

Case Study 2: Mental Illness and Community Attitudes

Lecturer notes

A note for lecturers

This case study is designed to give students some practice in considering issues associated with reporting or communicating about mental illness and suicide so they will be better prepared to deal with such a situation, should it arise, when they are working as journalists or public relations practitioners. Mental illness and suicide are very sensitive and complex issues, and it is natural that some people may feel uncomfortable talking about them. Usually, these feelings are temporary and do not cause serious distress.

Talking about mental illness or suicide in an educational and supportive environment provides lecturers with an opportunity to advise students about counselling and other services available on campus, and to encourage students experiencing problems to seek professional help by talking to a GP, health professional or call a crisis counselling service such as:

- Kids Helpline 1800 55 1800 (5-25 years)
- Lifeline 13 11 14
- Suicide Call Back Service 1300 659 467

For online information visit: www.headspace.org.au and www.reachout.com

For further information and advice about preparing your class for this case study, you should refer to the document 'Discussing sensitive issues' which can be found on the *Mindframe* for journalism and public relations education website at www.mindframe-media.info

The Scenario

The case study presents a scenario in which complaints about a Child Care Centre are made because a person working there has schizophrenia. The centre is part of a large child care franchise, *Happy Days Child Care* and is currently managed by Mrs Smith, who would now like her daughter Debbie to take over the licence for the business. Debbie, who has been assisting her mother at the child care centre for many years, has applied to Community Welfare for approval for a licence to manage the service. In applying for a licence, potential applicants are legally required to disclose certain information. Debbie has indicated that she receives treatment for schizophrenia, that her illness is well managed and that she has been well for many years. Community Welfare has disclosed this information to the parents of children attending the centre during interviews with them about the service. Prior to this the parents were not aware of the woman's illness. For the purpose of this exercise the following information should be assumed:

- Community Welfare has breached privacy policies in their disclosure of Debbie's illness to parents;
- Only the licensees of child care centres are legally required to disclose information regarding issues such as mental illness to Community Welfare, other staff working within the centre are not required to do so;
- Senior management of Happy Days Child Care Centres franchise were previously unaware of Debbie's illness. Debbie is under no legal obligation to disclose this information to the senior management of Happy Days Child Care;



- Debbie is under no legal obligation to disclose information about her illness to parents of children attending the Centre.

The video scenes follow a journalist as he speaks to the parents, the woman who runs the child care centre and the Director of Community Welfare.

**Note: We are aware that the information provided above may not necessarily be consistent with the actual laws relevant to this situation in each state and territory. However for the purpose of this class exercise we have provided the assumed information above so that students do not become distracted by the legal aspects of the exercise.*

Using the Scenario

Mental illness and mental health are legitimate topics for community and media discussion. However, communication about mental illness should be done with care to ensure the communication is not stigmatising, discriminatory or impacting on the rights of individuals. Extra care should be taken when communication is occurring in the media. Journalists are urged to consider the way they report on and discuss mental illness. Similarly, people who may provide information to the media must also consider the potential impact of a story on individuals and the wider community. This case-study is designed to expose students to the complexities and challenges of managing communication where an incident involves someone with a diagnosed mental illness.

Students will be required to consider how they will liaise with publics and stakeholders, what mechanisms they will use to communicate with various publics, and how they will manage the media, while keeping in mind the potential for further harm that could be associated with this situation if communication is not managed well.

This scenario can be used as the basis for a class exercise in subjects such as Issues and Crisis Management, Media Relations, Ethics and Law or Introduction subjects in Public Relations.

The following options and questions provide a guide for analysing the scenario from a public relations perspective. You may ask students to look at all of these questions or a selection only.

In considering the scenario and questions, you should refer students to the document *Issues and Impact: Communicating mental illness and suicide*, for an overview of key ethical and public relations issues involved in managing communication about mental illness. This resource and further reference materials are available on the *Mindframe* for Universities website (www.mindframe-media.info).

