

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND CRISIS COMMUNICATION: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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Abstract

English

Every organisation is susceptible to harmful occurrences that could damage it. An unexpected fire could destroy a warehouse and cost lives of employees in the process. Product failure or product sabotage could cause customer panic and a loss of sales and revenue or even loss of customer lives. Rumours of high level fraud could loose the organisation the support and trust of fundamental investors.

A harmful occurrence becomes a “public relations crisis” or simply “crisis” when it is of such a nature and extent that it receives public scrutiny and consequently negatively affects the organisation’s reputation or relationships with its publics. A “crisis” is therefore distinct from the actual harmful event (“incident”) that occurs.

Damaging scrutiny from the publics usually occurs if the organisation has played a role in the cause of the incident and/or did not manage the incident properly. Negative public attention (“crisis”) will have a negative impact on the organisational system if not handled correctly.

In this dissertation it is argued that an incident does not necessarily need to become a crisis, i.e. it need not damage the system’s reputation or relationships. An organisation can apply strategic crisis management to either prevent or plan for an anticipated harmful occurrence. Crisis management has three components, these being management, operational and communication components. The latter is a public relations function generally referred to as “crisis communication”, the focus of this study.

The study explores the current use of crisis communication by the Potchefstroom City Council, as a type of organisation, using the systems theory as the general theoretical foundation. It takes the specific environmental considerations for local government, in particular, the Potchefstroom City Council into consideration. A number of recommendations

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are made for the establishment of a crisis communication strategy by the council. They include:

- Crisis communication training for key communication employees.
- Support for the crisis communication function by top management.
- More strategic interaction with key publics as a component of crisis communication.
- Building and managing relationships with key media.
- Identifying existing effective communication channels and establishing new ones where necessary.
- Using ward councillors as a crisis communication tool.

The complete list of recommendations is discussed in section 6.4

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Opsomming

Afrikaans

Alle organisasies is kwesbaar vir insidente wat nie deur die normale probleem oplossings meganismes bestuur kan word nie en wat die organisasie in die publieke oog kan laat beland. 'n Onverwagte brand in 'n pakhuis kan lei tot die verlies van werknemers se lewens. Mislukking of sabotasie van produkte kan paniek onder klante veroorsaak en kan lei tot die verlies van verkope, inkomste en selfs klante se lewens. Gerugte van bedrog kan 'n organisasie sy beleggers se steun en vertroue kos.

Hierdie negatiewe openbare aandag word gedefinieer as 'n "krisis" of 'n "krisis in openbare betrekkinge". Die term "krisis" verskil van die destruktiewe gebeurtenis self wat hierna sal verwys word as 'n "insident".

Ongewenste openbare aandag volg gewoonlik as die organisasie 'n aandeel gehad het in die oorsaak van die insident en/of die insident nie goed bestuur het toe dit plaasgevind het nie. Negatiewe openbare aandag (krisis) sal 'n negatiewe uitwerking op die organisasie hê as dit nie korrek hanteer word nie.

Hierdie skripsie stel die argument voor dat 'n insident nie noodwendig in 'n krisis hoef te verander nie, m.a.w. lei tot 'n geskonde reputasie of verhoudinge nie. Daar bestaan wel 'n strategiese proses (krisisbestuur) wat deur 'n organisasie gevolg kan word om 'n geantisipeerde destruktiewe gebeurtenis te voorkom óf om daarvoor voorsiening te maak. "Krisisbestuur" bestaan uit drie komponente naamlik, bestuur, operationeel en kommunikasie. Kommunikasie is 'n funksie van openbare betrekkinge genaamd "Krisiskommunikasie", die fokus van die studie.

Die studie ondersoek die huidige gebruik van krisiskommunikasie deur die Potchefstroomse Stadsraad deur gebruik te maak van die Stelselteorie as die algemene teoretiese fondasie.

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Spesifieke omgewings-oorwegings vir plaaslike regerings, en spesifiek die Potchefstroomse Stadsraad, word in berekening gebring voordat aanbevelings gemaak word vir die instelling van 'n Krisiskommunikasie-strategie deur die raad. Hierdie aanbevelings sluit in:

- Krisiskommunikasie-opleiding vir sleutel kommunikasie werknemers.
- Steun aan die krisiskommunikasiefunksie deur die Stadsraad se topbestuur.
- Meer strategiese interaksie met sleutel belangegroep as 'n komponent van krisiskommunikasie.
- Bou en bestuur verhoudinge met sleutel media.
- Identifiseer bestaande effektiewe kommunikasie kanale en vestig nuwe kanale waar nodig.
- Die gebruik van wyksraadslede as effektiewe kommunikasie instrumente.

Die volledige lys aanbevelings word in afdeling 6.4 bespreek.

Preface

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to a number of people and institutions for their support, comments and input into this study. The following are included:

- The National Research Foundation (NRF) for its financial assistance towards this study. Opinions expressed and conclusions arrived at are those of the author and are not necessarily to be attributed to the NRF.
- My promoters, Dr LM Fourie and Prof JD Froneman, for their encouragement and sound advice.
- The North-West University School for Communication Studies for its continuous support to complete this research.
- Past and present employees of the Potchefstroom City Council for their input and assistance. I trust that this study will provide sound guidance into the establishment of an effective crisis communication strategy, and in so doing, will help deepen the relationship between the council and its residents.
- My family and friends for their unwavering belief in me and for their support to complete this study despite numerous personal challenges that have diverted my focus. I believe that I would not have been able to complete this study without their constant encouragement.
- My husband, Geoff, for understanding how important the completion of this dissertation was to me and for allowing it to take up a great amount of family time. His willingness to accommodate my studies has been a constant source of strength.
- Finally, to God for establishing the original principle that you can overcome any “harmful incident” if you choose to learn and grow from it. It does not necessarily need to break you, but can make you stronger. Without this principle, crisis communication would have no place.

Belinda Horak, 2005

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1. CHAPTER 1: ORIENTATION

1.1 Introduction

A public relations crisis (“crisis”) within an organisational context is an event which can cause public scrutiny with the potential to damage or even destroy an organisation’s reputation and its relationships with key publics if it is not managed correctly. Correct management on the other hand has the potential to win favour and improve reputation and vital relationships with publics.

Popular examples of public relations crises include the Tylenol poisonings and the Exxon Valdez oil spill.

The pharmaceutical company, Johnson & Johnson, was confronted with a crisis in 1982 when seven people on Chicago's West Side died mysteriously. Authorities determined that each of the people that died ingested an Extra-Strength Tylenol capsule (a product of Johnson & Johnson) laced with cyanide. Officials at Johnson & Johnson made it clear that the tampering had not taken place at either of its plants, even though cyanide was available on the premises. The bottles, some of which had five or less cyanide laced capsules and one which had ten, were bought, tampered with and then placed back on the shelves of five different stores in the Chicago area.

The news of this incident travelled quickly and was the cause of a massive, nationwide panic. These intentional poisonings made it necessary for Johnson & Johnson to launch a public relations program immediately, in order to save the integrity of both their product and their corporation as a whole.

The company immediately alerted consumers across the nation, via the media, not to consume any type of Tylenol product. They told consumers not to resume using the product until the

extent of the tampering could be determined. Johnson & Johnson, along with stopping the production and advertising of Tylenol, recalled all Tylenol capsules from the market. The recall included approximately 31 million bottles of Tylenol, with a retail value of more than 100 million dollars. This response to recall every Tylenol bottle when so very few were known to have been contaminated was indeed expensive. But the company recognised the value of the years that it had taken to develop a good reputation for Tylenol. They realised the billions invested in building their reputation could vanish overnight with one negative 30-minute telecast.

Johnson & Johnson was praised for their actions by the media for their socially responsible actions. Along with the nationwide alert and the Tylenol recall, Johnson & Johnson established relations with the Chicago Police, the FBI, and the Food and Drug Administration. This way the company could have a part in searching for the person who laced the Tylenol capsules and they could help prevent further tampering. Johnson & Johnson was given much positive coverage for their handling of this crisis.

By creating a public relations program that both protected the public interest and was given full support by media institutions in the US, Johnson & Johnson was able to recover quickly and painlessly from possibly the greatest crisis ever to hit the pharmaceutical industry (Kaplan, 1998).

In 1989, the Exxon Valdez oil tanker entered the Prince William Sound on its way towards California. The ship ran aground and began spilling oil. Within a very short period of time, significant quantities of its 1,260,000 barrels had entered the environment. At the moment of the collision the third mate, who was not certified to take the tanker into those waters, was at the helm. The probable cause was established that the Captain and many of the crew had been drinking alcohol in considerable quantities.

The action to contain the spill was slow to get going and little was done to contain the spillage in the crucial first few days. This spillage spread out into a 12 square mile slick. Just as significantly, the company completely refused to communicate openly and effectively. The Exxon Chairman, Lawrence Rawl, was immensely suspicious of the media, and reacted accordingly.

After more than a week, the company was still giving no ground on the request for better communication. John Devens, the Mayor of Valdez, commented that the community felt betrayed by Exxon's inadequate response to the crisis, in contrast to the promises they had been quick to give of how they would react in exactly this eventuality.

The spill and its environmental consequences, alongside its disastrous communications were enormous. The spill cost around \$7bn, including the clean up costs. \$5bn of this was made up of the largest punitive fines ever handed out to a company for corporate irresponsibility. The damage to the company's reputation was even more important, and more difficult to quantify. However, Exxon lost market share and slipped from being the largest oil company in the world to the third largest. The "Exxon Valdez" entered the language as a shortcut for corporate arrogance and damage (Schechter, 1997: 20; Mallenbaker, 2005).

If one were to look at a hypothetical example that could occur in a local government, one could consider the example of an uncontrolled outbreak of a dreaded disease such as meningitis in a community. A meningitis outbreak occurred in Potchefstroom in August 2003. The study will refer to this incident in more detail in chapter 5.

A special function of public relations has been developed to deal specifically with this sort of threat to reputation and relationships. This form of public relations is known as crisis communication and is utilised as an element of a larger organisational strategy called crisis management, which uses operational, management and communication elements to manage crisis.

Sturges (1994:297) states that crisis communication has been overlooked as a tool for contributing to the long-term benefits of an organisation. If a crisis is managed well, it may lead to benefits for the organisation such as a chance to improve the organisation's reputation and relationships and winning public support (Clawson Freeo, 2000). In the past, crisis communication has generally been used in a defensive role to respond to a crisis, but organisations must realise that crisis communications should be a part of the larger issues of an organisation's policy and strategy. It can be used before, during and after a crisis. A crisis communication plan can help transform a negative situation into a controlled event over which the organisation can have some degree of control (Roughton & Awadalla, 1998).

Chapter 2 of the study will discuss various public relations principles that can be used as a foundation for effective crisis communication to build, maintain and strengthen the organisation's reputation and relationships with publics so that both will withstand the pressures of a crisis. Crisis communication involves various forms of communication between the organisation and its key publics before, during or after a crisis event (Caponigro, 2000:273; Fearn-Banks, 1996:2). The focus of this study is on communication element and not on the management or operational actions which make up the rest of the crisis management function.

Crisis communication before a crisis helps to anticipate possible crisis scenarios and to draw up a crisis plan that can be implemented in case the crisis occurs. This plan must be communicated to anyone who will be expected to take specific action during a crisis. It also helps to build the important relationships that must be in place in order to manage a crisis and maintain a positive reputation with all publics.

Crisis communication during the crisis takes place between the organisation and its internal and external publics with the specific intention of managing the effects of the crisis on reputation and relationships. Special attention is given to communicating with the media

during a time of crisis. Knowing how to communicate the message to the media and the public can help minimize damage to the organisation's reputation (Reid, 2000:68).

Crisis communication after a crisis is the communication that will be used to help minimize the damage to the organisations reputation and help regain trust where lost or rebuild relationships if damaged.

This study is founded on the theory that as an open system, a local government has an effect on its environment and is affected by the same. This symbiotic relation is threatened by the very nature of an organisational crisis. In order to minimise the damage of the crisis, local government can apply two-way symmetrical communication before, during and after a crisis to protect its reputation and maintain its relationships.

Local government is the link between communities and the broader government structure, its suprasystem. It is an open system within the larger suprasystem of the provincial and national governments. Local government utilises a number of subsystems to accomplish its mandate. It is placed in communities to build relationships necessary for service delivery and feedback to broader government. If local government is able to implement more effective crisis communication then damage to the reputation and relationships will be minimised if a crisis is ever to occur. This is important since damage to this system's reputation will also affect the reputation of the suprasystem (provincial and national government entities).

As its title suggests this mini-dissertation is an exploratory study into local government and crisis communication. As an exploratory study the researcher used a single subject so that a sample piece of information may be obtained. This opens up the possibility of further research and investigation.

The study determines the current state of crisis communication within the Potchefstroom City Council, a local government entity in the North West province of South Africa. It

investigates how a South African local government is able to apply general crisis communication principles in order to implement crisis communication within its unique environment. Existing literature on the subject of crisis communication is used to determine the general principles of crisis communication and how these should be applied by any organisation. However, it is clear that an organisation needs to take its own specific environment and context into account so that the general principles to be applied more effectively. It is with this understanding that the study investigates the environmental factors that must be taken into consideration when implementing crisis communication within the local government context. It therefore takes the South African local government environment and more specifically the Potchefstroom City Council's environment into account.

Adaptation of the general principles takes place by taking into account the regulatory environment to within which local government operates. These regulations have been set by the South African National Government to guide the actions of government communicators on all levels and in all spheres of government

Both the general principles of crisis communication and the environmental factors are then taken into consideration in order to present a number of recommendations that can be used by the Potchefstroom City Council when compiling a crisis communication strategy.

1.2 Crisis communication in South African local government, a type of open system

The general systems theory is used as a theoretical foundation for this study. According to Littlejohn (1996:59) the systems theory and its related fields have been popular in the study of communications. The general systems theory can be used to gain information about human relationships and their connection to the tasks to be accomplished in an organisation. This information is essential for efficient performance of crisis communication (Jansen & Steinberg, 1991:42; Windahl *et al.*, 1992:83; Littlejohn, 1996:43; Heath & Byrant, 1992:114).

Crisis communication needs to be adapted to suit the specific environment in which it is being applied. Since a system affects its environment and is affected by its environment, it is important that the system remains permeable to allow interaction between itself and its environment. It is also vital its internal functions (such as crisis communication) are adapted to suit the environment in which it is expected to be effective.

A number of variables make crisis communication within a local government complex and sensitive. Local government must take into consideration all requirements placed on it in terms of government communications by various national legislation as well as external institutions. In September 2000, Cabinet undertook a decision that the Government Communication and Information System (GCIS) must provide guidelines to entrench a new ethos and approach to government communications. GCIS have sanctioned national policies for all communications responsibilities, procedures and programmes undertaken by government (GCIS, 2004).

The South African political dispensation places a definite emphasis on two way interaction between government and its publics with the aim to improve management of government in order to better provide for the specific needs of the communities they serve. Legislation to this end will be discussed in detail in chapter 4. In short, a fundamental aspect of the new local government is the engagement of communities in the affairs of their local government – particularly in planning, service delivery and performance management. Local government is now expected to be transparent, effective and efficient (South Africa, 2000)

Local government is called to protect and improve the sustainable quality of life of its communities and thus needs to be well educated and prepared for harmful incidents. Local government risks damaging or even losing those relationships that are the very core of its functioning when crisis communication is not in place. Crisis communication can help minimising damage to its reputation and relationships, damage which would consequently hinder its mandate to serve its people. When no plan is in place to deal with a crisis, the

functioning of the system may be severely affected resulting in negative consequences to its publics. It is necessary for the local government to work closely with its publics in a co-operative relationship to plan for or prevent such crises.

In short, local government must do what it can to identify possible crises so that it can either put measures in place to prevent it or to plan for those scenarios that cannot be prevented. If it does not do this, a harmful incident may lead to a public relations crisis that will have a negative impact on it, its publics and the larger government system within which it operates. Previous studies on crisis communication have not taken into account the unique nature of local government while existing systems theory studies have not been applied to the topic under discussion. In view of this, the following general research problem could be formulated:

1.3 Research questions:

1.3.1 General research question:

How should a local government such as the Potchefstroom City Council conduct crisis communication?

1.3.2 Specific research questions:

- 1.3.2.1 How should crisis communication be applied in an organisation, such as a local government, according to existing literature within the context of the systems theory?
- 1.3.2.2 What considerations should be taken into account when crisis communication is applied within the unique context of South African local government?
- 1.3.2.3 What recommendations can be given to the Potchefstroom City Council to assist with the establishment of a crisis communication strategy?

1.4 Research objectives

1.4.1 General research objective

In accordance with the general research question stated in 1.3.1, the general research objective is thus: *To determine how a local government such as the Potchefstroom City Council should conduct crisis communication.*

1.4.2 Specific research objective

1.4.2.1 To determine how crisis communication should be applied in an organisation, such as a local government, according to existing literature within the context of the systems theory.

1.4.2.2 To identify the considerations that should be taken into account when crisis communication is applied within the unique context of South African local government.

1.4.2.3 To give the Potchefstroom City Council recommendations to assist with the establishment of a crisis communication strategy.

The present study will thus provide relevant guidelines which, if applied, will help the Potchefstroom City Council compile its own crisis communication strategy to minimise damage in the event of a crisis. The result could possibly be the survival of its reputation and relationships. The study also lends itself to being adapted for use by other local governments in South Africa with similar results.

1.5 Theoretical argument

The study is founded on the general theoretical argument made below:

According to the open systems approach to public relations, organisations and their publics have reciprocal consequences on one another. The actions of the organisation have consequences for its publics, and when the publics learn about these consequences they often

take actions that have consequences upon the organisation. When the consequence on the public is negative then the reciprocated reaction on the organisation will also be negative causing damage to the organisational system. When the reciprocated negative consequence comes in the form of public scrutiny (a public relations crisis) then the consequence will be damage to the organisation's reputation and relationships with key publics. (Grunig & Hunt, 1984:9-11).

More specific theoretical statements will be made and discussed in chapters 2 and 3.

In the event of a crisis, the consequence on the publics will be negative. The publics can be expected to react negatively towards the organisation. However, a number of public relations principles have been identified to minimise the negative effects of these consequences on the organisation's reputation and relationships with its publics.

1.6 Local government entity studied

Potchefstroom City Council is the South African local government entity that was used as the subject for this study. The choice of subject was deemed feasible as:

- Management of the Potchefstroom City Council had requested advice on the establishment of a crisis communication strategy;
- The Potchefstroom City Council communication strategy prepared for the council in 2003, highlighted the need for a crisis communication; and
- The Potchefstroom City Council made itself available to be the subject of this study.

Potchefstroom City Council is a local government (city council) situated in the North West province of South Africa. The executive mayor is the political head of the council and the municipal manager is the administrative head. The Council is divided into eight components called directorates which are all sub-systems of the council. Each directorate has an administrative head (director) and a political head (member of the mayoral committee or

MMC). The executive mayor is assisted by the MMCs to exercise mayoral powers and duties. The executive mayor may delegate specific responsibilities to each MMC. This means that the mayoral committee will function very much like the Cabinet at national and provincial level.

The Potchefstroom City Council has close to 1200 employees. Potchefstroom has a population of approximately 250 000 residents.

The Communications Unit of the Potchefstroom City Council is positioned in the office of the executive mayor. The unit is headed up by a public relations officer (PRO), who is supported by a team consisting of one communication officer, an events officer and graphic designer. Together they form the communication unit approached by the entire council to implement both internal and external communications. The PRO is the primary point of contact in the communication unit.

1.7 Research methods

Qualitative research in general involves an in-depth study of a topic where the researcher studies a subject through interaction with it. Qualitative research attempts to capture reality as seen and experienced by the respondents. The aim is not measurement, but understanding. This allows the researcher to obtain firsthand knowledge of the social topic in question (Chadwick *et al.*, 1984:206; Ragin, 1994:190; Sarantakos, 1993:44). Some of the qualitative techniques used for this mini-dissertation, include literature review, qualitative interviews, participant observation and triangulation.

1.7.1 Exploratory qualitative research

As the title of the mini-dissertation suggests, this study is an exploratory study into local government and crisis communication. Glicken (2003:14) describes an exploratory study as research that tries to delve into new ideas. Its purpose is not to provide an overwhelming amount of information, but instead to provide very general forms of information that leads to

discover new areas of study. It often occurs in a new area of research when little information is available on the subject. Although there is a lot of information available on crisis communication, there is very little available on how this field is to be applied in South Africa local governments.

