zones for an extended period of time. This is likely to slow down internal and external communication, burden your decision-making process, jeopardize your ability to implement decisions swiftly, and raise stress and fatigue levels.

In both situations, the number and mix of stakeholders with possible conflicting interests will be a challenge to address effectively, due to the following factors:

- your access to information will be limited, and the reliability of the information you obtain may be questionable;
- you're at the mercy of the local political regime and legal system, which will affect your ability to manage the situation according to corporate principles;
- your local operation's freedom to take actions may be severely restricted by the local authorities;
- your business principles regarding safety and ethics will be questioned by international stakeholders.

All in all, it's clear that you will have far less control over the situation than if it had happened closer to home, in familiar grounds with clearer legal boundaries and ethical guidelines.

Your priorities

1. Establish a clear line of communication with your local operation. It will be vital to have