



Issue Management and Public Affairs

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Explain what issues management is and how it is different from crisis management
- ✓ Discuss how to develop a framework for managing issues

Issue Management: defining the Field

Defining Issue Management

At some point in time, organisations may experience some sort of issues, which they must resolve quickly if they wish to have any chance of surviving and remaining in business. Issue Management is **not** the same as Crisis Management. One expert, R.L. Heath, gave his observations about issue management. He noted that most often issue management is defined prejudicially to fit the expectation of the person providing the definition. Howard Chase, who coined the term “issue management”, defines it as:

“Issue Management is the capacity to understand, mobilise, coordinate, and direct all strategies and policy planning functions, and all public affairs/public relations skills, toward achievement of one objective: meaningful participation in creation of public policy that affects personal and institutional destiny”. In other words, issue management requires planning to influence policies directed at organisation.

Whether issue management falls under PR or vice versa remains a raging debate among academics till this day (Heath, 1997). Grunig and Repper (1992) believe issue management is part of strategic planning and Public Relations. According to Heath (1997), four functions of issue management exist.

These include:

- anticipate and analyse issues
- develop organisational positions on issues
- identify key publics whose support is vital to the public policy issue
- Identify desired behaviours of key publics.

Relationship with Crisis Management

Issue Management is not the same as Crisis Management but they are related in many ways. Register and Larkin (1997) identified three phases of increasing intensities of issues until the maximum intensity is reached, at which point management would have a “crisis” that they would be required to deal with. The crisis phase is the fourth one. Highly experienced issue managers would disagree with the implication of this definition just given because it seems to suggest that all issues will end up being crisis if not well-managed and that issues do not bring along pressures in contrast to crisis.

Other experts such as Gaut and Ollenburger (1993), as well as, Seitel (1989) postulated that Crisis Management tends to involve reactive responses while issue management is often more proactive in nature, requiring pre-crisis planning, and engaging in effective communication to identify potential threats. But this proactive stance may only be valid provided risks are well-known in advance otherwise issue management may require a reactive approach if risks could not have been anticipated or the issues were altogether new such that no one could have considered them possible.

Issue management may even be described as pre-emptive crisis management by most crisis management professional. The main difference between crisis management and issue management depends more on the situation at hand than on the response approaches used to tackle them. In other words, crisis management deals with sudden events that threatens the very existence of a company while issue management deals with formulating policies over a period of time to guide how companies should function in the event of a problem.

Another way to view Issue Management and Crisis Management is that Crisis Management has to do with the events as they happen now and it is tactical whereas issue management relates to future events and it is therefore, strategic. Examples of crisis within aviation industry can be a plane crash; the cause of the crash and how crash victims are treated. Still on aviation and picking on another example, we may define issues as problems pertaining to the location and size of the airport, plans for expansion and the current capacity of the airports. Since crises affect public policies, companies need to be alerted to the changes in society that could be brought about as a result of crisis and adapt quickly to these changes by positioning themselves to influence such policies which would have effect on the destinies of individuals as well as the organisations.

Context of Issues Management

The 'Tipping Point'

According to Gladwell (2000), the tipping point refers to the moment an evolving debate enters the public sphere and subsequently bring about change. Howard Chase in his analysis believes that there is the need for issue manager to understand and to manage the context in which change of policy and destiny occurs. It should however be noted that forces of change are often out of the control of organisations. The current changers sweeping public health seem to follow the 'green issue' trends witnessed during the 1970s. We will of course discuss the health issue getting to the end of this unit.



There is a simple model used to represent emerging issues which depicts a six-step process. In this model, a study is first initiated by researchers to unravel perceived uncertainties. The findings are published and other interested persons in the organisations, government, and NGOs pick up on these

findings and submit their own views (the interpretation phase). This subsequently leads to the identification of either opportunities or threats that have to be tackled. When a threat is detected (e.g. leakages from nuclear facilities or toxic chemical leakages), an activist group such as NGOs may sound the alarm (culprit phase) resulting in a negative news item which may lead to public protests. At this point, the “tipping phase” has been reached and public interest is kindled (ignition phase) which kicks in lobbying of policy makers (influencing phase). When all six phases have occurred, it finally results in the introduction of regulations.

Action Planning: a Framework for Managing Issues

In the event of mounting issues, issue managers may resort to issue management strategies to help them manage the issues. But that may not be enough. They may have to adopt the approach of viewing things from the perspective of outsiders (i.e. the standing outside looking approach) to effectively manage issues circulating in the public domain. Issue management strategies of company policies may be categorised into two sections: the first, which is known as section 1, consists of 5 steps (steps 1-5) and the second, known as section 2, also consists of 5 steps (steps 6-10). The steps outlined below, with commentary in addition to all materials treated in this course so far and an understanding of current media practice and knowledge of organised groups, should provide sufficient information for you to understand how issues can be thoroughly managed.

Framework section 1: Thinking and Planning

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The ideal of promoting wellness to prevent illnesses has been debated for some years now, especially when healthcare practices began to realise that treatment of illnesses was becoming expensive.

Consequently, the health sector has been advocating for prevention instead of curing illnesses. The World Health Organisation (WHO) and Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) are leading the campaign to encourage people to eat more fruit and vegetables so that they can improve their health and prevent illnesses. The tipping point for taking action in relation to health matters came about when a sub-committee of the US House of Representatives came out to put a figure on the cost of obesity at \$117 billion. This really caught the attention of many people around the world. The cost of smoking has also been estimated and pegged at \$157 billion.

