

Case Study 2: Mental Illness and Community Attitudes

Student notes

This case study is designed to give students some practice in considering issues associated with reporting and communicating about mental illness or suicide, so that they will be better prepared to deal with such situations should they arise, when they are working as a journalist or public relations practitioner. Mental illness and suicide are 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. However, if students do become distressed as a result of using these materials or because of other problems, and these feelings continue, they should talk to someone they trust such as a lecturer, tutor, or counsellor at their university. Students can also talk 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

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;
- Senior management of Happy Days Child Care Centres franchise were previously unaware of Debbie's illness. Debbie is under no obligation legally 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.



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 potentially 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 you to the complexities and challenges of managing communication where an incident involves someone with a diagnosed mental illness.

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

The following Options and Questions provide a guide for analysing the scenario from a public relations perspective. Your lecturer or tutor may ask you to look at all of these questions or a selection only.

In considering the scenario and questions, you should refer 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

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 you to explore the strategies you 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.
2. Identify some useful allies.
3. Identify what further detail and information you might need to know before making any further response. How would you go about obtaining it? You may want to consider legal and policy related issues, privacy issues, medical information, facts and statistics.
4. Brainstorm some of the key issues the media may focus on.

Responding to the Situation

5. What type of public relations plans will you need to develop now?
6. How would you communicate with your publics and stakeholders?
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;
 - The news value associated with the story and the likelihood that the media will report the story regardless of a response from your organisation;
 - Factual and accurate information regarding schizophrenia and any associated risks to children or community members;
 - Who will be your media spokespeople and how will you brief them;
 - Will you need to bring in other experts either within or external to the organisation? Identify who these experts might be;
 - Consider what tactics you would use to involve and communicate with the media.
8. Following this incident, how would you go about re-engaging with stakeholders and the community?

Exercise 2: Anticipating a Crisis

The following discussion questions will allow you to explore the strategies you would use to anticipate a potential crisis. Using one of the Options provided above, 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?
2. How could you have anticipated this situation?
3. Specifically what plans should have been in place?
4. How would anticipation and management of the issue have potentially changed the outcome?

Assignment or Individual Task

Considering one of the options listed above, 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.