This study lends itself well to an exploratory qualitative design as it is not intended to generalise the study to other situations, places, people or in this case, local governments. It could, however, be adapted for use as a framework for other councils, or serve as an additional source when creating or revisiting crisis communication plans. As an exploratory study, only one subject has been investigated, this being the Potchefstroom City Council. As an exploratory study it may open up the possibility of further research into the topic.

1.7.2 Literature review

A search of the Nexus, ERIC and RSAT Systems as well as the Social Sciences, Humanities and Business Periodicals Indexes, confirmed that this topic had not yet been researched.

A literature survey of bound periodicals, computerised databases, the internet (amongst others), were used to identify accepted and popular theory about effective crisis communication management, within the context of the systems approach and symmetrical two-way communication (Research question 1). The sources that were not available in the North-West University's Potchefstroom library are available through inter library loans or via the Internet.

A number of documents published by the South African Government have been used to identify specific guidelines and prescriptions for general government communication and government crisis communication. These documents include the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, the Municipal Systems Act (32/2000) and the Government Communication and Information Service's (GCIS) government communicator's handbook (Research question 2).

1.7.3 Participant observation

For the period of September 2001 to December 2003, the researcher was employed as a member of the communication unit of the Potchefstroom City Council. This provided the researcher with first-hand insight into the types of communication being implemented by the Potchefstroom City Council. The researcher also established professional relationships with key role players providing the opportunities for discussions and interviews pertaining to the research topic. The primary reason for this participation was purely to perform duties as a communication officer within the office of the executive mayor. It provided access to the communication unit and other key individuals who are responsible for communication with key publics. However, the main rationale for holding this position was not for research purposes. It was during this time that the researcher identified an opportunity to use the topic for research purposes. The bulk of this study was completed after the researcher's time of employment at the Potchefstroom City Council.

1.7.4 Qualitative interviews

Government communicators and key role players at the Potchefstroom City Council were interviewed by the researcher for insight into existing crisis communication and crisis management in the council. These interviews were conducted over the period of October 2003 to December 2005.

The respondents who were interviewed had a wide range of perspectives and experiences covering local government communication. The interview questions are included as Annexure A, B, C and D. The discussions revealed that crisis communication was not being practiced in the council and that none of the respondents had a clear understanding of its function. This is understandable since none of these key role players have been trained in the function of crisis communication. The interviews therefore also included questions about the council's general communications with key publics, preparedness for crises and potential for crisis communications.

Qualitative interviews were used because the researcher had access to key government officials who are able to provide the necessary information. Interviews were conducted with the individuals who are responsible for government communications in the Potchefstroom City Council. Email and telephonic correspondence was also maintained with key individuals at the Potchefstroom City Council throughout the study in order to gather ad hoc information or obtain further clarification on information already obtained.

The relevant remarks resulting from all contact with these individuals will be included throughout the mini-dissertation to add insight into the need for, understanding of and readiness for crisis communication within the Potchefstroom City Council. The information gathered during the interviews helped the researcher make recommendations and provide guidelines which the Potchefstroom City Council can use to establish a crisis communication strategy.

1.7.5 Triangulation

Validity was ensured by choosing a variety of literature as well as well-placed sources that were able to offer information suitable to the study. These key members of Potchefstroom City Council responsible for communication were interviewed. Literature pertaining to communication principles, crisis communication and general or communication management principles were used critically and taking the specific context into consideration. As such they were sources of valid information.

Reliability was sought by comparing the information from a number of different sources to see if and how it corresponded. The various sources were found to support each other to a large extent, which indicated that the information used to answer the research questions was reliable. The sources used included existing crisis communication plans of various institutions, the policies of the Potchefstroom City Council, key members of the Potchefstroom City Council responsible for communication, existing communication literature, and South African legislation.

By striving to use a variety of valid data and using it in a careful manner, reliability was sought, thereby helping to eliminate any uncertainty surrounding the data, research methods or the subjective views of the investigator (Lindlof, 1995:166, 238). As such different forms of triangulation were employed.

1.8 Structure of the study

Chapter 2: Crisis Communication in an open system, deals with communication in an open system from a theoretical point of view. It considers the general concepts of an organisation being an open system and how the public relations function plays a vital role in the effective functioning of the system. It describes the negative affects of a crisis on this system and introduces the function of crisis communication.

Chapter 3: Managing organisational crises using crisis communication, discusses the findings of the literature study intended to determine how crisis communication should be effectively applied in an organisation within the context of the systems theory. It continues to describe the principles of crisis communication as a form of public relations and how this should be applied within an organisation.

Chapter 4: Local government and crisis communication looks at the regulations given to local government communicators and how these may and do impact on the implementation of the general principles of crisis communication as described in chapter 3. It also provides a historical and current overview of government communications.

Chapter 5: Crisis communication and the Potchefstroom City Council, contains the recommendations made by the researcher to the Potchefstroom City Council for the establishment of a crisis communication strategy. Comments obtained from the interviews with key role players in the Potchefstroom City Council are included throughout the chapter to supply a further foundation for the recommendations.

Chapter 6 is the **concluding** chapter of the study. It provides an overview of the finding of each chapter in order to answer the research questions asked in point 1.3.

1.9 Concepts used

The following terms will be used throughout the study.

Crisis: An event or activity (“harmful incident” or “incident”) that affects the whole system and has the potential to negatively affect the reputation or credibility of a business by drawing public scrutiny to the way in which this incident was managed (Caponigro, 2000:273).

Crisis communication: All forms of communication between the organisation and its key publics before, during or after a crisis event designed to minimise the damage to the organisation’s reputation and relationships if negative public attention were to occur (Fearn-Banks, 1996:2).

Crisis management: The function of strategic planning that coordinates the management, operational and communication components needed to minimise potential damage of a harmful incident and to gain control of the situation by removing some of its risk and uncertainty (Caponigro, 2000:273; Fearn-Banks, 1996:2).

Crisis communication plan: A strategic communication plan that describes the public relations steps the business will take to effectively manage a crisis situation and establishes specific staff responsibilities to this end (Caponigro, 2000:273).

Stakeholders: The broad categories of people who might be affected by management decisions or affect those decisions. They are affected by the organisation or have the power to affect the organisations. It is these people who feel they have some stake in the success of the

organisation – or that the organisation's success has a major stake in their success (Caponigro, 2000:275; Grunig, 2001).

Vulnerability: A weak area in which the organisation is susceptible to a harmful incident (Caponigro, 2000:275).

1.10 Summary

Chapter 1 has set the scene for the rest of the mini-dissertation providing an orientation of the chapters to follow. Chapter 2 will cover the theoretical foundation of this study. It looks at the general system theory and how an organisation can be classified as an open system. It then investigates the role of public relations in the organisation as an open system and how crisis communication fits into the bigger picture. Some general principles of effective public relations are discussed leading into a discussion of effective crisis communication.

2. CHAPTER 2: COMMUNICATION AND THE OPEN SYSTEM

2.1 Introduction

This theoretical chapter looks at the central concepts of the systems theory and why an organisation, such as a local government, can be classified as an open system. It then briefly investigates the role of public relations in an organisation, followed by a discussion of the role of crisis communication as a type of public relations. This forms the foundation of the third chapter, which deals with the practical application of crisis communication in an organisational setting.

2.2 The Systems Theory

The systems approach has its roots in the General Systems Theory, a natural science approach first used to describe general qualities of organic and inorganic systems and their interactions with their environments. It defines a system as a physical or conceptual entity composed of interrelated parts (also called members or elements) (van Niekerk *et al.*, 2001:98; Angelopulo, 1994:42).

According to this approach, a system can either be closed or open. A closed system does not have any exchange with its environment. An open system, on the other hand, interacts with its environment to achieve growth and balance. An open system can be recognised by the fact that it is made up of a number of parts or elements; it exists in an environment which it impacts and is impacted by; it has mutual relationships with its own subsystems and the bigger suprasystem that it forms a part of; and it has specific attributes or properties.

Those common characteristics relevant to this study are discussed in the following paragraphs.

The parts of a system are arranged in highly complex ways that involve subsystems and a suprasystem the ordering of which show levels of *hierarchy*. Thus a system is made up of smaller subsystems and is also part of a larger suprasystem (Windahl *et al.*, 1992:87; Heath & Bryant, 1992:113, 114).

The parts of a system are *interdependent*. This means that all parts of a system are linked and have a mutual effect on one another. Each part of the system has a function that is related to the system as a whole. The functioning of one part of a system is reliant on the other parts of the system. When one part is affected either negatively or positively then it has a knock on effect on the other parts of the system. When the system is an organisation, the link between the different parts of a system is formed primarily through communication and communication also facilitates the interdependent relationship of these parts by allowing a flow of information from one part to another (McLaughlin, 1986:8; Booth, 1993:27; Windahl *et al.*, 1992:87).

Another attribute of an open system is that the parts have *permeable boundaries* that allow information and materials to flow in or out. One is able to classify systems as either open or closed depending on their degree of permeability. The higher the permeability, the more open the system. All systems require some degree of permeability in order to survive. An open system allows in information that helps it adapt and assess whether its actions are moving it towards its goals. A closed system does not. The degree of openness or the system's ability to interchange information dynamically with its environment is thus directly related to the system's ability to adapt and survive (Windahl *et al.*, 1992:88; Heath & Bryant, 1992:113-114).

The attribute of *homeostasis* describes the tendency for the system to adapt dynamically through self-regulation in order to survive and prosper (Heath & Bryant, 1992:113, 114). This is the adaptation mentioned in the previous paragraph about permeable boundaries.

According to Heath and Bryant (1992:113) *equifinality* is the ability of the system to reach the same goal with different means. In other words, an organisation can set a goal but reach it in different ways.

2.3 A systems approach to organisations

Organisational theorists consider organisations to be open systems. This is clear since an organisation is an organised set of interacting parts (subsystems) each of which affects each other (other subsystems) as well as the total organisation (the system) (Grunig & Hunt, 1984:8).

The main aim of a system is that its actions must achieve its goals (Heath & Bryant, 1992: 114). This is confirmed by Grunig (2001:4-5) who says that an organisation is only effective if it achieves the goals it sets itself. However, a system does not function in a vacuum but within an environment. This environment has an impact on the system and the system also has an impact on the environment. Grunig explains that an organisations environment consists of its publics. Grunig (2001:4) defines publics as:

People who are affected by the organisation or who have the power to affect the organisation.

It is because of this reason that the public relations function plays a vital role in the survival of an organisational system. However, this role of public relations according to the systems theory has not always been recognised within an organisation.

All strategies and actions of an organisation have the potential to impact on public opinion. It is the task of the public relations function to provide an organisation with guidelines (proactively and reactively) to achieve public acceptance. This is because public relations is the only function that interacts either directly or indirectly with all the publics of the organisation. Public relations, in other words is the function concerned with public opinion on

behalf of the entire organisation. This is done either by reacting to a problem or guiding the organisation through emerging or potential issues (Lubbe, 1994:10-11).

Grunig and Hunt (1984:9) describe the distinction between the role of management subsystems and public relations subsystems according to systems theory. Management subsystems are to control and integrate. In other words they control conflict and negotiate between the demands of the environment and the needs of the organisation to survive and prosper. The public relations function serves a boundary role. This means that it serves as a liaison between the external publics and the organisation and the other subsystems. It also helps the various subsystems communicate with each other across the internal boundaries (Grunig & Hunt, 1984:9).

2.4 The role of communication in an open system

Until the late nineteenth century organisations only communicated informally with their publics. However, the twentieth century saw both the organisations and the publics becoming larger and more sophisticated with each having an increased impact on each other. The organisation had to start keeping track of its impact on the publics and also keep track of the public's impact on the organisation (Grunig & Hunt, 1984:8). Managers could not longer ignore publics are communicate in an ad hoc manner and so communication began to take up much more of their time. In addition to this the mass media became more powerful, influential and specialised which meant that managers now had to have more communication expertise. It was at this point that organisations began to create specialised communication roles (public relations) to manage the communications. This role became a subsystem of the organisational system.

In accordance with the systems theory there is a mutual dependence between an organisation and its publics (interdependence). Both the organisation and its publics must co-ordinate their behaviours to minimise conflicts and damage to each other in order to ensure survival of both

parties (Grunig, 2001). If inputs from the environment, other systems or its own subsystems shows that the actions are no longer going to achieve the goals then it must adapt to restore the balance needed in the system in order to achieve the goals (Heath & Bryant, 1992:113-114).

According to Cutlip, Centre and Broom (1985:4,151), public relations is all about influencing the opinions of individuals who make up the publics of an institution. The authors go on to provide the following definition of the function:

Public relations is the management function that identifies, establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between the organisation and the various publics on whom its success or failure depends.

Lubbe (1994:7), after interpretation of many definitions provided by various authors, come to the conclusion that there is an overall agreement that public relations is conceptually:

- *a management function involved in guiding the organisation on a planned and sustained approach towards achieving its objectives;*
- *an interactive function concerned with interpreting the organisations policies and actions to its publics and the publics needs and perceptions to the organisation; and*
- *a communications function to send and receive messages between the organisation and its various publics.*

However, until recently public relations has not been considered a strategic function. Throughout the history of public relations, the field and its purpose have rather been defined by technique than by theory with the result that public relations practitioners were considered technicians (doers) rather than strategic councillors (thinkers). Grunig (2001:1-6) has observed a change over the past few decades. The field of public relations has developed from an occupation to a profession. Where public relations practitioners once needed no or very little education in the field, they are now required to be educated in the broad body of knowledge available. The public relations function now follows recognised standards of

effectiveness and ethical principles in most countries to ensure the moral application of the profession. This change has come about as the public relations profession realised that it should be a strategic part of the organisation and not simply technical support i.e. public relations workers must not just be doers but thinkers too. This is extremely important within the context of the management of crisis communication since it is a strategic function (see section 3.3).

Grunig and Hunt (1984:13-22) describe the diversity of public relations methods used today in four models of public relations. Each model provides a different function within the organisation and must only be used when its specific function is required. The characteristics of the four models could be summarised very briefly as follows:

- a) The press-agent or publicity model is typically used for a propaganda function.
- b) The public information model is used for the dissemination of information, not necessarily with a persuasive intent.
- c) The two-way asymmetric model is used for scientific persuasion. The public relations professionals use existing social science theory and research on attitudes and behaviour about their desired topic in order to try persuade the publics to accept the organisation's point of view or to support it.
- d) The two-way symmetric model serves as a mediator between organisations and their publics in order to achieve mutual understanding between the organisation and the publics.

Since 1985 James Grunig headed a team of researchers who studied the characteristics of excellent public relations and how such public relations can help make an organisation more effective. The result of this study was the identification of the most effective public relations model and several generic excellence criteria that can be positively correlated to successful public relations programs throughout the world.

Grunig's widely regarded Excellence Project describes how professional public relations (complying with the excellence criteria) appropriately applied and adapted in different environments, is a fundamental component of effective organisational management because it helps to balance the interest of the organisation with the interests of its publics and therefore helps to avoid conflicts or to identify and manage them. The two-way symmetrical public relations is the model that best complies with the systems approach and attempts to adjust the organisation to its environment and the environment to the organisation (Grunig, 2001). This two-way symmetrical model of communications is described by Lubbe (1994:9) as research based communication used to improve an organisation's understanding of strategic publics.

Public relations professionals practicing excellent public relations principles are able to point out the consequences that organisational interests will have on the publics and that public interests will have on the organisation. This identification of consequences is done by engaging in environmental scanning. The practitioners run a communication program of formal or informal discussion, research and communication with key publics to find out who the publics are and what conflict could be created if the organisation and publics interests do not coincide. They can then strategically advise the organisation to adjust its behaviour. These intensions are then communicated to the key publics. Conflict is avoided and balance is maintained in the system (Grunig, 2001). The public relations practitioner is the link between the organisation and its publics. If done strategically public relations activities can help maintain the organisation's balance. It is the role of public relations to create, manage and maintain relationships with the publics with the view of identifying possible issues and dealing with them or at least preparing to minimise the damage to the balance in the case that the issues can no longer be avoided completely.

Press agent and Public participation models are typically closed system approaches while the both the two-way asymmetric and two-way symmetric models both involve two-way communication between organisations and their publics. Therefore when considering a public

relations approach to crisis in an open system only the two-way asymmetric and two-way symmetric models could be applied (since both follow an open system approach.)

In the two-way asymmetric model, the public relations function will compile communication with the intention of creating a very specific attitude or behaviour within its publics. The message is based on existing scientific information about that specific topic or issue as well as existing research on how attitudes and behaviour can be changed for that particular topic or issue. This is to achieve the exact change the organisation wants. Feedback is received from the public but the organisation will not adjust its objective, it will simply use this feedback to adjust its communication to again try achieving the original intended results. The receiver never initiates communication to the organisation but only respond to the communication of the organisation. The organisation does not change as a result of the public relations but it attempts to change an attitude or behaviour in the public. This is what makes this type of model asymmetric – balanced in the favour of the organisation (Grunig & Hunt, 1984:23).

In the two-way symmetric model the communication is more of a dialogue between the organisation and the public. The public should have as much of an opportunity to persuade the organisation to change its attitudes or behaviours as the organisation would be able to convince the public to change their attitudes or behaviours. This model is all about public relations bringing the organisation and publics together to communicate well enough to understand the position of the other and adapt to find a harmonious balance. Both will adapt to reach a solution that suits both parties. According to Grunig and Hunt this is the most ethical model to public relations and equates to excellent public relations (Grunig & Hunt, 1984:23).

Creating harmony between the organisation and its publics is important since each have an impact and consequences on each other.

Actions of an organisation (usually because of the decisions of management) have consequences on their publics. These can be either negative or positive consequences. For example the decision to produce unsafe products, to retrench a large number of employees or to dump harmless waste all have a negative impact on its publics. When publics hear about negative consequences, they often take action that in turn has consequences on the organisation e.g. boycotting the company's products, petitioning its behaviours. Positive consequences on the other hand promote positive responses. For example when an organisation invests in the community or its environment the community will respond positively by being more willing to support the company's services or products (Grunig & Hunt, 1984:10-11). It is these negative consequences that cause public scrutiny and could damage the company's reputation and relationships if not managed correctly. The damage could be of such an extent that the company (system) will not survive.

Crisis communication has been developed as a specific sub-type of public relations in order to help an organisation deal with the negative responses to negative consequences of an organisation's actions or decision. This facilitates the organisational systems survival in the event of public scrutiny.

2.5 Defining a crisis

The concept of crisis tends to be poorly defined and incorrectly used in organisations. One hears many managers who say they have to deal with crises every day, when what they are actually dealing with are incidents or accidents. The terms "incident", "accident" and "crisis" are often used interchangeably when they are actually not the same at all (Bland, 1988:4; Albrecht, 1996:11; Ray, 1999:14).

Pauchant and Mitroff (1992:12) provide descriptions of each of those concepts:

- an incident is an event that affects a self-contained part of a larger system;

- an accident is an incident that has been amplified by other variables in the system and thus evolved to physically disrupts a system as a whole; and
- a crisis is an accident that has evolved through further amplification. It not only disrupts the system as a whole but has an added element of public scrutiny which threatens to cause a negative public opinion which will seriously damage the organisations reputation and relationship with key publics (both internal and external).

In other words, it is not the actual event that causes public scrutiny but the way the organisation deals with it or the organisation's role in the cause of the event that could damage its reputation or relationships. The following examples are used to clarify the use of these concepts to illustrate the above.

In the first example we compare an angry customer with a factory fire. Almost instinctively we assume that the factory fire should be classified a crisis far more easily than an angry customer. But before one can make this assumption, one must consider all the aspects. For example, even a large factory fire can be put out without further incident if one is prepared for it. If this is the case then the outside world won't even find out about it. The internal publics will also have no reason to scrutinise the method in which it was managed and will therefore not need to raise concerns. Now let's consider the angry customer. If he or she comes to you complaining about a serious product flaw and is not taken seriously they could eventually go to the media with evidence that the product could lead to death of customers. This will immediately result in negative attention and mistrust. The first example remained an incident because it was dealt with effectively and was not allowed to reach the point where it disrupted the entire organisation, but the latter example became a crisis because it was not managed well and evolved to the point that it received public scrutiny which led to negative publicity for the system as a whole. It was the management of both incidents that distinguished whether or not they escalated into crises (Bland, 1998:4-5).