This new information of the negative effect of obesity immediately set in motion a proposal for increasing physical activities in schools and at work places, with more people being encouraged to take part in physical activities to reduce obesity and also for them to adopt better eating lifestyles.

It is important not to focus on the issue alone but the impact it is having, once the issues have been identified. Next, people who are part of the problem have to be determined (this includes decision-making bodies, policy makers, leaders etc.) and their motivations also established to pinpoint their allegiance in relation to the tipping point and the six phase issue sequence. Issue managers must categorise groups with broad agendas and those with a narrow agenda. Those with broad agendas may

include Prime Minister, doctor at general practice and consumer organisations) while others with a narrow agenda may comprise of (environmental activist group, government official with specific duties or a heart surgeon). These two groups will have different motivations, characteristics and impact.

The debate about obesity, identified earlier on in this unit, can result in an initial assessment backed by research.

The table below identifies three key points relation to diagnosis of the obesity issue:

1. The potential for creating common cause (bringing players together) is high
2. As a result of the first point, the development of a multi-stakeholder programme should be straight forward
3. Existing shared interest across all three natural coalitions can be mobilised to facilitate agreement on a broad public policy agenda

TABLE 1.1 Opinion leaders and decision makers in the obesity debate

Player	Natural Coalition	Assumed Motivation
Doctors in general practice	Not-for-profit	Improved patient health
Diabetes experts	Not-for-profit	Disease reduction
Consumer group	Not-for-profit	Informed consumers
Nutrition associations	Not-for-profit	Healthier eating/lifestyles
Government leadership	Government	Healthier citizens
Health ministry	Government	Disease prevention
Food producers	For-profit	Innovative, saleable products
Food retailers	For-profit	Sustainable customer base
Celebrity chefs	For-profit	Personal positioning

Roles and Responsibilities of the Issue Manager

The issues manager has five roles to play which are as follows:

- Strategic analyst
- Tactical programmer
- Facilitator of opinion
- Advocate of facts
- Counsellor on strategy issues

Issues managers, besides their various roles stated above, need to consider the moral and ethical environment which shape public opinions because it forms part of the context for undertaking advocacy duties and have a bearing on the kind of impact an issue will have and how it will be managed. The issue manager makes these assessments to help him/her provide excellent counsel to his employers. Apart

from the public moral and ethical considerations, the issue manager also needs to take into account his/her own moral and ethical code or personal views when choosing which company to work for and consider the location of the company as well. Any strategy adopted by the issue manager should not be in conflict with their personal values.

Framework Section 2: Action

The guiding principle of issue management, according to Woody Allen, is not about winning but about finding ways of being part of the solution by participating in the decision-making process. Issue managers need to work to reassure the public that perceived risks are being addressed to put their minds at ease. The public may have legitimate concerns but they have to be resolved using programmes designed to build trust and confidence by assuring people that these concerns are 'nothing to worry about'.

The most important aspect of issue management is redefining or reframing the issue as well as ringing on board stakeholders with the right understanding of the issue to act as advocates for your proposals. Another important aspect is to find a common agenda for building and maintaining a particular opinion. The agenda should be relevant, powerful and tangible to be effective. The issue manager should aim to identify a proposition that draws people together and to make the proposal for solving the issue the focal point (i.e. the solution the focal point), and not making the issue as the focal point. Focusing on the proposition instead of the issue will ignite action while focusing on the issue will only 'generate interest'. In the obesity example, we find the debate being focused on the need for physical exercise.

The group with the broad agenda would share in other aspects of the issue of obesity and would be keen on people with adopting healthy eating habits. What we would like to know is, under what circumstance for instance, would the diabetes specialist want to work with a farmer or other professional to combat the obesity issue? Well, the driving force for people work with others who have no specialist knowledge in what they do is rooted in the quest to make people aware of their indirect roles to solving the diabetes problem or issue because obesity results in diabetes and diabetes is caused by unhealthy diet which the farmer, for example, can be influential in reversing by producing healthy food products. So the diabetes doctor sees an opportunity to work with the farmer and finds ways of informing the public about the choices available to them and how to choose the right option (e.g. eating lean meat instead of red meat) and the farmer who now understands the situation will also work to create the right condition to realise the objective (i.e. increase lean meat production to meet increasing demands).

TABLE 1.2 Core proposition and key players

Core Proposition

We need to take action to make sure that all schools, both state funded and private, provide the means for children and their parents to have at least 60 minutes' physical exercise during the school day. It is essential that children develop habits that avoid weight-related diseases later in life	
Key Players	Motivation
School	High standards of education
Doctors in general practice	Improved patient health
Diabetes experts	Disease reduction
Government leadership	Healthier citizens
Health ministry	Disease prevention
Nutritionists	Healthier eating/lifestyles
Private fitness centres	Increasing membership
Independent fitness instructors	Design of tailored fitness programmes
Local community	Safe, friendly neighbourhoods

Likely top-of-mind response of key players to core proposition

Positive	Neutral	Negative	Uninterested
Independent fitness instructors Government leadership Nutritionists	Schools Diabetes experts Health ministry Doctors in general Practice	Private fitness centres	Local community

Further Reading:

- ✓ *Risk Issues and Crisis Management in Public Relations: A Casebook of Best , (2008), By Michael Regester, Judy Larkin*
- ✓ *Handbook of Strategic Public Relations and Integrated Communications, (2004), By Caywood*