Class Exercises

To explore the complexities and challenges of this situation, students can be allocated to one of the following two scenarios. Allow students time to discuss the questions in small groups and then compare and contrast the approach of each group.

Alternatively you could ask groups to consider both scenarios simultaneously and consider the different organisations in relation to each question.

Option 1

You are employed in the public relations unit for Community Welfare. After the journalist has come to interview the Director, you hear about the situation for the first time. The Director fears that she may have done the wrong thing in agreeing to be interviewed by the journalist. Your public relations manager has called a meeting of the public relations unit to discuss the current situation.

Option 2

You are in charge of public relations for the Happy Days Child Care Centres franchise. You receive a call from the Director of the franchise after she has been contacted by a journalist for comment regarding the employment of a mentally ill person within one of the Centres. You have been asked to manage the situation.

Exercise 1: Managing the Current Situation

The following discussion questions will allow students to explore the strategies they would use to manage the current situation, based on one of the options outlined above.

Identifying the Issues

1. Identify who your key stakeholders and publics will be. Consider both internal and external stakeholders and publics.

- For the Community Welfare this might include: Parents, Mrs Smith and Debbie, the Happy Days Child Care Franchise, the child care industry, other related government departments, the Minister, and the general community.
- For the child care franchise this might include: Parents, Community Welfare, Mrs Smith and Debbie Smith, Senior Management Happy Days Child Care Franchise, Child Care Industry Representatives, relevant government departments, general community.

2. Identify some useful allies.

Responses might include (depending on the option chosen): Local mental health experts, National mental health advocacy and support organisations (e.g. SANE Australia), local government, legal departments and advisers, sections of the general community.

3. Identify what further detail and information you might need to know before making any further response. How would you go about obtaining it?

- Responses might include (depending on the option chosen):
- Detail on each of the organisation's relevant policies, including privacy, eligibility criteria, equal opportunity policies etc;
- Detail on relevant national or state legislation around discrimination, privacy, equal opportunity etc;
- Legal advice about the current situation and any breach of legislation;
- Facts and statistics about schizophrenia, treatment, impacts on behaviour etc;
- Specific information about the child care centre, the franchise and the individuals in question.

4. Brainstorm some of the key issues the media may focus on.

For Community Welfare this may include:

- Risks to children;
- Disclosure or non-disclosure of information to parents;
- Parent fears, anger and outrage;
- Perceived association between violence and mental illness;
- Police checks of applicants working with children;



- Relevant legislation and regulation;
- Will they close the day care centre?
- Will there be a review of all day care centres?
- Will they tighten regulation of day care centres?

For the Day Care Centre this may include:

- Disclosure or non disclosure of information to parents;
- Duty of care to children;
- Whether Mrs Smith's license to operate should be revoked;
- Parents pulling their children out of Mrs Smith's care;
- What qualifications or training does Debbie have in early childhood care?
- Previously disgruntled parents may speak out and responses may be required.

Responding to the Situation

5. What type of public relations plans will you need to develop now?

Answers might consider the following:

- Crisis management plan and crisis management team with clearly identified roles and responses;
- A list of key spokespeople that can be drawn on if further public response is required and briefing of these spokespeople;
- Lists of key contacts in certain areas. For example, within the organisation;
- Links with mental health organisations that could be drawn upon for advice.

6. How would you communicate with your publics and stakeholders?

Answers may consider the following (depending on the specific option students are working on):

- Individuals in either organisation or attached to the organisations may be contacted by mail, telephone, a private or public meeting, a relevant website (although this is public so information will need to be monitored).
- The broader community can be reached through the media (although consideration would need to be given to whether this is a good idea), through websites etc.
- Consider the impact of social networking sites such as Facebook. What might be the implications of individuals posting messages on these sites, given media and other people may get access to the information. How might it be moderated?