In the second example, if an office is struck by lightning and burns down it is an accident because it automatically disrupts the systems functioning. Initially the public will sympathise. However, it will escalate into a crisis if there is reason for scrutiny from the publics. For example negative attention would have been received if the office burnt down because the lighting conductor was defective or if people died because of inadequate evacuation procedures. The extent of the damage in this example could be traced to a weakness in the organisation and leaves enough to create negative public attention (Bland, 1998:5).

An incident or accident only becomes a crisis when it is allowed to escalate to the point that it attracts enough negative attention from its publics to damage its reputation and / or relationships. This will generally occur if it was caused by (or ineffectively managed because of) the inadequacy, error, oversight or deficiency of the organisation (Bland, 1998:4-5).

The way the organisation reacts to an incident could possibly turn an initial negative situation into an opportunity if it manages a crisis effectively. Crisis communication before, during and after is able to use a crisis as an opportunity to build and strengthen the organisation's reputation because it makes use of the principles of two-way symmetrical (excellence) public relations to involve key publics in decision making (see the explanation of two-way symmetrical communication in section 2.4). However, if key publics see that the organisation has made decisions that are not in agreement with the publics' needs, then they will develop a negative image of the organisation. Their support (on which the organisation depends) will be lost.

While every crisis is unique, a number of common characteristics can be identified.

A crisis generally:

- receives intense scrutiny from media and publics;
- threatens to damage long term relationships with the publics;
- interrupts a company's normal operating procedures, threatens a company's image;
- damages its bottom line;

- takes the organisation by surprise;
- is accompanied by insufficient information about the problem;
- escalates in intensity at an ever increasing rate of destruction to reputation and relationships;
- creates havoc with the organisation's financial resources;
- is accompanied by stress which may impact the effectiveness of decision makers;
- threatens the organisation's profitability, viability and legitimacy;
- has time restrictions for developing a response and making decisions;
- requires immediate decision making, problem solving and communication;
- disrupts the organisational system as a whole;
- negatively affects the industry;
- cause significant damage to either its publics, services, the environment, product reputation or human safety;
- threatens the organisation's high priority goals; and
- involves a high level of uncertainty with regard to blame, cause, response, public perception, resolution and possible consequences

(Ray, 1999:16-17; Tew, 2002:187; Barton, 1993:2; Albrecht, 1996:11; Fearn-Banks, 1996:1; Jacobs, 2001:226).

All organisations face incidents daily, e.g. conflicts, technical failure, client complaints, injuries, retrenchments, downsizing, lawsuits, damaging rumours or poor moral. The origins may be external or internal and may be within or outside the control of the organisation. Many modern crises are caused by the decisions made by humans albeit deliberately or accidentally. Some may be inherent to a complex socio-technical system while others are completely out of the control of the organisation, such as acts of God. Some incidents are rooted in internal dissatisfaction that has received insufficient attention. There are many causes and every organisation is vulnerable to some degree (Albrecht, 1996:10-23; Caponigro, 2000:269; Lerbinger, 1997:xii).

Most organisations also have mechanisms in place to resolve or accommodate more regular incidents that disrupt parts of its own system and so the impact is absorbed and equilibrium is achieved without further incidents. The full escalation of an incident or accident into a crisis is rare. But unfortunately it is impossible to avoid or prevent crises completely, since occasional imbalance is a natural characteristic of all living systems. A system has an increased chance of an incident disrupting the system if it does not have regulatory processes in place to restore balance quickly when necessary (Tew, 2002:188; Albrecht, 1996:25,137).

A systemic view of crises can provide an understanding of how a crisis can disrupt an entire system (including its subsystems and suprasystem) because of the interrelated nature of the systems parts. A crisis negatively affecting an organisation will not only affect all its subsystems but also the entire industry.

From a systems approach, many incidents can turn into crises if they are amplified by other variables because of the tight interrelationships between variables constituting the system. The principle is that a change in one part of a system can be amplified by a number of variables to the point that the change can no longer be dealt with by current processes. This causes damage to the system which must be dealt with using additional measures (Albrecht, 1996:22-27). Because of the system's attribute of interrelatedness an organisational crisis will not only affect its own system and subsystem but also its suprasystem. This implies that its key publics are also affected.

A crisis does not simply occur out of the blue but will always have a history of warning signals. Often it is not only one factor that has caused the crisis but it is the combination of run-up incidents which have added up and escalated to the point of destabilising the entire system (Tew, 2002:187; Albrecht, 1996:12, 25). Each precipitating incident gives off warning signs (Albrecht, 1996:137). If one is able to interpret these warning signs correctly then one should be able to predict the possibility of a crisis. This is one of the steps in the first phase of managing a crisis. The two-way communication prior to the crisis is a method used to

identify these warning signs by communicating with the publics and then conveying them to the organisational management in order that the organisations can change its behaviour to avoid the potential crisis.

How an organisation could apply these theoretical points in the practice of public relations will be discussed in chapter 3.

2.6 Conclusion

This study agrees with Angelopulo (1994:40-41) in stating that the systems approach is an exceptionally good aid to understanding and practicing public relations. The systems theory shows that an organisation and its publics are mutually dependent on one another (interdependent). As such, an organisation must take its environment into consideration in order to identify and adapt to factors that could affect it negatively and therefore have subsequent negative affects on it. This is achieved through public relations which facilitates the effective interaction of an organisation with its environment or publics. Public relations theory helps the decision makers make sense of the environment and adapt for survival (Grunig, 2001).

Chapter 3 introduces the role of crisis communication in an organisation. It describes how an organisation should manage a crisis before, during and after a crisis and the role that crisis communication plays in the bigger context of crisis management. Two real-life examples of crisis are quoted to introduce the practical crisis communication steps provided by existing literature.

3. CHAPTER 3: MANAGING CRISES THROUGH STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

3.1 Introduction

Local governments in a democratic society such as South Africa may be more prone to public criticism than the average business organisation in the same environment. The publics of a business orientated organisation understand that the business exists primarily to make a profit and hold it accountable to do so in a socially responsible manner. A democratic local government on the other hand, exists primarily to progress the social and economic development of its local community. It is developmental in its orientation and legislation adds the unique dimension of transparency and community orientations for all decisions and actions (South Africa, 2000). Add to this the political dimension of numerous political parties operating in the same space and trying to win favour (reputation and relationships) in local communities in order to gain more political power in that community. The political party in charge of the local government at any given time is under constant threat of being exposed to the public for any decision or action perceived to be unbeneficial to its community. This exposure will damage the system. In accordance with the principle of interdependence, damage to the system will automatically damage its publics, something which in the South African context will mean a negative affect on the development and well being of a community. One only has to look at the number of rumours about fraud or corruption in South African government to realise that this type of organisation must constantly be on its toes to protect its reputation and relationships with its publics. By loosing the respect of its publics, a leading political party may very well be faced with loosing its political power which will cause major disruption to a local community and its development. There is no doubt that it needs to implement strategic crisis communication. Reputation and key relationships will be damaged if effective crisis communication was not put in place in all three phases: before, during and after a crisis.

The majority existing literature about crisis management and crisis communication focuses on the topic from a general organisational perspective and only occasionally from the perspective of a specific industry. As such, a very small percentage of the literature reviewed for this study focussed specifically on crisis communication in local governments and none looked at the topic from the perspective of a South African local government. Since a local government is a specific type of organisation the theory taken from existing literature has consequently been adapted to apply to local governments in general. The terms “organisation” and “local government” are referred to interchangeably in this chapter unless otherwise stated. Chapter 4 will discuss the unique environment of South African local government and more specifically the Potchefstroom City Council in order to adapt the existing theory to the chosen subject.

Organisations, by nature including local governments, are held accountable for their decisions and actions that result in negative consequences on their publics. In today’s climate of corporate and political accountability, actions build a reputation far more effectively than declarations or promises. Stakeholders (including voters, i.e. the citizens of a town or city) need to know that the organisation (such as a city council) is as concerned about their needs as it is about its own. Local governments even more so since they are established primarily to serve the best interests of their communities and to prevent harm wherever possible. A record of responsible deeds is a vital component of a positive reputation (Regeister & Larkin, 2002:158-159).

The co-ordination of public and organisation goals is achieved by strategic, two-way communication. Within the system’s approach it is clear that an organisation that does not take its key publics into account when making decisions will eventually make decisions that are not aligned to the needs, goals and expectations of these publics. In the case of a democratic local government, this principle is not only governed by the systems approach but also by a political mandate put in place by a country’s government system. It is there to serve the community in which it operates. A democratic local government, as with any other organisation, is expected to take its publics into account at all times so its actions or decisions

will meet the needs of the community. Where this does not happen it opens itself up to public scrutiny and possible damage to relationships or reputation.

Based on the concept of equifinality discussed in section 2.2, a system such as a local government can decide to plan for a crisis, but it still needs to choose which path it will follow to do so. The responsibility is to ensure that it chooses the most effective method. This chapter will show that the most effective method of crisis management is one that includes a crisis communication component - a two-way symmetric form of public relations. It is the responsibility of the communication function within a local government to ensure that crisis communication uses the principles of two-way symmetric communication to be most effective. This will bring it into step with general organisational principles discussed in this chapter and democratic government principles discussed in chapter 4.

Guidelines to the practical management of the function of crisis communication can best be formulated in view of the theoretical points formulated in chapter 2. These theoretical concepts will be used as the basis for the practical suggestion found in existing public relations literature. Chapter 3 looks at the broader concept of crisis management, where crisis communications fits into this function and how it should be applied within a local government.

3.2 The role of crisis communication

Crisis communication is a public relations function - building and maintaining relationships with key publics whose ongoing support will be needed if a crisis occurs. Fearn-Banks (1996:2) expands on this by stating: *Crisis communication is the communication between the organisation and its publics prior to, during and after the negative occurrence. The communications are designed to minimise damage to the image of the organisation.* Venter (1994:211) provides a similar definition: *Crisis communication is that public relations*

activity which has as objective the maintenance of an organisation's positive relations with its publics during a crisis, in order to ensure its future successful existence.

From these definitions it appears that crisis communication is the strategic communication needed before, during and after a crisis. Its main goal is to minimise damage to the organisations reputation and relationships. According to research cited by Fearn-Banks (1996:3), an organisation will suffer less financial, emotional and perceptual damage when it has strong and well-developed relationships with its key publics prior to a crisis; it uses two-way symmetrical public relations procedures; it establishes and puts into effect continuing crisis management activities and prepares crisis communication plans prior to crisis; and it has communication ideologies that encourage, support and champion crisis management. Fearn-Banks adds that organisations with good crisis communication have a greater chance of avoiding crises; enduring crises for a shorter time; endure crises to a lesser magnitude; and coming out with a more positive image than organisations who do not have good crisis communications (Fearn-Banks, 1996:3).

In 2001 Grunig identified four principles of crisis communications that can help an organisation minimise the damage caused by a crisis (Grunig, 2001). As mentioned earlier, references to “organisations” can be applied to local governments. It is therefore also relevant to take note of Grunig’s principles. They are adapted somewhat to reflect the nature of (local) democracy:

The relationship principle: *local governments can withstand both issues and crises better if they have established good, long-term relationships with publics who are at risk from its decisions and behaviours* (Grunig, 2001). This principle is also supported by other literature. Fearn-Banks (1996:14) and Caponigro (2000:267-271) state that the most important factor in surviving a crisis is how much support the organisation (read: local government) already has from each of its key publics upon entering the crisis. People are more willing to support an organisation in crisis and give it the benefit of the doubt when it has previously earned their

trust and credibility through a good, two-way relationship. The better the initial support, the better the chances of its relationships remaining intact or even thriving in such an event. For public relations to be managed strategically the communication department must identify stakeholders, anticipate issues and resolve these issues in order to protect its relationships with its key publics. All of this is done through two-way communication programs developed early enough to make a difference. Albrecht (1996:15) adds that the amount of support the public gives an organisation is directly linked to its reputation and the strength of the relationship between the two parties. The stronger a local governments relationship with its key publics, the better it will be able to withstand the damage from a crisis.

The accountability principle: local governments should accept responsibility for a crisis even if it was not their fault (Grunig, 2001). If one refers back to the example of the Tylenol poisonings, Johnson & Johnson immediately accepted responsibility that their products were the cause of harmful incidents even though they did not know whose fault it was. They put their customers need for information and safety above their need for revenue. By doing this they did not waste any time in disseminating information and recalling products. By accepting responsibility, they possibly saved the lives of more potential victims. Only once all the facts were available did they make claims of innocence. This decision won their publics' favour and their reputation and relationships were strengthened. Similarly a local government must accept responsibility for what is happening and take charge (responsibility) to manage the incident. It is understandable that a community will look to their leadership to help them deal with any harmful incidents. It must put its publics' need for information and safety above its own need to prove its innocence, and take charge (responsibility) in containing and managing a crisis. This is a principle that wins the respect of ones publics.

The disclosure principle: at the time of a crisis, a local government must disclose all that it knows about the crisis or problem involved. If it does not know what happened, then it must promise full disclosure once it has additional information (Grunig, 2001). Similar to the discussion of the accountability principle, a community's need for information must be

considered utmost when an incident occurs, especially when the incident holds a physical threat to the community. Withholding information to try protecting a reputation in the short run will only damage it in the long run. In a democratic government the community also has a right to access any information that directly affects it.

The symmetrical communication principle: *at the time of a crisis, a local government must consider the public interest to be not merely as important as its own, but of paramount importance.* It could thus be argued that public interest and safety is paramount. As with any type of organisation, a local government has no choice other than to engage in true democratic dialogue with its publics and to practice socially responsible behaviour when a crisis occurs (Grunig, 2001).

A crisis could destroy the public's positive perception of the organisation or even of the entire industry/profession of which the organisation is a part. But, crisis communication can protect the reputation of the organisation and its suprasystem (in the case of local government, of the political system) by reinforcing positive attitudes and changing negative attitudes. An effective communication strategy, devised before a crisis occurs, may mean the difference between strengthening the reputation and seeing it destroyed (Caponigro, 2000:143; Fearn-Banks, 1996:9).

Not only does two-way communication help to build relationships that can withstand the impact of a crisis but it can also help to identify issues with the help of its publics that could escalate into a crisis if not prevented or managed correctly. These issues may simply be misalignments between the goals of the organisation, in this case a local government, and its key publics (see Grunig's comments about aligning with the environment's goals in section 2.4).

Grunig's excellence study emphasises the point that all communications programs need to be proactive and strategically managed. A local government that is not proactive in anticipating

crises will be forced into being reactive when a crisis strikes, being controlled by the situation rather than taking control from the first sign of trouble (Albrecht, 1996:139). According to Grunig (2001:6) management is only strategic when organisations (read: local governments) make long-term strategic decisions that are feasible in their environment. In other words, a local government must involve its community when identifying which incidents and potential crises to plan for. These plans will be feasible since they take the public's needs, knowledge and issues into account. This principle is also in agreement with South Africa's Municipal Systems Act discussed in section 4.2.2.2.

General management and organisational theories do not provide the necessary framework for the communication programmes needed to scan the environment to determine which long-term feasible decisions will be feasible. It is at this point that we turn to public relations theory to provide the solutions for all types of organisations, including local governments. Through interaction with the environment, public relations can identify which plans to manage potential crises will be feasible in the long-run by comparing organisational goals with public the public's needs. This communication can also help determine if the organisation and its public consider the same vulnerabilities to be important. Once identified, the public relations functions should bring these issues to the decision makers' attention so that appropriate plans can be put in place to manage them. Two-way communication therefore helps a local government provide solutions that are feasible to both it and its public i.e. it helps the organisation be more socially responsible (Grunig, 2001).

3.3 Managing a crisis

In laymen's terms: crisis management is the proactive strategic process of identifying the potential crises the organisation faces and then making decisions and putting actions or policies in place to either prevent them from occurring or putting plans in place to manage them effectively when they do occur. Many business crises can be prevented or at least its effects minimised through strategic crisis management.

Fearn-Banks (1996:2) gives the following useful definition of crisis management:

Crisis management is a process of strategic planning for a crisis or negative turning point. [It is] a process that removes some of the risk and uncertainty from the negative occurrence and thereby allow the organisation to be in greater control of its own destiny.

The objective of the crisis management function includes preventing potential crises or planning for those that are unavoidable by putting in place the necessary plans and strategies. This management function has three components: communication, management and operations. Some functions of the communication component also overlap with the management and operational components so that they are integrated and co-ordinated. If any of these components are applied individually without the input of the other then the result would be an uncoordinated, non-integrated and ultimately ineffective crisis management plan.

An example of how these three components work together is how each responds in different ways when a crisis occurs. Irvine and Millar (1998:14) describe the three categories of response. Local governments as a type of organisation, to which this theory applies, must respond:

- on a **management** level in allocating the resources and making critical decisions needed to resolve the situation;
- on an **operational** level to get the disruption under control; and
- on a **communication** level to ensure that important relationships and its reputation is not damaged.

These three categories of response cannot operate alone but must be co-ordinated and integrated. This interaction is illustrated in figure 3.1 and 3.2 below.

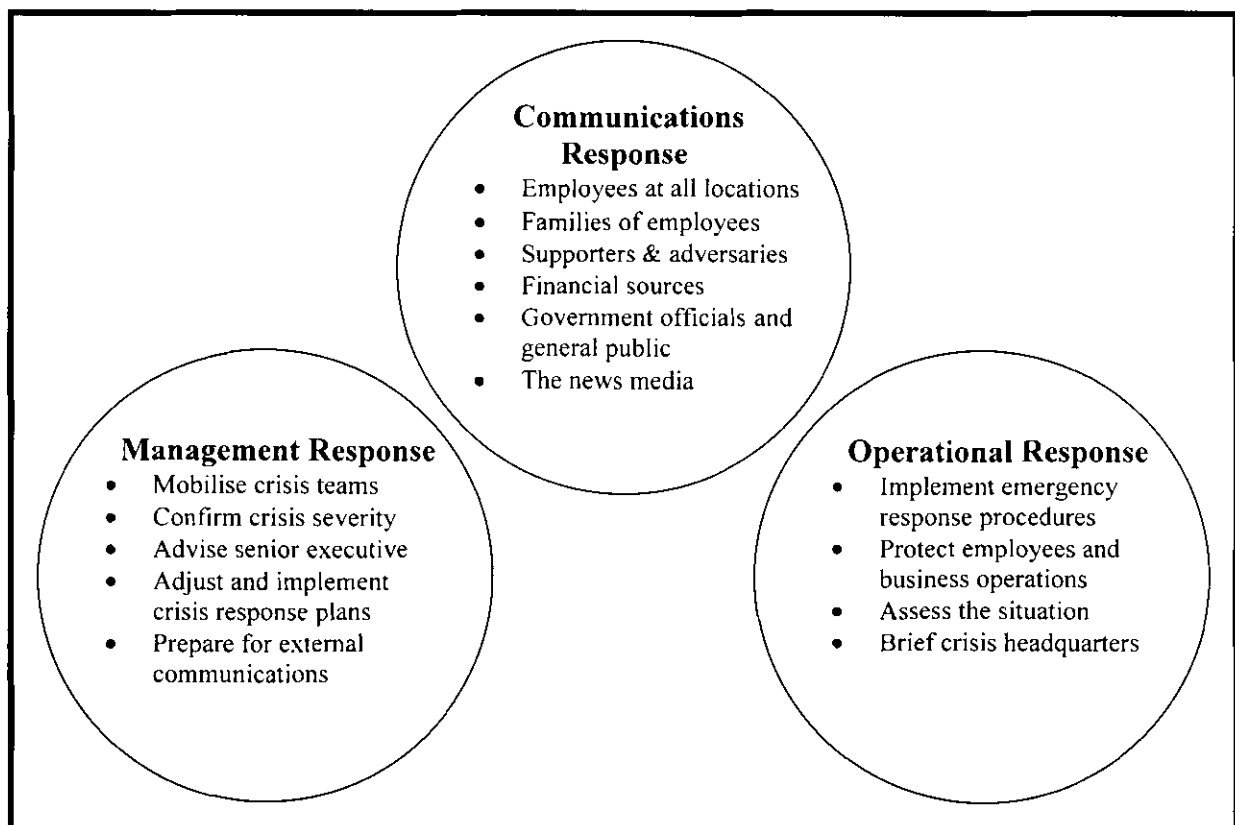


Fig 3.1 The three functions of crisis communication: separate and uncoordinated

Source: adapted from Irvine and Millar (1998:14)

Figure 3.1 shows what functions each component must perform when a crisis occurs.

