

Don't wait 'til the k*k hits the fan

 By [Marion Scher](#)

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Now I'm no soothsayer and there are no crystal balls lying around my house, honest, but you don't need special powers to see, in certain areas, where trouble is barrelling down the road towards you.

Let's start here - do any of the following points apply to you:

- Have a large workforce of low-paid staff?
- Use casual workers on an ongoing basis?
- Are likely to be laying staff off?
- Are rubbing consumers up the wrong way?
- Are coming up to pay negotiation time with your staff and therefore their union/s?
- Cosatu has fallen out with you and wants to make a statement?
- The ANC have fallen out with you and wants to add to Cosatu's statement?
- Have fired anyone lately who really has it in for you?
- Attended a *New Age* breakfast as a guest, gave a donation and didn't tell your boss...?

OK - so the last one is a bit tongue in cheek and in fact I could add lots more points to the list, but I think you get the picture. Which is why I'm constantly amazed when I arrive at a company, often a major player in their field, to find them looking surprised when I ask if they have a crisis communications plan?

Crisis communication's plan?

Do we need one - is the reply I generally get. The answer is quite simple - Duh!

The point is, don't wait until you have hordes of toy-toying protesters outside your office with cameras rolling and John Robbie, Debra Patta and Jeremy Maggs all queuing up for interviews. Draw up a crisis communications plan and not just an external one but very importantly an internal plan also. Your staff needs to know what's going on and what to do in a crisis.

Most importantly choose your spokesperson carefully. Don't choose the CEO just because he or she holds that position. Ask yourself: Are they the sort of person who can handle intense pressure whilst being bombarded with questions and often harsh accusations. Taking criticism isn't always easy and possibly admitting you made a mistake even harder.

If we look at the current situation with Anglo American Platinum, which recently announced it was going to retrench 14,000 workers, we see a good example of how pre-planning could have helped.

Yes, this week their CEO Chris Griffith did a great job of speaking to the media explaining that after a crisis meeting between various stakeholders, including government, they were now looking at different ways forward. But surely it would have been better if, before this announcement was made, they had thought of how they would handle the reaction and had firm statements in place.

It doesn't need a crystal ball...

Did they seriously think that the unions and government would say, 'Oh that's fine then - so what's next?' You have to think ahead and maybe explain clearly at the same time you announce the lay-offs, what you have planned to help these 14,000 workers. Maybe a retraining programme or special packages.

Surely someone at such a major company could have foreseen the media and public reaction? This is an issue on a major scale and maybe your company's issues are a lot smaller - but unless you have a plan you may still see yourself on the front page of The City Press or Sunday Times - perhaps worse a segment on Carte Blanche.

Most of these types of stories come from one source - a disgruntled ex-employee. It can take just one person to push the right button and watch as walls start tumbling. The first thing most companies do is go into denial mode - usually on the advice of their legal team. Don't talk to the press they are told.

When called in by companies, generally whilst the crisis is in full swing, this is often a stumbling block, especially with international companies, who have to go through their head office overseas. As long as the reaction is 'no comment' you're judged as guilty.

So, don't wait - call your executive staff and may even lower tiers together and have an honest, open session on just what can go wrong and what you would do in each particular circumstance.

If you've checked those above-mentioned points and any of them apply to you, it may even be time to start writing one-paragraph prepared press statements - just in case. Often stories never make it to the press, but if they do, you'd better be ready!

ABOUT MARION SCHER

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