7. Consider whether the organisation you are representing should release a statement or make comment to the general media regarding the event. Things you will need to consider include:

Privacy and discrimination related issues, including legal aspects.

It may be unwise to release details about the incident until advice has been sought about the legal implications of the case. You may also want to consider how your organisation is perceived if it releases information about a person's illness to the wider community through the media.

The news value associated with the story and the likelihood that the media will report the story regardless of a response from your organisation.

This story has many news values making it likely to be reported – it is local, there is already conflict between the centre, the parents and community welfare, it could play on fear and community concerns, but may also scrutinise a government department – all elements for a news story. If the media will report the story anyway, it may be better to provide information to the media that ensures that the angle, context and content are responsible and unlikely to cause further problems. Students should consider what information they would include/exclude from a media response.

Factual and accurate information regarding schizophrenia and any associated risks to children or community members.

Students can find more information about schizophrenia as well as organisations that may be able to assist on the *Mindframe* for Universities website at www.mindframe-media.info. They may also want to refer to *Issues and Impact* to consider the impact of community discussion about mental illness. What sorts of images might this scenario create about people who have schizophrenia - they are untrustworthy, unreliable, unable to work or care for children?

Who will be your media spokespeople and how will you brief them?

Students should consider what type of spokesperson would be appropriate, their media skills and how they will present the messages the organisation wants to get across.

Will you need to bring in other experts either within or external to the organisation? Identify who these experts might be.

Students may identify the CEO, legal representatives, advocacy organisations, supportive community members or parents.

Consider what tactics you would use to involve and communicate with the media.

Students should indicate when they would make a response – i.e. immediately or in time.

- Would they issue a statement, call a media conference, stage an interview opportunity?
- Who would they nominate as spokespeople, and what type of media would they work with?
- Would the organisation take the opportunity to explain to journalists the importance of treating the story with consideration – promoting the *Mindframe* website at www.mindframe-media.info

8. Following this incident, how would you go about re-engaging with stakeholders and the community?

Students may want to consider:

- Ways of communicating with stakeholders and the community;
- Could they stage an open day? A question and answer session? Or another activity to bring people together?

Exercise 2: Anticipating a Crisis

The following discussion questions will allow you to explore the strategies you would use to anticipate a potential crisis. You will be able to explore what you would have done differently, given the chance.

1. What kind of preparation from a public relations perspective would have helped the organisations involved?

Students may identify the following:

- A public relations plan that outlined communication channels and ways to brief appropriate people about a potential situation;



- Involving public relations practitioners at the earliest possible point when an issue may have been identified;
- Policies and procedures about how to handle similar situations;
- Conducting a risk audit;
- Crisis Management team;
- Media training.

2. How could you have anticipated this situation?

Students may suggest:

- Through mechanisms for identifying issues in the community for their clients;
- Through clearer communication channels and allocated times to identify potential issues or problems;
- Conducting research into policies, legislation and how it may relate to mental illness.

3. Specifically what plans should have been in place?

- Crisis management plan;
- Media relations plan.

4. How would anticipation and management of the issue have potentially changed the outcome?

The issue would have been dealt with internally without any need of disclosure to the parents or general public regarding Debbie's illness.

Assignment or Individual Task

Ask students to consider one of the two options provided under the Class Exercises and develop one of the following:

A. **A plan for managing the crisis:** outlining what systems you will put in place, resources and expertise you will draw on, how you will identify and communicate with stakeholders and publics and any other ethical considerations that you think may be important.

B. **A media relations plan:** including an outline of what media response you will provide, what research you may need to do, the timing of communication, how the issue will be handled, who will be the spokesperson or spokespeople, and how these people will be briefed. You may also want to include an outline of the specific ethical considerations posed by this scenario.

Assessment Tip

Use the lecturer's notes above to assist in assessing the task. Ensure they have considered both good public relations planning as well as the ethical considerations.

Related fact sheets are available online at www.mindframe-media.info