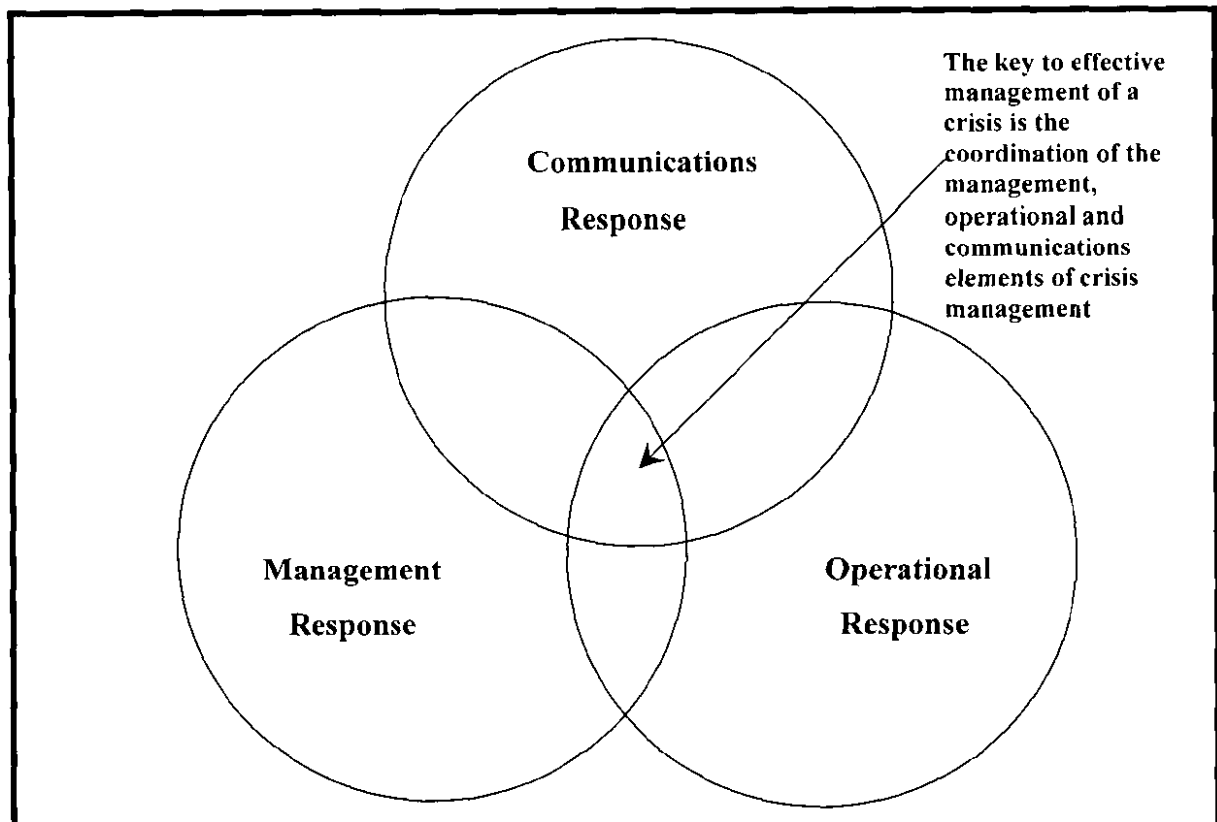


Fig 3.2 The three function of crisis communication: coordinated and integrated

Source: adapted from Irvine and Millar (1998:14)

Figure 3.2 shows that the three components of crisis management should be integrated when responding to a crisis. This integration is also necessary before and after a crisis occurs.

Effective decisions need to be made quickly when a crisis occurs. Actions need to be taken, and material and messages need to be produced and communicated. As discussed under Grunig's disclosure principle, it is the local government's responsibility to disclose whatever information is available about the incident. A local government is responsible for providing its community with enough information for them to make informed decisions even if an incident is not its fault. All of this needs to be done quickly and effectively. It is therefore important to be proactive as well as strategic. Valuable time is lost if decision makers only try to get organised once the crisis occurs. Most of the management, operational and

communication actions needed to deal with a crisis can be decided on and tested for effectiveness before the crisis even happens. A comprehensive crisis management plan can be pre-planned and tested regularly to save time in the actual event of a crisis occurring (Caponigro, 2000:98; Lerbinger, 1997:19). It is the responsibility of the public relations function to compile and maintain the communication component of these plans.

Crisis communication should be entrenched in the strategic objectives and culture of a local government. It needs to be seen as a strategic procedure and not an ad-hoc activity which has simply been done in an irregular, inconsistent and inferior manner (Caponigro, 2000:83). It plays a specific role in helping government achieve its political mandate.

Another reason why crisis communication should be proactive and strategic is that a local government, like any other type of organisation, needs physical and financial resources to deal with any crisis. If crisis management forms a part of a local government's strategy then resources will be allocated for the probability of such events. If crisis management is not a strategic part of its strategy then the organisation will not have allocated any resources and, when a crisis strikes, will need to divert resources that would normally have gone to operations and services. Such an unforeseen expense could drain its physical and financial resources otherwise allocated for public service and community development (Albrecht, 1996:14). Even less extensive crisis communication involves time and budget. Executives can show their dedication to the process by allocating a dedicated budget or including it in their annual planning and reviews. This will help demonstrate that it is a major priority and that somebody is being held responsible and accountable for the entire process (Caponigro, 2000:100).

Council management and political leaders must be undivided during a crisis (Fearn-Banks, 1996:4). Council officials and the community will look to their "leaders" for guidance and a crisis is no time for top management to display a divided front. They must show that they know and believe in the plan, showing that this is what they will depend on to get the

community through a crisis. If they can show this sort of support for the plan, then the officials and community, whose natural everyday inclination is to follow the instructions or example given from the top, will be inclined to follow the plan provided. There needs to be a united front from the top to show support for the plan, both before and during the crisis. This will reassure everyone.

3.4 Examples of crises

The following are two more examples of actual public relations crises experienced by governments after harmful incidents occurred in their jurisdictions.

3.4.1 The Kobe Earthquake

On 17 January 1995 the City of Kobe, Japan was struck with a devastating earthquake killing more than 6000 residents. The harmful incident itself did not provoke public scrutiny. It was an act of God and the local government of Kobe had no control over its origin. However this natural disaster turned into a public relations crisis for the Kobe government when it revealed the poor management of the circumstances surrounding the large loss of life. The incident revealed that both Kobe's central and local government had neglected to develop the skills necessary for managing major natural or man-made disasters in their geographical jurisdiction. The most significant revelation from government's reaction to the earthquake was the severe lack of co-ordination and preparedness to deal with disasters (Nakamura, 2000:23-24).

The events which led up to the crisis were as follows:

The trembler struck at 05:46 on 17 January 1995. By 06:00 the Defence Secretary has been informed. By 06:15 two helicopters from the nearby Self Defence Forces (SDF) base took off to investigate the situation. They found that the damage was severe over the entire Kobe region. However no action was taken by the SDF until 10:00 leaving the residents to care for

themselves for more than four hours. The SDF's delayed reaction was due to two political issues and not due to their lack of ability to manage the situation (Nakamura, 2000:23-24).

The first political issue arose from Japan's post-war constitution. Many had previously opposed the SDF's involvement in disaster relief, saying that it should be the responsibility of the police and fire defence forces. The SDF therefore assumed that it was these entities that would be dealing with the incident and therefore did not respond immediately. The second political issue delaying their response was that the SDF did not know who would bear the costs of their relief efforts if they were to get involved. It was only at 10:00 when they received a formal, written request from the governor to assist with operations that they became involved. The reason why this formal request was delayed beyond acceptable timing was because nobody, not even the governor's personal secretary, knew his whereabouts that morning (Nakamura, 2000:23-24).

Section 3.5 will describe some of the crisis communication measures that could have been put in place before and during this incident to help speed up the response to the incident. If the government had undertaken crisis communication prior to the disaster and included all possible parties, each party would have known what their role was to be. Crisis communication would have built the relationship between all parties who were needed to react in this incident, building trust and an understanding of everybody's role prior to the incident. But the delay in the response was only one of the reasons why this incident became a crisis for the Kobe government.

Further information that was revealed after the earthquake fuelled the public relations crisis. Most of the 6000 residents who died as a result of the earthquake died in the western part of the city. It was revealed that this part of the city had been neglected during a phase of urban upliftment and lacked the modern infrastructure and plans needed to handle its high density populations – a population of mainly elderly people. A fire broke out in this western area but the infrastructure to deal with the fire was not incorporated in this part of the city and as a

result many lives were lost due to the fire. More than half of the 6000 deceased were over 60 years old. The area was a sub standard which contributed to the high death rate. (Nakamura, 2000:24).

These and many more issues caused major public outcry towards the inability of all levels of Japanese governments to deal with any major harmful incident. The local government of Kobe erected a crisis office in 1996, only one year after the earthquake. In 1998, largely due negative outcry surround the 1996 earthquake, the central government instituted a crisis office under the direct control of the prime minister. Similarly many local governments have erected their own offices to manage such disasters. (Nakamura, 2000:23). The crisis was not contained within the Kobe system but its effects spread to the suprasystem of the Japanese government spheres. This refers to the attributes of hierarchy and interdependency described in section 2.2, showing that a crisis in a system will impact all subsystems as well as the suprasystem it belongs to.

Section 3.5 will explain why having a crisis management function that operates only in theory but not in practice is useless. It is not enough to have a policy or plan on paper. Crisis communication must help entrench crisis management in the culture of the government and its community. Each subsystem in the system must understand its importance. This importance needs to be re-emphasised regularly through simulations, communications, revision of plan and policies and inclusion in annual budgets. The following discussions of incidents experienced in Kobe after the establishment of their crisis management functions will illustrate this point.

Kobe City's crisis office was faced with an oil spill off the coast of Hyogo Prefecture in 1997. The director of disaster control mobilised and co-ordinated the various government procedures put in place by the crisis office and the government succeeded in containing the oil spill before it could become a major disaster. The efforts were met with positive public opinion and the director became a role model for many other localities (Nakamura, 2000:23).

In contrast, when a nuclear accident occurred in Japan in October of 1999, one year after the central government establishment its crisis office, the prime minister and the crisis office was criticised for being too slow to act. The office had not been informed of the incident for several hours after it occurred due to lack of co-ordination amongst the various agencies who were dealing with the incident. Those who knew about the incident either did not know that they had to contact the crisis office or did not know how to contact the office. This delay in informing the prime minister consequently delayed the implementation of the crisis plan (Nakamura, 2000:23-24). Crisis communication before such an incident would have provided all entities with a reporting tree showing that the prime minister should have been informed as a top priority. It would also have ensured that everyone who was involved in the crisis response would have known their roles and this would have brought about coordinated and integrated efforts. A crisis simulation prior to the incident would have shown a lack of preparedness [see point 3.5.1.2(c)].

3.4.2 The 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami

On 26 December 2004 an offshore earthquake resulted in a giant tsunami wave which devastated the shores of Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, Thailand, Somalia, Burma, Maldives, Malaysia, Tanzania, Seychelles, Bangladesh and even Kenya. More than 200 000 people died as a result with hundreds of thousand more affected by the aftermath of homelessness, diseases, unemployment and emotional trauma. Again it was not the actual harmful incident that evoked public scrutiny but what was revealed about various governments whose communities had been impacted.

Thai governments received tremendous outcry when their lack of preparedness for this incident was exposed.

A newspaper report in a Thai daily newspaper, "The Nation", reports that in 1998 Smith Dharmasaroja, a Thai meteorologist predicted that an earthquake and tsunami "is going to

occur for sure." This was something that he believed his research had been pointing to and his belief had prompted him to write many letters to senior government figures advising them to be better prepared for the possibility of a tsunami hitting Thailand. He advocated more effective tsunami warning systems, but was not taken seriously. The same newspaper article reports that some German families of those killed in the tsunami were considering whether or not to sue the Thai government because these letters had not prompted the correct measures (Rojanaphruk, 2005). After the tsunami, Smith Dharmasaroja was recalled from retirement and charged with development of Thai and regional warning systems. He became the chairman of the Committee for the National Disaster Warning Administration (Rojanaphruk, 2005).

Enormous public outcry was aimed at the Thai government when it was revealed that the early warnings signalling the possibility of a tsunami on the day were not taken seriously enough or passed on to the correct authorities. When questioned about this accusation the Thai Meteorological Department and the Geological Resources Department said they did not give a tsunami warning because they could not be sure that one would occur. In an article in "The Nation" they explained that in 1998 the then director-general of the Thai weather bureau issued a tsunami warning off the coast of Phuket. The anticipated tsunami did not occur and the director-general received public condemnation for provoking panic and fear amongst the tourists – the livelihood of Phuket. Therefore one of the main reasons why the authorities did not want to issue the warning on 26 December 2004 was a fear of public scrutiny and upsetting the tourism industry. However, despite this reasoning, the standard procedure as laid down by the Pacific Tsunami Warning Centre in 1965, dictates that any underwater earthquake with a magnitude greater than 6.5 on the Richer scale must automatically trigger the tsunami warning system. The earthquake that caused the 2004 tsunami measured 8.6, yet no warning was given. If the officials on duty that morning had been following a clear-cut procedure that had been well rehearsed they would have based their decision on an approved plan rather than their own apprehension of inconveniencing the tourism industry (see point 3.5.1.2). If the government had engaged in more crisis communication with their publics (the

community and tourists included), then these publics would have understood that evacuation was in their best interests – even if it was simply a precaution. Public misunderstandings and undesirable attitudes would have been dealt with before or after such a precautionary evacuation. They, as well as the officials on duty, would have understood that the officials had an important job to do and that it one that concerned the safety of every person in their care (Yoon, 2004).

But it was not only the Thai Meteorological and Geological Resources Departments that received early warning of seismic activity that needed urgent attention. A BBC news report written by Julianna Kettelwell (Kettelwell, 2005) describes how the Pacific Ocean Warning Centre picked up the earthquake action on 26 December. They notified Asian authorities but no action was taken because no emergency response procedures existed. Similarly computers at the Vienna Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty Organisation also picked up the seismic activity. Although the computers picked up this information, the facility staff were all on holiday and the information was not passed on to the countries that needed it most (Kettelwell, 2005).

This shows that the management of the existing early warning systems should have been more effective. But an early warning system alone is not the solution. A BBC News report (Kettelwell, 2005) reported the following:

A summit has now decided to create a tsunami early warning system for the Indian Ocean. The high-tech equipment could detect tsunamis that are still miles out at sea. But unless you can warn people in remote areas, the technology is useless.

"There's no point in spending all the money on a fancy monitoring and a fancy analysis system unless we can make sure the infrastructure for the broadcast system is there," said Phil McFadden, chief scientist at Geoscience Australia. "That's going to require a lot of work. If it's a tsunami [message], you've got to get it down to the last Joe on the beach. This is the stuff that is really very hard."

A sentiment echoed in the same news report by Dr Whitmore of the West Coast Alaska Tsunami Warning Centre as quoted:

The warning system is more than just a warning centre. You have to have communication from the centre and then you need some sort of emergency response infrastructure. And that is really the hardest part, getting a localised emergency response. An operator sitting in an early warning centre in Jakarta might know about an impending tsunami, but how does he warn the fisherman in Sumatra, the sweet seller in Sri Lanka, the tribesman on Nicobar Island? In many of these places TV, radio, even a telephone is not an option (Kettelwell, 2005).

Kettelwell's article continues by airing the views of Prof Bill McGuire, director of the Benfield Hazard Research Centre at University College London. Prof McGuire believes that the population must be educated about tsunami and how to respond to them if they occur. He also believes that an efficient and effective communication chain is vital when responding to a harmful incident (Kettelwell, 2005). The practical implementation of this advice will be discussed in section 3.5.1.2.

An effective crisis communication plan envisaging the potential danger of the tsunami could have taken all the above into account. Communities at risk would have been educated, authorities would have known how to communicate with the remotest places, those responsible for crisis communication would have known who to contact in the chain of command to get the ball rolling. With crisis communication in place many lives may have been spared. This is a massive task, but it is the responsibility of each government to protect its people. The details of effective crisis communication will be discussed in section 3.5.

As illustrated in the examples of the Kobe earthquake and 2004 Tsunami, when government is faced with an incident that could lead to a public relations crisis, it is usually not the actual incident that causes public scrutiny but the possibility that it could have been prevented or

when it is managed ineffectively. Crisis communication cannot be neglected as a tool to protect government's reputation and relationships.

3.5 The three stages of crisis communication

Crisis communication (as well as the other two components of crisis management) takes place in three phases. These are:

- pre-crisis (planning phase);
- during a crisis (execution phase); and
- post-crisis (recovery phase).

The following section provides a comprehensive description of crisis communication activities to be integrated with crisis management before, during and after a crisis (Refer to Figure 3.1 and Figure 3.2 in Section 3.3). It will deal primarily with the crisis communication function and not the management and operational activities.

3.5.1 Pre-crisis

Crisis communication in the pre-crisis phase consists of two parts. Part one tries to identify and avoid potential issues that could lead to a crisis. However, not all issues can be prevented. Therefore part two is concerned with preparing for those potential crises that are unavoidable (Augustine, 2000:7).

The following sections will describe the actions that must take place to either prevent a potential crisis or ensure that the damage caused by a crisis is minimised.

3.5.1.1 Pre-crisis part 1 – Avoiding the crisis

A key way in preventing damage to the reputation is to ensure that the potential crisis does not occur at all. Governments not only have an ethical but also a political responsibility to protect its relationships with its community, since these relationships are the reason for its

power. It is therefore a responsibility of government to avoid those situations that could have a negative impact on its reputation and relationships.

Avoiding a potential public relations crisis is the least costly and simplest way to control its potential effects. It is a proactive process in which crisis communication probes its system and environment for vulnerabilities and potential incidents which could become crises. The crisis management function then puts preventative measures in place to try avoid the situation (Albrecht, 1996:137).

As discussed in section 2.2, the system is affected by its environment and also has an effect on its environment. It must therefore take its environment into account when identifying and preventing potential crises. This deed forms part of the crisis communication function. It makes use of two-way symmetrical communication to involve government's publics in identifying potential incidents and devising plans to avoid them. By doing this it ensures that the government's decisions are feasible and meet the needs of all its publics (see section 2.4). Both internal and external publics must be given the opportunity to provide input in this process. Through pre-crisis two-way communication the organisation will be able to catalogue potential crisis situations identified by various publics and then bring these to the attention of management to devise policies and procedures for their prevention where possible. Two-way dialogue therefore helps the government be more socially responsible and demonstrates that it values the input of its publics and wants to make sure that their crisis management decisions meet the needs of its publics (Grunig, 2001).

Due to the interrelated nature of the government system and its publics, where both are able to impact each other positively or negatively, (see section 2.3), it is understandable that publics would want to be a part of this process since they will not want to see their government experience a negative incident that could ultimately influence them, the public, negatively (Grunig, 2001).

Employees are vital in helping government, as a type of organisation, identify potential for public relations crises as they do most of the work and have a unique perspective on things that can go wrong. It is therefore important to educate employees about their role in the process of crisis management. People in different sections, levels, departments or divisions are more aware of what could go wrong within their own working environment than somebody in a management level who is removed from the everyday operations. It is therefore important to include all staff members, managers and supervisors (or at least as many as possible) when identifying potential crises. Employees on each level must have the opportunity to present any input. The organisation must determine the most effective way for this information to reach management and the communication team. Possible two-way communication methods include one-on-one meetings, focus groups, or anonymous inputs in a predetermined manner. Giving all employees an equal opportunity to voice concerns not only creates a sense of unity in the quest to overcome crises but also provides the opportunity for buy-in and support for the plans that will result from the input. All employees need to be encouraged to take part in this process. However not everyone will want to and nobody should be forced to give information (Albrecht, 1996:208-212; Fearn-Banks, 1996:20; Caponigro, 2000:52).

Often top management is unaware of employee and supervisor concerns, because employees are not encouraged to report problems or concerns, or approach top management when their fears reach a certain discomfort level. Employees will only begin sharing once they feel comfortable doing so. It is important that they know the employer can be trusted; will keep all information confidential; and will act on the input or at least find someone who can deal with the issue. It must be emphasised that their information will be used for improvement of the system by preventing or planning for a crisis (Albrecht, 1996:161).

The informative process can also be assisted by educating employees on the type of information that is needed i.e. the type of information that relates to the good health of the company's relationships and reputation. The list of vulnerabilities that may be identified by

employees is extensive but includes, for example, problems between employees; problems with a customer, a policy or procedure; faulty equipment; fears of employees and poor moral. Expressing an opinion about a potential problems early and clearly is a positive step towards crisis prevention (Albrecht, 1996:161, 208).

Two-way symmetrical communication must become a part of an organisation's culture. Channels must be introduced to enable information about the identification of vulnerabilities to reach the correct people. This does not mean that employees need to come to top management every time they encounter a problem. It is vital that the right lines and channels of communication are used so that all information is filtered correctly and dealt with on the correct level. It is the duty of line managers to investigate employee claims and concerns tactfully, legally, ethically, responsively, and when possible, quickly. They must know how to distinguish between an incident that can be handled by existing mechanisms and those which could lead to a harmful incident – which in turn must always be treated as having the potential to escalate into public relations crisis. The legitimate claims that cannot be dealt with on the line management level must be communicated to the crisis management function via one of the crisis communication channels for follow up and serious attention (Albrecht, 1996:137, 192-194).

Employees on all levels should be made to feel secure enough to report situations that they feel might put the company at some form of significant risk. All levels of management must support the need to call attention to a procedure, event, employee, incident or any other threat that goes beyond the type of problem expected as a part of everyday operations (Albrecht, 1996:192-193). Some organisations have introduced incentives for employees who warn management of potential crises. This develops an internal culture where discussion of previously unacknowledged dangers is not only tolerated but actively encouraged and even rewarded (Albrecht, 1996:161,187-188). However, involvement in the crisis identification process should stem from an understanding of its purpose and a desire to protect the future of ones government.

The input received through the crisis communication procedures will need to be analysed and prioritised by the executive. No organisation, or government, has the time or resources to significantly deal with all vulnerabilities identified. The list therefore needs to be prioritised and shortened without compromising future safety (Caponigro, 200:49). A brainstorming session should be called by the crisis communication function once they have received representative input from all publics. This brainstorming session must include the top management of each division (system part) within the government. In South African local government terms this would mean involving the mayor, municipal manager, members of the mayoral committee and directors. During the brainstorm session, all participants should be given time to list what they feel are potential crises – no matter how outrageous they may seem (Augustine, 2000:8; Argenti, 1998:221; Regester & Larkin, 2002:159). Executives should list everything that could attract public scrutiny of the organisation. Vulnerabilities for crises could exist because of current situations; crises which the government or other government entities have experienced in the past; or activities planned for the future which may meet opposition. Their concerns will be added to the list of genuine concerns already received from the publics.

Argenti (1998:221) and Augustine (2000:8) state that the brainstorm facilitator should guide the group through each item to determine what probability there is that it will occur and what its consequences will be. The perceived consequences must include short and long term damage the government will face if the vulnerability is left with the potential of escalating into a crisis. The crisis communication team must clearly state what the affects will be on the organisation's reputation and relationships. Those items which are unlikely to occur plus have insignificant consequences should be removed from the list and given no further attention. Any item that has either a high likelihood of occurrence or threatening consequences needs further attention.

These principles are supported by Caponigro (2000:63-69) who suggests that the following method be used to prioritise vulnerabilities.

Two variables must be considered for each item listed:

- its likelihood of occurrence; and
- its potential damage to the system.

The entire list of vulnerabilities, regardless of how absurd they seem, must be ranked according to each of the two aforementioned variables.

Each item on the list will first be allocated a colour according to its likelihood of occurrence as follows:

- red = highly likely to occur;
- yellow = could occur but unlikely; and
- green = unlikely to occur.

In a second exercise each item on the list will first be allocated a colour according to its potential to cause damage as follows:

- red = would cause serious damage
- yellow = would cause manageable damage; and
- green = would cause little damage.

The colour combinations can be ranked from red-red being the highest priority to green-green being the lowest priority. Red-red coded vulnerabilities are highly likely to occur and have the potential to cause serious damage. These should receive top priority. Green-green are unlikely to occur and even if they do, they will cause little damage – not enough to affect the system's existence, reputation or relationships. Colour combinations in between must be prioritised accordingly (Caponigro 2000:63-69). This is one of many recommended processes that can be used to prioritise vulnerabilities.

This elimination process may still leave government with too many scenarios to plan for effectively. To facilitate the greatest number of scenarios being covered, the list can be shortened by grouping scenarios into categories. For example: natural harmful incidents (sub categorised into disease outbreaks, flooding, fires etc); man made harmful incidents (sub categorised into bomb blasts, sabotage, etc); rumours about the local government (e.g. fraud, poor service, etc). By categorising potential incidents into similar scenarios that require similar responses, the government will be able to plan for more scenarios. All scenarios categorised as “red-red” as described in the paragraph above, must have their own customised plan because of its likelihood and potential damage.

Processes must be put in motion to avoid potential crises wherever possible. The old saying applies that “prevention is better [and less costly and damaging] than cure.” However, some of the items on the list will prove to be outside of the organisations control. In these instances plans must be compiled to minimise the damage if these scenarios should ever be realised. The communication, management and operational components must compile their respective plans so that they form one integrated plan of action (Augustine, 2000:8-11).

3.5.1.2 Pre-crisis Part 2 – Planning for the unavoidable crisis

Planning for an unavoidable situation that has been prioritised by government’s executive is necessary even when a line manager feels that they will be able to deal with the situation without preparation (Augustine, 2000:11; Regester & Larkin, 2002:157). A harmful incident usually involves an escalated chain of event leaving no or very little time to think and act strategically unless this has all been thought out beforehand. Reactions that have not been planned or well thought out will open government up to public scrutiny and it will have a crisis on its hands. A lack of planning also leads to uncoordinated efforts by the three components of the crisis management function i.e. management, operations and communication. Strategic planning prior to an incident makes it more possible to concentrate on the actual problem when it peaks and provides an already tested framework for action

(Regeester & Larkin, 2002:158). Lack of planning was evident in both the tsunami and Kobe earthquake examples which consequently caused a great amount of damage.

The organisation will need to perform a number of steps in planning for the unavoidable crisis, including the following high level communication steps:

- Identify which key publics will be affected in each scenario and set communication objectives for each scenario;
- Assign communication specialists to each crisis scenario team (each team will also contain management and operational specialists);
- Draw up a formal communication plan for each crisis scenario. The plan must be aligned with management and operational plans; and
- Test the communication component in conjunction of the other two components of each proposed crisis plan and make necessary adjustment accordingly.

According to Grunig (2001:14), at the time of a crisis an organisation, such as a local government, has no choice but to engage in true dialogue with publics and to practice socially responsible behaviour since it must consider the publics' interest at least as important as its own. Usually an organisation's profit margin is its most important objective, however, at the time of the crisis, the public's safety (for example) is at least as important as profits. (Something that the Thai government did not demonstrate when it tried to protect its source of income, the tourism industry, rather than its people.) The company cannot only think about itself and its own needs. If it did it would destroy the relationships that exist and would come out of the situation with a bad reputation, having shown that it does not value its public's needs.

When a crisis strikes the organisation needs to communicate with its key publics quickly and accurately. There is minimal time available to plan communication during a crisis. An organisation must do as much planning as possible before the crisis strikes. Prior to the crisis an organisation can determine who the key publics are; what core messages need to be

communicated to them; prepare draft messages and communication material; and determine which channels of communication will be most effective to reach each public.

Inevitably the crisis will affect a number of internal as well as external publics, because of the open system characteristics of an organisation. The publics that will be targeted depend on the nature and magnitude of the crisis and the nature of the industry. Key publics are those groupings of people that are most important to the success of the organisation and whose support must therefore be guarded in a crisis. Key publics may include (amongst others) employees; family members of employees; investors; community; human interest groups; unions; customers or clients; and service providers. The media is a public as well as a channel, able to influence the outcome of public opinion and therefore influences the impact on the organisation. But it is also a channel by which to reach other publics and audiences. Special attention must be given to this public and will be discussed in point 3.6.3.

Compiling and regularly updating a database of key publics is an essential part of managing crisis communication. This takes place prior to a crisis. In the event of a crisis, the organisation must already have the updated names and contact details of its key publics for quick reference and use.

The database is also used prior to a crisis to know who to target when building important relationships. The importance of having excellent existing relationships with key publics has already been discussed in this paper. However, to re-iterate, if a good relationship exists between the public and the organisation, then there is a greater likelihood that the public would continue to support the organisation (Caponigro, 2000:270). The purpose of effective crisis communication is not to begin relationship building during a crisis but to have good relationships in place before the crisis; maintain or strengthen them during a crisis; and then build on the positive relationships after the crisis.

Once the publics have been identified, the crisis communication team must determine the communication objectives (before, during and after a crisis) for each public, the core messages needed to reach these objectives; and the most effective channels to communicate these messages. Each of these must be based on the actual needs of the publics as determined by communicating with them. Government cannot assume that it knows what its public's communication needs are. For example, without engaging with the publics one may believe that communicating in English would be the most effective language of communication while in reality a significant percentage may not understand English. The objectives, messages and channels must be chosen according to the publics needs. Their needs are identified by engaging in two-way symmetrical communication with them.

Many of the core messages and materials needed in the event of an incident can and must be drafted ahead of time since all involved will be pressed for time if such a situation arises. Communication needs to happen quickly. According to Caponigro (2000:141), the window of opportunity is usually less than 24 hours for the communication to be credible and effective. One must also keep in mind that most of these materials will be needed immediately and cannot be compiled effectively during the event. Material can be compiled based on the scenario that the crisis team is planning for. Space can be left open to add the finer details of the situation if it occurs. This will ensure quick, strategic communication with publics and will help to keep the reputation and relationships in tact (Argenti, 1998:223; Caponigro, 2000:121,141).

The types of materials and information which could be prepared prior to the event could include:

- fact sheets and background information about the government;
- brief biographies and photographs of key executives;
- answers to frequently asked questions about the government;

- a draft memorandum reminding employees to refer all news media inquiries to the primary spokesperson. This memo could be drafted to near completion, the latest details of the spokesperson could be updated and finalised at the time of crisis;
- draft letters to the most important stakeholders and publics identified by the crisis communications team. Each letter would inform the stakeholders of the situation (for which adequate space may be left in the draft), thanking them for ongoing support and encouraging them to contact the team with any questions; and
- any other internal or external communiqué for which an outline or draft can be drawn up prior to the crisis (Caponigro, 2000:121).

The messages sent to each public will be with the intention of meeting the communication objectives set by the team. The communication must be tailored to be able to effectively meet these objectives (Caponigro, 2000:33, 121).

The crisis communication plan must include using all possible existing channels of internal and external communications. If no effective channel of communication exists to reach a key public then one must be established during this preparation phase (Argenti, 1998:230; Sonnenfeld, 2000:127).

Possible channels of communication for South African local government include: the media, focus group sessions, community meetings, ward committees, employee newsletters, the government's website, other related websites, email, sms's, faxes, rates and taxes cashiers, kiosks placed at strategic high-traffic pedestrian areas, letters, video presentations, satellite broadcasts, telephone calls (outgoing), telephone hot lines (incoming), flyers, management statements distributed on audio tape or cd, satellite broadcasts, appearances at schools or regular social gatherings, and radio or television interviews (Caponigro, 2000:264; Argenti, 1998:230; Sonnenfeld, 2000:127). Legislation also provides its guidelines to channels of communication for South African local governments. These will be discussed in chapter 4

which focuses on the specific environment within which a South African local government system operates.

All relevant information about the publics, core messages and channels must be clearly documented so that it can be incorporated in a crisis communication manual for quick reference and implementation by the crisis team [see point 3.5.1.2(b)].

a) Assign a crisis communication team to each prioritised scenario

A crisis team (management, operational and communications) will usually be made up of internal expertise but may also include external team members to supplement the organisation's emergency capabilities (Albrecht, 1996:156). Most crisis management teams are made up of heads of different departments, or identified role players from those departments who will be directly linked to multidisciplinary problem solving in crisis management issues (Albrecht, 1996:130). This diverse team from across the organisational spectrum will have their finger on the pulse of each department or section and will have better insight into how the entire system is being affected by the crisis, and how each department can play its role in overcoming the crisis. The team needs to be broad enough to deal with the variety of aspects that will be involved but not too big that it becomes unmanageable.

Determining in advance which communication resource will be on each crisis team is an important part of crisis planning (Albrecht, 1996:154). A lot of the damage caused by the Kobe earthquake could have been prevented if the various authorities had known what their roles were and reacted accordingly immediately. Members assigned to specific crisis teams will be assigned specific roles and responsibilities according to their individual capabilities to deal with the perceived scenario. If an organisation considers itself a high risk organisation, it should appoint a permanent member of staff, or a team, who will focus on the strategic and overall task of crisis communication in the system (Argenti, 1998:225). When a high risk organisation appoints a permanent team it demonstrates that it considers its reputation and relationships a priority.

Different types of communication expertise will be required when dealing with different crisis scenarios. The organisation should assign communications team members to each crisis scenario according to their capabilities. This will help the organisation by putting the best suited people in charge of handling the communication with immediate effect when a crisis occurs (Argenti, 1998:225). Communications must work interdependently with management and operational function with the same main objective – to keep the organisation alive.

Since the crisis team will be dedicating their time to the crisis situation when it occurs, suitable replacements must be identified to cover the vital everyday communication tasks usually performed by members of the crisis team (Argenti, 1998:231).

From the crisis team members a leader, alternate leader and spokesperson needs to be chosen, each according to their individual capability of handling the responsibilities which will come with the rank, nature and magnitude of the crisis (Argenti, 1998:226; Caponigro, 2000:106).

b) Draw up a formal plan for each crisis scenario

The crisis team must meet to compile coordinated and integrated management, operational and communication plans to deal with a potential scenario. These meetings should continue until the plan is finalised. This crisis plan must describe, in detail, steps that will be taken to manage a crisis situation so that an organisation can act swiftly and confidently. It must also describe what roles and responsibilities are assigned to each member of the team. The team must then meet three to four times per year thereafter to update the plan. Preparation of a plan prior to the crisis is vital since there will be no time for effective planning when the event occurs (Caponigro, 2000:106; Regester & Larkin, 2002:168).

A consolidation of recommendations from Caponigro (2000:106-111), and Argenti (1998:227-228), suggest that the following be included in a crisis management plan:

- the organisation's crisis management philosophy and the overall goals and objectives of crisis management;
- a statement from the CEO as a preface showing support and endorsement of the crisis management philosophy and plan;
- a definition of the crisis for which the plan will be applicable;
- a step-by-step description of what should be done if the crisis occurs, highlighting the immediate priority steps;
- a detailed description of each team member's roles and responsibilities;
- a list containing details of who should be contacted externally if assistance is needed e.g. police services or counselling services;
- a list of all contact details for every member of the crisis management team;
- a reporting structure (reporting tree) to show the flow of communication required for notification and co-ordination (i.e. Who passes what messages on to who);
- the necessary form templates to be used to document phone calls and other enquires received. This must also include instructions on what to do with the completed information;
- contact details of the primary and secondary spokespeople as well as instructions prohibiting others from discussing the situation with the media;
- a description of the approach that will be taken for media relations as agreed upon by the team. This will describe how all inquiries should be directed to a central location where trained team members will deal with them. Agreeing on this approach ahead of time will prevent the organisation from looking completely disorganised or not knowing what is happening;
- templates of all the communication material prepared prior to the time for targeted publics must also be included;
- contact details of all experts identified to assist with psychological therapy;
- contact details of all targeted publics including postal addresses;
- contact details of all media to be targeted for this type of crisis;
- a description of all channels previously identified for each public; and

- a location allocated to serve as headquarters. The plan must describe who is responsible for setting up these headquarters and exactly what equipment or items will be necessary to run the centre so that they will be gathered as quickly as possible. This centre must ideally be set up in such a way that communication will be centralised here. All lines of communication should flow to and from these headquarters throughout the duration of the crisis.

In addition the crisis communication plan must also describe communication objectives before, during and after a harmful incident and what two-way symmetrical communication will be engaged upon to build and strengthen relationships and the government's reputation in these three phases.

On completion, the plan should be approved by the authority in charge of crisis management in the organisation so that team members are sure that the actions to be taken will have received the approval of executives before the crisis occurs. It is no use describing an action step if it will not be approved at the crucial time. There is no time to seek approval when a crisis strikes. Seek approval from all applicable executives while the plan is being drawn up (Caponigro, 2000:106-109; Argenti, 1998:228). The meteorological and geographical departments in the Tsunami example made a critical mistake when they did not follow the agreed plan. But this largely due the fact that they were not sure of the authority it carried.

Once the plan is approved, the communication function is responsible for co-ordinating the training, reporting and communication of the plan which is vital in ensuring that the team and key members of the organisation know their roles and responsibilities. Copies of the plan must be distributed to everybody who has been assigned a responsibility in the plan. It is advisable that the copy be placed in a ring binder so that sections that are updated at a later stage can be replaced easily (Caponigro, 2000:106-109; Argenti, 1998:228).

This crisis plan needs to be assessed and adapted on a regular basis in order to accommodate changes in the environment. A system that does not adapt to change is unlikely to survive external influences and pressures. See point 2.2. The team should meet to review the plan and discuss necessary updates. This plan needs to be updated as regularly as it is needed for it to remain accurate, relevant and useful. It will assist the team if a review or meeting schedule is drawn up. The plan should also be tested by way of a simulation at least once a year (Caponigro, 2000:110-111).

c) Test each plan and make necessary adjustments accordingly

A realistic crisis simulation or practice drill should be used to assess the preparedness of the government and its crisis team (Caponigro, 2000:111; Regester & Larkin 2002:169). It also gives the team a chance to familiarise itself with the contents of the plan and to test its effectiveness and make necessary changes.

The simulation should only take place once all members of the crisis team have undergone the necessary training (Regester & Larkin 2002:169). Simulation before this time will not be a realistic measure of the team and since it is a timely and costly exercise, will be a waste of resources.

A mock crisis scenario (based on the description in the crisis plan) should be initiated through an informed member of the team. This member should commence the crisis plan as if it were a real situation (Regester & Larkin, 2002:169-170). Although the team is given the date of the simulation, it will not be told the exact nature or variations of the crisis as these will have been described in the plan. This will test if the members and the plan are flexible enough to deal with possible variations. The simulation must test the organisation's ability to meet communication objectives as well business operation objectives.

Opportunities for realistic media interviews must be included in the simulation (Argenti, 1998:228; Regester, 1987:170). All assigned spokespeople must receive media training as

part of their crisis training. One is reminded that not all team members appointed as spokespeople will have had the opportunity to deal with the media before. This is an ideal situation for them to practice what was learnt during their media training. Media training is one area that cannot be delegated outside the crisis communication team since it is this team of strategic public relations practitioners who generally deal with media on a daily basis and understand the environment and nature of journalism. The crisis team must take the media's environment into consideration so that it meets the media's needs and not just its own.

The crisis simulation should be followed immediately with a de-briefing session and detailed discussion involving the entire team and anybody else who was brought into the simulation. This is done to determine if the crisis management objectives (management, operational and communication) have been met. This must be followed up with the distribution of a detailed written report. It is best that the organisation bring in outside expertise to rate the simulation for purposes of objectivity (Regester & Larkin, 2002:170).

Recommendations for changes to the plan must be considered by the team and those deemed necessary must be used to update the crisis plan.

The plan must at all times be ready for use at a moment's notice so that any incident or accident can be managed in such a way that it minimises potential damage to reputation and relationships when a crisis arises.

3.5.2 During the crisis

3.5.2.1 The onset of a crisis

When a harmful incident is identified, the government must immediately put its approved and tested crisis plan into action to contain the crisis and manage its affect to minimise damage to its reputation and relationships. In other words, it must do what it can so that the incident does not result in a public relations crisis.

The plan is put into motion when the person at the top of the reporting tree is informed about the crisis situation (Argenti, 1998:229). This person will begin following his or her instructions in the plan which will commence with informing the next level of the reporting tree about the crisis.

3.5.2.2 Communicating during a crisis

The crisis headquarters must be set up immediately at the onset of the incident. It must serve as the platform for all communication activities during the incident (Argenti, 1998:230). It will be the point of collection as well as distribution of information.

Government must communicate with its community during a harmful incident. This cannot be compromised for any reason. It is government's responsibility to keep the community informed throughout the situation (see Grunig's symmetrical communication principle in point 3.2). They should not be left to hear the details through public media. In order for them to remain supportive of the organisation, they need to be assured that the situation is being managed well and that their need for information is being taken care of (Augustine, 2000:24).

Every incident that could lead to a crisis is unique. It is for this reason that pre-crisis training must prepare the crisis communication team to be flexible when required (Caponigro, 2000:143). This flexibility must still be exercised within the legislation and prescriptions that govern government communications (see chapter 4).

When an incident arises as much information must be gathered as soon as possible from a variety of sources (Argenti, 1998:229). The communication team will need to sift it all for accuracy and credibility before considering passing it on to publics. An organisation must never lie to its publics albeit through prematurely releasing information that has not yet been verified. The public will soon find out that this information is not entirely accurate. It will give the impression that the organisation does not know what is going on and is not in charge, destroying much needed relationships and in turn damaging its reputation. Alternatively it

may seem as if government is intentionally lying which will destroy trust, reputation and relationships. Reputation, credibility and trust are three elements that take the longest to rebuild once destroyed (Caponigro, 2000:271).

It is not necessary to communicate all facts to all key public. The level of communication will be directly linked to the complexity of the crisis and the publics affected. Communication should only be issued to those publics who will have questions about the situation, or who may be frustrated or upset if they do not receive any direct information (Caponigro, 2000:143-144). In some instances the crisis could be aggravated by sending unnecessary information. It will only cause concern or fear in a public group that might not have been concerned in the first place.

There are certain core messages that need to go out when communicating with the publics during this phase. According to Caponigro (2000:149) and Bland (1998:54) these will include:

- showing that the organisation is taking the situation seriously by proving that it has identified the problem and is doing all it can to solve it;
- communicating only those facts that can be confirmed – no lies and no speculations;
- trying as far as possible to communicate all the bad news at one time and not in intervals which would have the effect of rupturing business with each communication;
- describing all the steps that are being taken to solve the problem quickly and effectively so that the publics know that the organisation is searching for and implementing solutions;
- conveying a strong message that the organisation is accessible for open, honest communication and that it is not trying to avoid its publics;
- re-enforcement of the organisation's appreciation of each public. These messages must thank the publics for their support and understanding during the difficult situation in the organisation's life; and
- telling publics how, when and where more information will become available so that they can keep abreast of the situation.

One of the functions of crisis communication in this phase is to facilitate two-way communication by including ways to get input and feedback from publics. If government is to retain its reputation and trust it cannot afford to become disconnected from its relationships at this crucial time (Caponigro, 2000:149).

Organisations, such as a government, often think that its employees will automatically know and understand what's happening in a situation. In reality this is a misconception. It cannot afford to neglect employees as a key public. It is vital that time and energy be spent on communicating with employees and not only external publics. Employees need to be one of the targeted publics for which thorough preparation is done during crisis planning (Caponigro, 2000:141).

Records need to be kept of as much of the communication activities as possible. This includes phone calls received, interviews, meetings held, media inquiries etc. These may be needed for legal or public relations purposes later (Caponigro, 2000:147). Monitoring communication for effectiveness will help with the evaluation and adaptation of the communication and crisis plans after the crisis event (Caponigro, 2000:148). Templates of administrative tools, such as log sheets to keep track of calls, will have been included in the crisis manual so that they can be reproduced easily and quickly.

As much information must be documented as possible so that the organisation can evaluate the situation accurately after the crisis. Documentation also includes monitoring and capturing of all media coverage about the crisis. This will be an important guide to any change that may have occurred in public perception and support.

3.5.2.3 Dealing with the media

The media see themselves as advocates of the people especially when an organisation's decisions or actions have a large impact on its community. This is especially true in the case

of local government since all its decision and actions always have a direct impact on its community. The media could become major adversaries to government if they are not dealt with correctly. How they treat representatives of the government throughout any newsworthy event depends largely upon how they have been treated from the start. Managed correctly, the media can be used as a primary tool for managing public opinion because it can reach masses in a short time. A good press release for example could stop rumours or stop a crisis-induced panic. Crisis communication principles can turn the media into a useful ally. Media relations should be an integral part of crisis communications before, during as well as after a crisis. (Fearn-Banks, 1996:3-6; Regester, 1987:19; Albrecht, 1996:130-131). Media relations must be managed in such a way that the media's involvement will be positive and not destructive.

The amount of media coverage received as well as the tone of coverage will depend on the organisation's existing relationship with the media, the magnitude of the crisis and how it is affecting the public (Albrecht, 1996:130-131). If the organisation already has good existing relationships with key journalists then the spokesperson will find it easier to approach them for assistance in getting the organisation's core messages across in such a way that it is not destructive. These journalists will already have insight into the nature and good reputation of the organisation.

It is vital that government prepares strategic and truthful responses before speaking to the public via the media. One principle of dealing with the media during a crisis is to communicate all the bad news at one time, as far as possible. If bad news is communicated in intervals it will encourage a continuation of negative media coverage (Caponigro, 2000:270). The spokesperson for Exxon Valdez lost all credibility because had not prepared the answers the media needed, a fact that was compounded by the disrespectful way in which he handled the media (see point 1.1).

The message portrayed by to the publics must be sincere and truthful. The public wants to know that the government feels as badly about the incident as the affected public. Messages

being shared through the media should talk about the organisation's feelings first, their plans second, and then the results of those plans and other actions that will be taken. The way the message comes across is almost as important as the message itself (Albrecht, 1996:158-163; Caponigro, 2000:270). Again this is something that Exxon Valdez failed at but which Johnson & Johnson excelled in, winning it the respect of the media and its publics (see section 1.1).

The media's job is to cover the story. If the spokespeople have a 'no-comment' response to media questions, it will give the media nothing significant to report and will most likely drive them to dig deeper or find non-official sources of information. If the government doesn't say something, somebody else will need to decide what message will go out. This may make matters worse since they might receive information from a different source that portrays the situation negatively. The no-comment response in itself gives the impression that the government is hiding something or that it is not being totally honest and transparent (Caponigro, 2000:148; Albrecht, 1996:131-138). Although the "no-comment" response is not recommended, there may be times when the government does not have information to give or is not ready to provide an answer. In cases where giving a response is not in its best interest, the spokesperson must inform the media that the particular area of enquiry is still being looked into and that a response will be given as soon as accurate answers are available. If the spokesperson is unable to answer the question, they should advise the journalist that not enough information is available to answer the question but that, if the journalist leaves his or her contact details, the spokesperson can contact them with an answer at an agreed later time. It is advisable that the spokesperson be accompanied by an assistant who will be able to keep careful record of any necessary follow-ups.

It is important that the entire crisis communication team understands the environment that the media operates in. Journalists are competitive and try to get breaking news and information first. They also work to strict deadlines. Media must be informed of set times for press conferences and the team must stick to these times (Regeester & Larkin, 2002:173; Argenti, 1998:230). If the crisis communication team does not produce information timeously, then the

journalists will approach other employees or members of the crisis team for information in order to get an exclusive story or meet their deadlines.

All members of the crisis team and all employees must be taught that media enquiries are to be passed on to the crisis communications team. Under no circumstances should an unauthorised person be permitted to provide information to the media.

Media should also be provided with a comfortable location to use during an incident (Argenti, 1998:230). This should not be close enough to the crisis headquarters for journalists to pick up any unofficial information.

All information to the media must be communicated via the spokesperson, whether verbally or written. He or she must be well trained and well informed. An organisation, including a local government, usually has one full time spokesperson that is responsible for public comment in and out of crisis situations. It is logical that the crisis team will appoint this person to be the spokesperson during the crisis. However, this may not always be practical. The spokesperson used during a crisis will be chosen according to the magnitude of the crisis – the greater the magnitude, the more senior the spokesperson. They will also be appointed according to the amount of technical knowledge needed to answer media's questions. The spokesperson may therefore be someone other than the official spokesperson or public relations officer. It may be necessary for another manager or supervisor to assist the spokesperson in order to answer particular technical questions. It is therefore important that media training be provided to top executives, managers as well as head supervisors in each division of the organisation (Albrecht, 1996:159). There is no time for media training when a crisis strikes.

The spokesperson must never become angry or give the impression that they are panicking. They must stay calm and convey the sense that the situation has not consumed the

government. They must always convey a sense that the organisation is in control, accessible, honest and credible (Caponigro, 2000:148).

It is important for the spokesperson to convey all information as soon as possible, especially when the situation involves a threat to lives or property. However, only information that has been confirmed to be true may be conveyed. Sensitive information should be conveyed in a way that will prevent panic and increased fears (Argenti, 1998:230).

Through strategic, two-way communication with its publics, government is better able to maintain a positive reputation or even be able to strengthen it by showing that it can deal with unexpected events competently and in the best interests of all who came under the threat of the crisis.

3.5.3 Post Crisis

An important part of the communication after the crisis is providing feedback of the aftermath as well as explaining the steps that will be taken to prevent a similar incident from occurring again. These steps may include changes to policies, procedures or people (Caponigro, 2000:150). This information must be conveyed to the key publics via the channels already identified as being most effective.

If the event had significant psychological repercussions then government will also need to help manage the psychological effects of a crisis by offering psychological therapy or support to those who may have been traumatised. This can be done by making psychologists or trained councillors available to offer counselling to key publics (including employees) if no internal expertise is available. It must be clear that the therapy will be held in the strictest confidentiality (Albrecht, 1996:162). The relationships with outside experts used for these purposes should have been established before the incident so that no time is wasted in identifying the appropriate people. Their names and contact details should also be included in

the crisis manual for quick and easy access. If necessary, these same experts should be called in earlier, during the crisis event, to deal with any immediate counselling needs.

The crisis will have resulted in a momentum of communication to key publics. The crisis communication team should keep this communication momentum with the same publics for a period after the crisis, which will help to further enhance relationships (Caponigro, 2000:149).

Post-crisis scrutiny may still occur depending on the magnitude of the crisis and the impression the publics have been given about the manner in which the crisis was managed (Ray, 1999:159). Government must be aware of this and deal with each situation on its individual merits.

The post-crisis phase must be seen as a time for recovery and self-assessment. Crisis plans could be updated and adapted according to lessons learned in the practical experience. The government should embark on self-evaluation to determine if its crisis management methods could generally be improved upon. It must again embark on a two-way symmetrical communication programme to ensure that all the role-players that are responsible for elements of the crisis management plan are doing the same. For example, after the 2004 Tsunami (see section 3.4.2), it was identified that the tourism industry had an important communication role to play in preparing for future potential tsunamis. However, on 27 December 2005, one year after the incident, an article in the Thai daily newspaper "The Nation", quoted Dharmasaroja as reporting that 99% of the hotels and resorts in the areas affected by the tsunami a year earlier, still did not have tsunami guidelines for guests to study or plans to evacuate them. Dharmasaroja believes that this has not been done because there is no law requiring them to do so, this despite the fact that Dharmasaroja had written to the governors the six tsunami-hit southern provinces saying that many resorts could easily set up a computer link with the disaster warning centre in Bangkok (Rojanaphruk, 2005).

This lack of preparation means that the Thai government and its tourism industry risks tremendous public scrutiny in the face of a future tsunami. The same would apply to any government who does not prepare for a harmful incident that is considered a possible risk.

3.6 Conclusion

The chapter shows that if communication practitioners practice excellent public relations as described by Grunig and supported by various authors, then the government will have a greater chance of surviving an incident that evokes public scrutiny.

Crisis communication takes place before, during and after a crisis. It is suggested that communication become a proactive, strategic and integral part of any organisation and in so doing, it will naturally aid in avoiding, preventing or preparing for negative situations. This type of approach to communication is what is essential for effective crisis communication activities and overall crisis management.

The chapter gives a clear account of the objectives of each phase in the crisis communication process and the activities needed for effective implementation. The main objective of crisis management before a harmful incident is to identify possible harmful incidents and either take actions to prevent them or plan for them. Where possible, government must take action to prevent the crises. Where prevention is not possible, government must prepare for each situation so that it does not become a crisis and so that the minimum amount of overall damage will be experienced (including damage to the organisation's reputation and relationships with key publics). It is the role of the communication function to manage this process since it is communication activities that will enable co-ordination and integration of the three groups of responses i.e. operational, management and communication responses to the crisis.

During a crisis the government needs to act quickly and there is no time to plan or strategise at this point. All planning must be done before the actual event so that the team can react quickly and strategically if the scenario comes to being. Crisis communication's main objective is to make sure that damage to relationships and reputation is minimised. In fact, if the communications function operates effectively then the crisis may even prove to be an opportunity to improve the reputation and relationships. An important task during this phase is to use the media as allies in order to communicate with all key publics.

Crisis communication does not end when the incident ends. The momentum must be kept. The chapter provides a number of requirements for communication which takes place after the harmful incident.

Chapter 4 will focus on the considerations that must be taken into account when managing crises in the specific environment of a South African local government. It will look at existing regulations and guidelines to which local government must comply when communicating with publics.

As in any open system, governments are advised to apply the concepts of public relations excellence (two-way symmetrical communication) with consideration to its unique environment (Grunig, 2001). In this regard this study applies the general principles of crisis communication to a local government in a developing democracy, thus recognising the unique challenges facing a local government as an open system organisation. The specifics on this type of environment are discussed in chapter 4.

4. CHAPTER 4: CRISIS COMMUNICATION IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN LOCAL GOVERNMENT ENVIRONMENT

4.1 Introduction

South African government is a constitutional democracy with national, provincial and local spheres of government forming the hierarchy of the larger system. The three tiers are distinctive yet interdependent and interrelated [see point 2.2 on hierarchy in an open system]. Local government has been established as a grass-roots level government in the form of municipalities or city councils, to promote the well-being of the residents in a particular geographical area. It is often referred to as “grass-roots government” because it operates in immediate proximity to the residents and because its effective service delivery requires intimate relations with them. The principles discussed in chapter 2, and particularly in point 2.3 can be applied to a democratic local government. Legislation prescribes that the residents of a local government entity are its priority stakeholders and primary concern. Local government is expected to provide residents with services within the guidelines and prescription (legislation) put in place by the larger political system (Van Niekerk *et al.*, 2001:77). Some of these legislative guidelines pertain to general government communication. Crisis communication in local government must comply with the relevant guidelines since it is a type of government public relations (communication).

This chapter will briefly look into the environmental elements that can affect the application of crisis communication as a type of public relations within South African local government. When compiling its crisis communication strategy, local government must consider the generic principles of crisis communication provided in existing literature as well as the requirements of its specific environment, which influences the system and which can be influenced by the system.

The chapter begins with a discussion of the recent history of public relations within South African local government and how government communications has had to adapt to a changing political environment. The chapter then identifies the unique restrictions and requirements placed on the South African government communications and how these may affect government public relations and consequently crisis management in South Africa.

4.2 Recent changes affecting government public relations

4.2.1 Historical overview

Media restrictions during South Africa's 45 (forty-five) years of apartheid government meant that communities only had limited access to information about government activities. This culture of limited access and dispersal of information meant that the structural framework to communicate with communities was not geared towards modern systems of communication and information delivery. It also meant that there was limited involvement by entire communities in the decision making and activities of local government entities.

A new democratic government structure was introduced to South Africa in May 1994. The new Government of National Unity made a number of changes in order to improve the state of government communications after coming into office. Amongst these was complete access to government information, freedom of expression and involvement by residents in local government decision making.

In 1995 the then Deputy President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, appointed a task team to investigate the state of government communication in general. The Task Group on Government Communications was dubbed "Comtask". Its mandate was to examine government communications at the local, provincial, national and international level in order to make recommendations on new policies, structures and budgets to improve government communications (GCIS, 2004).

At the time of the Comtask investigation the South Africa Communication Service (SACS) was the body responsible for servicing government in terms of communication issues. On 18 May 1998, during the Budget Vote of the SACS, Comtask's research culminated in the announcement that a new body, the Government Communication and Information Services (GCIS), had been formed to replace the SACS (GCIS, 2004).

The GCIS is currently located in the presidency function and is responsible for setting up and running the new Government Communication System and transforming government communication functions. GCIS was tasked with drafting communication strategies and programmes for the government at national level, as well as integrating the communication operations of all government departments. It has since come forward with numerous guidelines for communications at all government levels (GCIS, 2004). The GCIS provides guidelines to entrench a new ethos and approach to government communications in order to assist government communicators to align themselves with the overall government communications system.

In its guidelines to government communicators, the GCIS compels them to view communications as a strategic part of governmental service delivery (see paragraph 2.4 on the strategic function of public relations). A government communicator's handbook was introduced by the GCIS and is updated annually as a tool for government communicators. It provides guidelines that include, amongst others, government communication strategy, media liaison and management, development communication, understanding of government policy, marketing and advertising and managing the corporate identity of government. The handbook also explains how strategy and planning remain key elements for effective, integrated and coordinated government communications (GCIS, 2004).

The GCIS manual describes a government communication unit as an instrument of service delivery in by providing vital information to its community and involving it in the business of local government. The manual goes on to describe that an internal communication plan,

which takes the internal environment into account, must be drawn up to target employees with specific strategic messages. The GCIS also highlights that it is critical for government to manage a crisis situation in the right manner (GCIS, 2004). However, the manual does not explain in detail how local governments should prepare for or deal with a crisis. The guidelines provided by the GCIS are valuable to local government to improve the effectiveness of communications.

Some legislation also prescribes the way in which local government must communicate to its primary stakeholders, its residents. These will be discussed in section 4.2.2.

4.2.2 The nature of local government communication

A shift of focus in government communications came with introduction of a new political dispensation in 1994. A definite obligation is placed on local government to view communications as a strategic tool: both in relation to the mandate of service delivery as well as the primary channel to ensure the public participation in the processes of democracy. Various legislations prescribe that the public is now part and parcel of government (South Africa, 2006; South Africa, 2000). Every voice counts and every person may hold the government accountable for its decisions and actions. This is in concurrence with the symmetrical two-way communication approach of Grunig (see paragraph 2.4).

The new local government structure places complex requirements on them to undertake communications with customers, voters and community. It is imperative to develop systems and processes to ensure that appropriate message, mediums and techniques have been put in place. No sphere of government can afford to simply communicate non-strategically in reactive or ad-hoc manners since they are now held accountable for all communication actions or lack of communication.

4.2.2.1 The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996

The adoption of the new Constitution of the Republic of South Africa in 1996 as well as the series of laws guiding local government in South Africa has changed the way in which local governments are required to communicate with communities (Hetherington & Mckenzie, 2003). According to Article 32 (1) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996), every South African citizen has the right to access any information held by the state. It is a principle of transparency allowing citizens to exercise or protect their rights and to have a say in the decisions and actions of government. This concurs with the principles of two-way symmetrical communication in a systems context as discussed in section 2.3 and 2.4.

The constitution now also guarantees the freedom of the media in order to assist the public to access information about government activities. This fosters a culture of openness and accountability and a need for modern systems of communication and information delivery (South Africa, 1996). This poses a challenge to government communicators who may be used to withholding information in the midst of a public relations crisis.

4.2.2.2 Local Government Municipal Systems Act

Furthermore, the Local Government Municipal Systems Act (32/2000) provides strict rules to communicating with the public.

Section 18 of the Act prescribes that when communicating with its residents, government must take into account the language preference and usage within the municipal area and also take into account the special needs of people who cannot read or write (South Africa, 2000).

Section 21 of the same Act prescribes that government, including local government, must make use of the local newspaper(s) in the area, trustworthy newspaper(s) circulated in that area as well as radio broadcasts covering the area of the local government. Any official notification to be given by the local government must be in the official languages determined

by the council, having regard to language preferences and usage within its area (South Africa, 2000).

4.2.2.3 Disaster Management Act

The crisis communication function in local government can also receive direction from the Disaster Management Act (57/2002). This Act provides prescription for the operational and management components of government disaster management. It does not make provision for the communication needed to protect the reputation and relationships of government but it is important that government communicators to be aware of these regulations since the crisis communication must be integrated and coordinated with the operational and management components.

The term “disaster” is used by South African government to describe a specific category of harmful incidents. The Disaster Management Act defines a disaster as:

“a progressive or sudden, widespread or localised, natural or human-caused occurrence which

(a) causes or threatens to cause –

(i) death, injury or disease;

(ii) damage to property, infrastructure or the environment; or

(iii) disruption of the life of a community; and

(b) is of such a magnitude that exceeds the ability of those affected by the disaster to cope with its effects using only their own resources” (South Africa, 2002).

Examples in the context of a local government include earthquakes, floods, fires, drought etc. It is important to remember that a “disaster” or “harmful incident” will only become a crisis when the authority responsible for managing the situation is brought under public scrutiny to the extent that its reputation and relationships are damaged (Ray, 1999:19).

The Disaster Management Act provides for an integrated and co-ordinated disaster management policy on national, provincial and local levels. It focuses on preventing or reducing the risk of disasters, mitigating the severity of these disasters, emergency preparedness, rapid and effective response to disasters and post-disaster recovery. It provides the legislation required to establish national, provincial and municipal disaster management centres and to co-ordinate volunteers (South Africa, 2002). But this Act does not provide guidance in terms of reputation and relationship management and public relations. It also does not make provision for the strategic communication element and its importance in the process. The Act does also not make provision for internal crises affecting the reputation of any government spheres. It is clear that the focus of the Act is on the operational actions needed to bring the incident under control and move into a recovery phase. It does not contain the reputation management and relational management elements embedded in crisis communication.

From the Disaster Management Act (2002) local government communicators must consider the following:

- the role of local government in regional disaster planning is seen as a consultative role. That it is the district council's responsibility to establish and implement the framework for disaster management in the area and to ensure that all the local government entities within that region follow a uniform approach if it is affected by a disaster in the district. The local government will be consulted by the district council in this process (South Africa, 2002). The Act does not make provision for situations where the local government would need to act on its own accord.
- the Act makes provision for the establishment of a district Municipal Disaster Management Centre which may be operated in partnership with local municipalities. This centre performs the technical operations needed to contain, and deal with a disaster (South Africa, 2002). It does not provide guidelines for the centre to manage possible damage to the reputations or relationships of either the district or local governments.

- the Act states that it is the centre's responsibility to act as a repository of, and conduit for, information concerning disasters, impending disasters and disaster management in the area. It may also advise and guide any institution in the district area with regards to disaster management (South Africa, 2002). This information is considered purely as part of the operational procedures and not as a specialised communication function. No guidance is given on how this information can be distributed in such a way that the message is effective, protects or enhances the government's reputation and / or stakeholder relationships.
- According to the Act if the local government feels it is necessary to prepare for a possible disaster, it is to do so in co-operation and in consultation with its district or metropolitan council. Some of the vulnerabilities identified by local government during the first pre-crisis phase may well warn of possible disasters. At this stage the issue needs to be handed over to its district's Municipal Disaster Management Centre for further action.

It must be kept in mind that this Act was not intended to deal with the crisis communication aspects of minimising damage to reputation and relationships. Its guidance is to regulate and co-ordinate the way government deals with the operational and management responses to a disaster. However, as depicted in figure 3.2 in section 3.3, communication is a vital element of effective crisis management. The three elements must be integrated in order to be effective. None of these components can function alone. The Act was not written from a public relations perspective and therefore needs to be supplemented with existing crisis communication literature when used as a source by local government to advise a crisis communication strategy. Government communicators must use this information to assist with the integration and coordination of operational and management functions when planning crisis management on a district level. In as far as crisis communication is concerned, government communicators must supplement existing legislation and guidelines with information obtained from crisis communication literature. There are, however, a few conclusions that can be drawn from this act in terms of communication requirements.

4.4 Communication channels

On 31 May 2005, Lindiwe Msengana-Ndlela, director-general of the Department of Provincial and Local Government, announced that communication by local government employees with the people they served needed to improve. She said that communication to ward and even household level was especially important because of an increased expectation for service delivery. The communication was needed to establish the needs to all residents. This statement was based on the growth in urbanisation and the consequent increase in the need for urban development (Benton, 2005a).

Local governments are responsible for the establishment of effective communication channels between themselves and their publics. Some communication channels used by national government with its own publics are good examples that can be adapted by local governments for their own purposes. A few of the national government communication channels are discussed below.

4.4.1 Imbizos

An imbizo is a forum of enhanced dialogue and interaction between national government and residents at grass root level. It is a form of public meeting where the president or ministers travel to local communities to communicate its programmes and progress being made. It allows for immediate feedback from the community which enhances participatory democracy. Communities can exercise their right to be heard and can assist the national effort to build more effective service delivery. President Thabo Mbeki commended the Imbizo process during his State of the Nation address on 6 February 2004. He said that imbizos have afforded ordinary South Africans the opportunity to speak directly to the government. He said that citizens had been using the imbizos to speak frankly about the quality of service delivery in their areas, as well as reporting on the performance of their local governments. They had also not been hesitating to raise sensitive questions about crime, health, perceived or actual corruption and malpractice. But one of the main objectives of holding imbizos on a local

government level is to improve communication between ward committees and their local governments (GCIS, 2004; Benton, 2005b; Mokale, 2004).

Local government entities can hold imbizos in their own geographical areas. This type of interaction is a particularly good method of communicating with illiterate residents. Interaction through imbizos can highlight particular problems needing attention, blockages in implementation of policy or policy areas that need reviewing. It gives political leaders access to what people say and feel about government, to listen to the concerns, grievances and advice of its people. This can provide clues as to what potential incidents or crises need to be prevented or planned for.

4.4.2 Bua News Online

Bua News is a GCIS news service established to enable community radio stations, newspapers and other media to have fast and easy access to the latest national, provincial and local government news. It is an online database updated daily that can be accessed by anyone who has access to online facilities. Local government may submit newsworthy articles to the GCIS to be published in Bua News (GCIS, 2004)

Local government can use this source to provide media with news about its crisis communication efforts in any stage of preparing for, dealing with or recovering from a crisis. If the media reports these efforts, then it will help keep the public informed with the same information. Reporting on responsible efforts will help promote a positive reputation for the local government which will in turn help protect relationships.

4.4.3 Multi-purpose community centres (MPCCs) and information centres

The GCIS has introduced the concept of MPCCs with the goal of providing every South African citizen with easy access to information and services near their place of residence. It is a community centre dedicated to the provision of government information from national,

provincial and local governments. Local communities living near a MPCC can also request information according to their specific needs (GCIS, 2004).

Every local government has the option to create a MPCC. A local government who does so will already establish a trend of a community that knows exactly where to access vital information when the need arises. These communities can be informed that they can access important information at the MPCC about how to prepare for, to prevent, or how to react in the event of a harmful incident. The MPCC can be a tool to disseminate important information before, during and after an incident. This will show responsible communication and can help prevent public scrutiny about the way in which local government has dealt with its people. This could help prevent a crisis.

However, if local government is unable to provide a dedicated MPCC, it should consider establishing an information centre. This centre must be a central point where information can be obtained on request. It could be a venue that already exists to provide other services e.g. a library or clinic (GCIS, 2004). The community can be informed to receive vital information from this point when they require it. An information centre can be used as a crisis communication tool.

4.4.4 Ward committees

The importance of ward committees as a link between the community and local government has been the topic of many discussions. Each ward within each municipal district is required to have a ward committee to act in an advisory capacity to the ward councillor responsible to the well being of their particular ward. The ward committee would gather information from its community and pass this on to the ward councillor who would in turn inform the local government of the issues faced in the community. At an imbizo held in November 2005 in Mpumalanga, the Deputy President Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, heard from the local governments represented that a challenge existed to help the ward committees become more effective. The issues raised included a need for skills training, capacity and the allocation of

resources. An example was given that ward committees often failed to communicate effectively because they did not have the resources (e.g. phones or transport) to communicate as regularly as they hoped. A concern raised by the ward committees was the overall poor relationships that existed between their local governments and their communities (Gadebe, 2005). These problems had also been raised a month earlier at an imbizo held in the Sedibeng District Municipality. President Mbeki, who had attended this imbizo, was told that the ward committees believed that the lack of resources and distances between residents were debilitating. An additional problem mentioned was the unavailability of ward councillors to attend meetings and therefore convey messages to their local governments. President Mbeki confirmed that the ward committees formed an important link between the communities and their local governments but that the focus should turn to implementing solutions that could lead to more effective communication amongst all parties (Modisane, 2005).

4.5 Conclusion

Because communication in government is directed by prescribed principles and rules, crisis communication planning for any government sector needs to draw from the communication guidelines provided by the GCIS as based on legislation while at the same time drawing from general communication principles as described in chapter 3 of this document.

Regulation provided in National legislation compels local government to ensure that they maintain continued dialogue with their residency. This means that a local government must plan ahead to continue communications with their residency regardless of an internal or external crisis.

The implication for government communicators is that a message cannot only be sent out in a written format and / or in only the first language of the municipal area. Special attention must be given to the preferred means and language in order for the message to reach and be understood by all the intended audiences effectively.

As a sphere of the South African government, the Potchefstroom City Council must abide by the communication guidelines, principles and legislation set by National Government whenever communicating with the residents. This also applies to its crisis communication activities since it is a type of public relations. However, in the case of crisis communication, no clear regulations have been compiled to date. The Council must therefore base its crisis communication strategy on existing crisis communication principles while taking into account the regulations placed on all types of government communications. General government communication guidelines and regulations can be drawn from legislation such as the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, the Local Government Municipal Systems Act, and the Disaster Management Act.

The following chapter provides detailed recommendations for the Potchefstroom City Council to assist it in establishing an effective crisis communication strategy. These recommendations are based on the information obtained in chapters 1 and 2, as well as an investigation into the specific environment that currently exists within the Potchefstroom City Council. The immediate environment of the Potchefstroom City Council will be discussed in chapter 5.

5. CHAPTER 5: CRISIS COMMUNICATION AND THE POTCHEFSTROOM CITY COUNCIL

5.1 Introduction

The Potchefstroom City Council (hereafter referred to as “the council”) is a South African local government operating as a system within the hierarchical government system in South Africa. It operates within its environment of the local community placed under its jurisdiction as well as in the larger environment of the government system of which it is a part. All spheres of South African government are expected to communicate effectively with communities in order to keep its communication relevant and effective, the Potchefstroom City Council must adapt its communication behaviour to the guidelines provided by its broader political environment as well as its local environment – its publics.

Chapter 5 looks at the current existence of crisis communication in the Potchefstroom City Council. It does so in two ways. Firstly it looks at the council’s response to a harmful incident that occurred in August 2003, which could potentially have led to a public relations crisis if not physically contained in time. Secondly it interprets the information supplied by Council employees responsible for communications at the council.

5.2 Meningitis outbreak in Potchefstroom, August 2003

In August of 2003, the Potchefstroom City Council was faced with a viral meningitis outbreak in the city. Since no crisis communication plan had been compiled to deal with an incident of this type, the council’s communication response was reactive, ultimately allowing a greater potential for public scrutiny.

The outbreak was first identified after one student died from meningococcal meningitis and a number of students throughout the community were diagnosed with the same virus. Meningococcal meningitis is a highly infectious disease. It is a form of acute bacterial meningitis found all over the world and can be transmitted when people come in close contact with each other, by oral secretions. Due to the fact that the virus is spread easily and is potentially fatal when not treated in time, all potential contacts of the meningitis victim had to be identified as soon as possible so that treatment could be administered before more fatalities occurred. The Council and rectors of the various tertiary institutions were called in to assist after the investigating medical practitioners realised that the meningitis could have been spread widely throughout various student bodies and the broader community. Representatives of the World Health Organisation were called in when the investigation revealed that people who had made contact with the victim has already left the Potchefstroom jurisdiction and that there was a strong possibility that the virus could have spread to communities outside of its jurisdiction.

The Council took charge of the situation since it is responsible for the public safety of the people in its jurisdiction (South Africa, 2000). The Potchefstroom City Council declared this an emergency since three fatalities had been registered, the disease was expected to spread beyond the city's borders and steps needed to be taken quickly to prevent further deaths.

The crisis team was made up of representatives from the Potchefstroom City Council, the Potchefstroom Tertiary institutions, community opinion leaders and the World Health Organisation. The Potchefstroom City Council was responsible for communicating with the broader community and the Potchefstroom University (now known as North-West University) was responsible for communicating with the tertiary institutions.

A control room was set up in the council chambers adjacent to the council administrative offices. Core team meetings where held three times per day in the council chambers where managerial, operational and communication needs were discussed. The community had to be

informed of the symptoms of meningitis so that they could be vigilant of any further cases of the virus. These messages had to be conveyed to the community as soon as possible without causing panic and chaos. According to the community liaison officer, the greatest challenge for the communication unit was getting the official messages out to the community in time and effectively. It appeared that the media had more control over what the community was hearing than the council did simply because the media's messages were reaching the residents more effectively. This meant that the majority of the residents were not exposed to the council's angle to the messages. Council's communication was not strategic enough. It should have involved more direct interaction with the residents, especially those areas with high concentrations of illiterate residents. The administrative side of the communications was handled well i.e. the recording of all the queries and questions and statistics of the types of calls that came in to the control centre (Metswamere, 2005).

It was decided that the entire student community of all the Potchefstroom tertiary institutions as well as other members of the Potchefstroom community who were in close contact with these people, were to receive free treatment for viral meningitis. Since the spread appeared to have been contained in the tertiary student community, all tertiary institutions were asked to postpone classes and limit contact with the outside community. Even an annual, traditional inter-university sports event was cancelled as a result.

Although many residents thought the strict preventative measures taken to inhibit the spread of the virus were overreaction, the emergency task team had to predict the worst possible outcome and work towards preventing this scenario from being realised.

The following comments can be made about the communication reaction to this incident:

- During the meningitis outbreak a number of conflicting messages were being circulated in the community. Many of these were simply due to the good intentions of residents who wanted to spread advice on preventative measures and cures for meningitis. However,

these messages were conflicting to the communication being sent out by the council. Some employees within the council also put together their own messages and distributed these internally. These messages were inaccurate simply because the senders did not have the inside information about the particular strain of the virus and the very specific measures needed to prevent the particular strain. The employees and community sent these messages out of a sense of helpfulness and sometimes desperation since the official communication was difficult to come by and was also not timeous. What they did not realise was that the conflicting information was confusing to the community and sometimes causing panic in the way the facts were given. Information provided by the community was often inaccurate as it spoke of other types of meningitis' and their specific treatments. If a crisis communication plan existed then all messages to be communicated internally and externally would have been drafted and approved before such an event could take place. The communication unit would simply have had to make final amendments before sending them out. This would mean more strategic and timeous information. If draft messages were available before the onset of the emergency then it would not have taken long to finalise these for distribution very early on the first day that the emergency was declared.

- Communication distribution plans needed to be compiled as the situation unfolded. Often these plans were not strategic but born out of desperation to see communication material distributed. Information distribution had to happen quickly and management and operational members of the crisis team, again out of eagerness, tried to assist by distributing the limited number of information flyers as each saw fit. Information was often distributed without having a strategic plan. There was no time to ascertain in which areas distribution had been duplicated or ignored or if the recipients understood the message as it was intended. Crisis communication planning prior to the event would have meant that a strategic distribution plan would have been in place and crisis team members would have known about this. The Council would already have known how to communicate most effectively with its residents.

- During this emergency, suppliers to print flyers and brochures at short notice after hours were only sourced after the material was ready for print. This was after office hours and the material was printed in a nearby city. This slowed down the distribution process. Planning prior to the crisis would have included to compilation of a database of suppliers who could have been contacted at all hours. These suppliers would also have been part of a two-way communication process to inform them of their potential role in an emergency situation (refer to section 3.5.1.2).
- In the midst of the event the council had to negotiate with the editor of the local newspaper for space to publish official messages about the emergency. Extra print runs also had to be negotiated in order for extra newspapers to be distributed to those parts of the community ordinarily would not afford the paper. This cost was carried by the council. All of these negotiations took up valuable time which could have been spent containing the crisis. If the local media had been involved in crisis communication strategy planning prior to such an event, they would have been more willing to assist and would have understood their role in such a situation [refer to section 3.5.1.2(a)].
- A number of communication expenses were occurred over the period of the incident and none were budgeted for. Money allocated for other council functions had to be redirected from other budget areas. Each financial decision had to be authorised by either the executive mayor or municipal manager, again taking their attention off their other responsibilities and delaying the process. Crisis communication prior to the event would have allocated budget for unexpected situations such as this (refer to section 3.5.1.2).
- Employees of the Potchefstroom City Council would have known their role in a crisis situation and could immediately have begun assisting with reaching the crisis management objectives. With prior education, the employees would automatically have known who and where to refer crisis related calls to. An internal communiqué, drafted prior to the crisis, could have been sent out as a reminder. This could have been sent out immediately [refer to section 3.5.1.2(a)].
- The Potchefstroom City Council would have had a list of important contacts in each major organisation in the Potchefstroom jurisdiction. The communication team could simply

have forwarded emails to this group of addresses already set up on the email system. The request accompanying this official emergency message would have been that each contact forwards the message to the entire institution. These people could in turn have been used to spread the message throughout the community. This email database could have included at least two email contacts from each business, shopping centre, school etc. Fax numbers should be available for those large institutions that are not linked to email (refer to section 3.5.1.2(b)).

- Relationships would have been formed with key opinion leaders in the community who could have been used to spread emergency messages to the illiterate residents in their areas. These opinion leaders could already have been educated about the importance of quick and accurate communication. They could even have been brought in as members of the crisis team to help predict relevant crisis scenarios. Although the council does have good relationships with many key opinion leaders, the council has not yet made use of this opportunity to promote crisis communication. If this had been done then more effective leverage could have been achieved during the meningitis to assist with communication to the community (refer to section 3.5.1.2).

Again it is important to point out that this health emergency could easily have turned into a communication crisis since the reputation of the Potchefstroom City Council and its vital relationships were at stake.

5.3 Crisis communication within the Potchefstroom City Council

In the final months of 2003 interviews were held with key members of the Potchefstroom City Council to ascertain what the current state of crisis communication in the Potchefstroom City Council was. The interview questions are contained in this study as Annexure A, B, C and D.

After interviewing the team responsible for strategic communications, it became clear that no crisis communication function existed within the Potchefstroom City Council at that time. In

the absence of this function, no persons could therefore be interviewed about their current role or current experience of implementing crisis communication in the council. The interview questions were therefore based on understanding of crisis communication and the anticipation of and readiness for such a function.

The combined results of the various interviews revealed the following:

- no crisis communication policy existed;
- no crisis communication plan existed;
- no members of the communication team are trained to manage or execute crisis communication;
- members of the communication unit were keen to development the skill of crisis communication;
- no budget had been allocated specifically for crisis communication in the event of a crisis;
- That top management and political leaders had not been provided with formal media training;
- A percentage of the council officials did not have access to the internal email system;
- A percentage of the council officials were illiterate;
- A number of linguistic groupings existed within the council;
- All official internal communication were only communicated in English, Tswana and Afrikaans;
- Often only English was used to communicate with both internal and external publics;
- A large percentage of the community could not be reached through electronic web based communication such as email or internet;
- The website of the city Council, www.potch.co.za, did not have an allocated space for crisis messages;
- It was not possible at this point to post messages directly to the website at a moments notice as messaging is not placed in-house. This function had been outsourced to an IT company in Johannesburg. The communications Unit was unaware of how to contact this company urgently after hours;

- The physical barrier of terrain, distance and undeveloped communication infrastructure within the organisation made it impossible to distribute one message to all employees simultaneously; and
- No other employees of the Potchefstroom City Council were provided with an orientation of crisis management, its importance or their role in the process (Fransman, 2003; Roopa, 2003; Metswamere, 2003).

Further information was gathered specifically around the respondents' understanding of crisis communication as well as the readiness of the Potchefstroom City Council to communicate before, during and after a crisis.

The then executive mayor of Potchefstroom (Roopa, 2003) described in an interview how the city has experienced a number of incidents which had a large affect on the city. He described how none of these incidents were anticipated although the scenarios would have been easy enough to anticipate if the correct crisis management process was followed. He went on to describe how each incident was handled in a reactive manner.

In order to ascertain whether or not these finding from the initial interview in 2003 were still valid in 2005, a final interview was held with a core member of the council communication unit. This interview was held telephonically on 29 December 2005. The interview questions are available as Annexure D.

The following conclusions were drawn from the 2005 interview (Metswamere, 2005). These are listed below:

- Since the proposed communication policy was prepared for the communication unit in 2003 (see point 1.6):
 - The communication unit had not undergone any crisis communication training; and

- The communication unit did not have a clear understanding of what crisis communication entailed. The team generally believed that it was the communication activities needed during a harmful incident to assist the operational team to contain the incident.
- It was confirmed that there was still no crisis communication policy or plans in place;
- The communication unit was still eager to learn new communication skills including crisis communication. However, the team (comprising of four members in December 2005), was challenged with limited time and resources. This resulted in very little time to attend training for new skills or to hold strategic planning sessions to prepare more effective communication strategies;
- No budget had been allocated for crisis communication. As with the meningitis outbreak, budget for unexpected communication would need to be redirected from elsewhere during the actual incident;
- The most senior council official and political office bearers had received media training in 2002. However, the communication unit believed that a refresher course was necessary and scheduled one for 2005. The money allocated for this training was unfortunately reallocated to other activities and the refresher course did not take place. At the time of the interview the community liaison officer indicated that it was suggested that this course be rescheduled for 2006, thereby including any new officials or councillors appointed during the 2006 local government elections scheduled for March 2006;
- Employee access to the council email system had improved since the initial interviews in 2003. It was now estimated that 95% of all employees, who make use of computers, also had access to email and the council network;
- Not all the council employees were literate. The greatest concentration of illiterate employees could be found in the more physical functional areas such as infrastructure or parks;
- A large amount of languages were represented in both the community and council employees. However all official communications were produced in English, Afrikaans and Tswana. All media releases were compiled in English;

- The website, www.potch.co.za, had been upgraded since the initial interviews in 2003. However, a legal battle has ensued between the council and its website management company. The communication unit did not have access to the system to update or make changes to the website and the supplier was not willing to make changes for them. A news section had been placed on the home page with the upgrade which would have been an ideal place to post emergency messages. But because the communication team did not have access to it, the website was not an optional tool for crisis communications.
- The greatest difficulty in internal communication was communicating to the illiterate staff and those who did not have access to email. Email was the main method used to distribute a message to all employees simultaneously. The message was usually emailed with an instruction for those with access to email to pass the message on to those who did not have access. The communication unit was not able to determine if these messages were ever distributed to the latter group. An internal employee newsletter, last used in 2001, was revived and issued in October 2005. It did not appear in November or December 2005 due to time constraints of the communication unit;
- It is common knowledge amongst employees that all media enquiries are to be passed on to the PRO. Because of this widely accepted rule, the communication unit had not experienced any situation where a staff member has dealt directly with the media;
- The community liaison officer expressed that the greatest challenge in communicating with the residents was communicating with the illiterate members (largely black or coloured community). The highest concentrations of illiterate residents lived in new extensions of the township, Ikageng. The main methods of used by the communication unit to communicate with the residents was written public notices, flyers and a monthly newsletter called the “Agenda” which was attached to monthly rates and taxes accounts. But because of the large contingent of illiterate residents, only a percentage of the community could understand the regular messages from council. Feedback to these messages had shown that it was mainly the white community who understood the messages.

- The communication officers did not have cell phone or car allowances. While they understand that cell phone contact and transportation are vital tools in reaching the residents, communication officers who could not afford to use their own cars or phones were simply not able to use these methods to keep in touch with the community.
- The communication unit had not taken any steps to prepare for potential public relations crises. Public scrutiny was dealt with as and when it occurred. The Directorate Public Safety had done disaster planning to anticipate potential harmful incidents but it did not include a communication component. The communication unit had not been included in this process.
- The communication unit shared Grunig's view that communication should be an integral part of council's strategic management (see point 2.4). The political office bearers, being the public figures of the council, seemed to need a clearer understanding of what government communication was all about so that they could more fully understand the consequences of their decisions and actions on the reputation and relationships of council.
- It was vital that the executive mayor show support of the communication unit and their role in the survival of the council. Open support and drive by the head political office bearer would automatically improve the amount of support the communication unit received in general. It appeared that a lack of understanding of the role of communications had led to an overall lack of support of communications as a strategic function in the council. As originally described by Grunig, the communication unit was considered to be "doers" and not "strategic thinkers" (see point 2.4).
- The type of negative input that was being received from the residents in the months prior to the 2005 interview included allegations of fraud and corruption, poor service delivery, general laziness in the council and budget allocations that did not seem to meet the real needs of the residents. These were general negative comments that had reached the ears of the communication unit. They were not media comments but were typical of the types of input from the community that should have been included in a crisis communication plan. If not managed but let to worsen, these comments had the potential to turn into negative

public scrutiny that could disrupt the councils system i.e. they may have been able to become public relations crises.

- Council employees generally do not feel comfortable reporting potentially damaging incidents to their line managers. It appeared that the general perception was that the directors and MMCs did not appreciate hearing negative aspects about their area. The expected response from top management may only have been a perception and not reality, but the perception was still large enough to stop employees from speaking up about issues that bothered them.
- There was a general feeling that each directorate operated in its own “silo”.
- Still no physical and financial resources had been allocated to crisis communication.
- The local community, investors and tourists were the three publics considered to be most important to the communication unit.
- If the communication unit needed to communicate with residents quickly (e.g. In the event of another disease outbreak or bomb threats), it would have to rely on a loud hailing system to spread the message in the streets. There were no plans for the practical implementation of this idea.
- It did not seem as if the head of communications (the PRO) was perceived to be an important part of top management.
- It did not appear as if the communication function was perceived to be an important part of the strategic management function of council.
- The communication unit has not done any exercise to anticipate potential public relations crises. Consequently no crisis communication plans have been compiled for any crisis scenarios.
- There are no direct channels for residents to report unhappiness (potential public relations crises) to the communication unit. A dedicated phone line called the “clean line” was available in the past for residents to report fraud or similar problems. Suggestions cards had also been used in the past for residents to send suggestion or complaints to the communication unit. Neither of these had been in operation for over a year at the time of the 2005 interview. Residents occasionally come to see members of the communication

team unit to discuss negative issues. These issues are then dealt with out of courtesy because there is no dedicated area to send the residents to.

- A new area had been established in the council since the 2003 interviews. This area was called the Employee Assistance Programme and was able to assist employees with general psychological counselling. They were also able to call in outside help if necessary (Metswamere, 2005).

The information in points 5.2 and 5.3 was compared to the principles of effective crisis communication identified in the literature study in order to compile recommendations for the Potchefstroom City Council to compile their own Crisis Communication Strategy. The environment of the subject was also taken into consideration. Being a sphere of South African government, certain restrictions, guidelines and legislative considerations have been imposed on all government communicators. These were described in chapter 4 and also considered when making the recommendations for the establishment of a crisis communication strategy. The recommendations are listed in section 6.4.

According to the Communication Policy of the Potchefstroom City Council, it is the council's aim to proactively undertake strategic communications interventions with its various publics in order to fulfil its mandate as set out in the Municipal Systems Act. The primary obligation of the Communications Unit is to implement the communications strategy, as determined by the City Council with the intent of helping the council achieve its various mandates. The Potchefstroom City Council must comply with all legislation pertaining to South African local government and its communication to its various publics. However, according to the then executive mayor (Roopa, 2003), the council was not yet at the point where it sees the communication unit as a strategic part of the council. Instead there was a general perception that the communication unit is only to be used as "technicians" and not "strategists". It was his opinion that the council sees the PRO, who is the head of communications, as the mouthpiece and "spin doctor" but not as a strategic part of the management structure of Council. This clearly stemmed from an old-school opinion of public relations, a paradigm

from which the most enlightened South African organisations are trying to escape and which was clearly at odds with the principles of a transparent democracy (refer to section 2.4).

There was also very limited understanding of the strategic role that communications could play in protecting the council as well as its publics. This was evident in the lack of integration of communication into other strategic functions. For example, in the early months of 2005 the Potchefstroom City Council was in the initial phases of compiling a Disaster Plan using the Disaster Management Act 2000 as a basis. The intention of this plan was to prepare for the operational and management reactions which would be needed if a disaster were to occur on a local level. However, crisis communication was not within the scope of this plan i.e. the intentional protection the reputation and relationships of the council was out of scope of this project (Slambert, 2005). However, without this component a disaster may very well become a public relations crisis if not enough preparation is given to crisis communication.

With this perception, it is important that the communication unit use the recommendation provided in point 6.4 in order to integrate strategic crisis communication in the Potchefstroom City Council.

5.4 Conclusion

Information about the way in which the Potchefstroom City Council conducted crisis communication between the years of 2003 and 2005 was investigated to determine the current status of this function in the council.

Interviews with key members of the Potchefstroom City Council and an investigation into the communication response to a meningitis outbreak were the main sources of information about the current status of crisis communication in the council.

The council's communication unit had an opportunity to demonstrate how it reacts to a destructive incident without prior planning when the city was faced with a meningitis outbreak in 2003. The unit's reaction is recorded in this chapter and is used as reasoning for some of the recommendations made in chapter 6.

Key members of the council were interviewed in late 2003. The community liaison officer was interviewed again in December 2005 to ascertain which findings from the 2003 interviews were still valid. Findings from these interviews are also used as reasoning for recommendations made in chapter 6.

Information from the council's reaction to the meningitis outbreak as well as information received from the interviews revealed that the council did not practice crisis communication.

Chapter 6 is the concluding chapter and it is here that the research questions listed in Section 1.3 are answered.

6. CHAPTER 6: CONCLUDING CHAPTER

6.1 Introduction

This exploratory study has made use of the Potchefstroom City Council as its subject in order to obtain a sample piece of information about how a South African local government can apply crisis communication effectively. The study's exploratory nature could enable further research or an expansion of this study.

The three research questions posed in section 1.3 are answered in detail to conclude this study.

6.2 Research question 1

How should crisis communication be applied in an organisation, such as a local government, according to existing literature within the context of the systems theory?

Literature reviewed during this study shows that the system should take a number of principles into account in order to apply crisis communication effectively. Following from chapter 2, the following can be highlighted:

6.2.1 A local government's actions (usually because of management decisions) have consequences on their publics (see section 2.3 and 2.4). Positive consequences promote positive responses but negative consequences promote negative responses (Grunig & Hunt, 1984:10-11). The local government must therefore consider the consequences of its actions on its publics when making decisions. If actions with negative consequences cannot be avoided then communication must be strategically planned in anticipation of negative responses in such a way that damage to reputation and relationships is minimised.

- 6.2.2 **The local government must practice two-way symmetrical public relations in order to be effective in its crisis communications.** The two-way symmetric model (described in point 2.4) is all about public relations bringing the local government and publics together to communicate, understand one another's needs and adapt to find a harmonious balance (Grunig & Hunt, 1984:23). According to Grunig and Hunt (1984) this is the most ethical model to public relations and equates to excellent public relations.
- 6.2.3 **The system must take measures to ensure that an incident or accident ("harmful incident") will not become a crisis.** Since a change in one part of a system can be amplified by a number of variables to the point that the change can no longer be dealt with by current processes, a harmful incident only becomes a crisis when it is allowed to escalate to the point that it attracts enough negative attention from its publics to damage its reputation and / or relationships. This causes damage to the system which must be dealt with using additional public relations measures (Albrecht, 1996:22-27).
- 6.2.4 **A system must take measures to prevent a crisis since it will affect the entire system as well as its suprasystem.** Because of the system's attribute of interrelatedness an organisational crisis will not only affect its own system and subsystem but also its suprasystem. This implies that its key publics are also affected.
- 6.2.5 **A system must manage a crisis effectively in order to protect relationships and reputation.** Crisis communication before, during and after a crisis event can be used to strengthen the system's reputation and relationships if managed correctly by showing the publics that it was excellently managed [see section 3.3]. However, if key publics see that the local government has not managed the incident well then they will develop a negative image of the local government. Their support (on which the local government depends) will be lost.
- 6.2.6 **A local government can withstand both issues and crises better if they have established good, long-term relationships with publics who are at risk from decision and behaviours of the local government.** Reputation and relationships are built and strengthened before a harmful incident occurs so that a measure of trust

already exists. The relationships that are built are also used to identify vulnerability notices by the publics so that potential crises can be avoided where possible. This is Grunig's relationship principle (see point 2.4 and 3.2).

- 6.2.7 **Local governments should accept responsibility for a crisis even if it was not their fault.** This is one of the principles mentioned by Grunig (see point 3.2). The local government must show that it takes its role in protecting its publics seriously even if it didn't completely or even partially cause the incident.
- 6.2.8 **A local government must disclose all that it knows about the crisis or problem involved at the time of a crisis.** The local government must promise full disclosure once it has gathered additional information if it does not know what happened at the time. This is Grunig's disclosure principle (See point 3.2).
- 6.2.9 **A local government must consider the public interest and need for information to be at least as important as its own at the time of a crisis.** Public safety is at least as important as profits. Therefore the local government has no choice other than to engage in true dialogue with publics and to practice socially responsible behaviour when a crisis occurs (see Grunig's symmetrical communication principle in point 3.2).
- 6.2.10 **The communication function in a local government must be strategic and not just technical.** The literature study showed that crisis communication must be managed through the process of crisis management, which not only managed the communication responses to a crisis but also the management and operational responses. However the entire process of communication management is coordinated by the communication function of the local government since its primary objective is to maintain a local government's positive relations with its key publics so that no support is lost and the local government's future will not be jeopardised. Crisis communication is thus a strategic process coordinated by the communication function in three phases namely before, during and after a crisis occurs. Section 2.4 describes the reasoning behind public relations being practised as a strategic part of the local government and not simply technical support i.e. public relations workers must not

just be doers but thinkers too. Crisis communication, as a type of public relations, must therefore be practised strategically.

6.3 Research question 2

What considerations should be taken into account when crisis communication is applied within the unique context of South African local government?

Based on the finding in chapter 4 of this study, the Potchefstroom City Council must consider its environment when applying crisis communication. These environmental considerations include professional and legislative prescriptions to government communication. The following can be noted:

- 6.3.1 The communication actions of the Potchefstroom City Council must align with the guidelines of the Government Communication and Information Services (GCIS) which prescribes certain conditions for government communications in all levels of government (refer to section 4.2);
- 6.3.2 The Potchefstroom City Council must consider the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) when conducting any communication with its residents, and consequently when conducting crisis communication. The Constitution speaks of the rights of citizens when it comes to communicating with and receiving communication from government;
- 6.3.3 The Local Government Municipal Systems Act (32/2000) provides all spheres of government with rules to communicating with their publics. It is this act that provides more practical prescriptions for local government communications. Local governments, such as the Potchefstroom City Council, are legally required to comply with this Act.
- 6.3.4 Although the Disaster Management Act (57/2002) does not deal directly with crisis communication, it will help local governments understand how crisis communication must be adapted for success integration into its disaster management functions. The

Act focuses on the operational and management components of containing a disaster (“harmful incident”).

- 6.3.5 National government has made provision for some communication channels needed for this sphere of government to communicate with local communities. Local governments can adapt the principles behind the development of these channels to develop its own communication channels to interact with their residents.

6.4 Research question 3

What recommendations can be given to the Potchefstroom City Council to assist with the establishment of a crisis communication strategy?

Taking the findings of this study into account, the following guidelines and recommendations are made to the Potchefstroom City Council to assist with the establishment of a crisis communication strategy.

It is recommended:

- 6.4.1 **That the Potchefstroom City Council compiles and approves a detailed crisis communication policy.** This policy is to be incorporated into its crisis management policy. Policy not only enforces actions but also adds structure and direction to a venture. The policy must include a timeline to which the Potchefstroom City Council must adhere to for the adoption and implementation of the policy.
- 6.4.2 **That the Potchefstroom City Council compile a crisis communication plan.** This plan should be compiled using the findings of this study as guidance. The general principles of crisis communication described in chapters 2 and 3, as well as the environment pertaining to local government as described in chapter 4 must be taken into account.

- 6.4.3 **That the communication unit receive training in crisis communication.** This training will be vital if the communication unit is to migrate from a technical role to a strategic role in the crisis management function of the council.
- 6.4.4 **That the top management of the Potchefstroom City Council receive training in crisis management and its role in the council as well as their involvement in the process.** The communication unit must receive buy-in from the executive mayor as political head and the municipal manager as the lead public servant. It is therefore recommended that buy-in be achieved through an educational session to small groupings within the top management. An opportunity to do this would be to call a special meeting for this purpose. A shorter educational can be presented as an item on the agenda of a council meeting for which the top management is expected to be present. At this point key political and official heads should already have buy-in of the idea but a brief presentation by the communication unit will provide the entire body of councillors (both full time and part time) with an understanding of crisis communication.
- 6.4.5 **That budget is allocated for crisis communication.** This budget must be compiled by the communication unit in conjunction with the municipal manager and the executive mayor. According to the former executive mayor of Potchefstroom (Roopa, 2003) and the community liaison officer (Metswamere, 2005), no physical or financial resources have been allocated towards crisis communication needs. It is the writer's recommendation that the top management provide both financial, physical and human resources in order to ensure that these elements cannot be used as an excuse for the lack of crisis communications. Allocation of resources will also demonstrate the top management's support of all such activities. Since they may not already be convinced that this is necessary, it is the communication unit's responsibility to demonstrate the excessive costs of not managing a crisis correctly in the loss of reputation and relationships. When a crisis occurs, the resources will need to be made available immediately. It will harm the Potchefstroom City Council system to redirect funds to a crisis that was not planned for.

- 6.4.6 **That the communication unit be given the authority needed to implement crisis communication.** This includes the authority to launch communication activities (focus groups, brainstorm, communications with individual, surveys etc) in order to identify potential crises and warning signs, build relationships and grow the council's reputation amongst key publics.
- 6.4.7 **That key officials and politicians receive formal media training.** This is to prepare them in case they are called upon to address the media in the event of a crisis. The example of the Exxon Valdez oil spill in section 1.1, showed how a poor response to the media could fan the flames of a public relations crisis.
- 6.4.8 **That the possibility of connecting all council offices be connected to the email network so that all working venues have access to email.** Alternatively other means of communicating simultaneously with all employees must be investigated.
- 6.4.9 **That all generic communication anticipated to be necessary during a crisis be drafted prior to such an event. These should be drafted in English, Afrikaans and Tswana,** the three languages used most widely in the Potchefstroom. These messages must always be understandable on all levels. The communication unit must make the information appropriate and interesting to the lower socio-economic status sub groupings of the audience, even if it becomes less interesting or even redundant to the higher socio-economic status sub groupings of the audience in the process.
- 6.4.10 **That ward councillors be trained in crisis communication methods.** An understanding of crisis communication will help ward councillors become aware of the special needs of their wards when it comes to communicating with them. By identifying these needs, e.g. communicating with illiterate members of their wards, they can assist the communication unit take these needs into account when compiling the crisis communication plans.
- 6.4.11 **That a section of the Potchefstroom City Council website, www.potch.co.za, be allocated specifically for emergency messages and that control be taken of using this site.** The council should at all costs retrieve control over the official website. It is an invaluable tool in communicating with the media and residents who have access to

internet facilities. The costs of employing a full time webmaster, who understands the unique needs of government communication, should far outweigh the costs of trying to repair a damaged reputation and relationships lost through a lack of communication with key publics.

- 6.4.12 **That the communication unit and the webmaster prepare a strategy for posting emergency information on the website in the event of a crisis.** This plan is to be incorporated into the overall crisis communication plan.
- 6.4.13 **That the communication unit market the Potchefstroom City Council website address widely in the community.** The community will be more likely to search for emergency messages on the site in the event of a crisis if it is already aware that the website exists and that it is a valuable source of information. The communication unit is to keep the website updated and relevant at all times so that it becomes known as a source of updated and reliable information.
- 6.4.14 **That each employee of the Potchefstroom City Council receives a basic overview of their role in the event of a crisis.** This can be done during an orientation course for new employees or during workshops arranged for this specific purpose.
- 6.4.15 **That the Potchefstroom City Council meets with other institutions to share best practice approaches with regards to crisis management and crisis communication.** The North-West University (formerly the Potchefstroom University) is one such organisation that is able to share professional advice on the subject. The two institutions have signed a memorandum of understanding agreeing to the exchange of knowledge and/or services where applicable. The North-West University's marketing and communication department as well as the North-West University (Potchefstroom Campus) School of Communications should be able to advise in this regard.
- 6.4.16 **That the communication unit be given a more strategic role within the Potchefstroom City Council instead of simply holding a technical function.** This change can only take place once the top management of the council understand the role of communication in local government. The communication unit could invite that

a body, such as the GCIS, to deliver a presentation to this end at a special event organised for top management.

6.4.17 That the communication unit use symmetrical two-way communication between the organisation (local government) and its publics to anticipate potential crises.

This type of communication will help establish the crisis communication needs of the key publics and then help align the crisis communication goals of the council to these needs.

6.4.18 That the communication unit and other key players receive training in the importance of two-way communication in effective crisis communication. The communication unit and other appointed key role players must be trusted by the community and peers in order for the implementation of the crisis communication to be trusted. This educational experience could take the form of a one or two day workshop presented by an objective expert in the field. It is the author's recommendation that the following initial group receive proper training:

- The executive mayor of the Potchefstroom City Council;
- The municipal manager of the Potchefstroom City Council;
- All members of the mayoral committee (MMC). These are the full time councillors who form the political bridge between the directorates and the community;
- All ward councillors due to their close relationships with each ward and the important role they will play in communicating during a crisis;
- All directors; and
- The Potchefstroom City Council communication unit.

This group needs to be equipped to lead a brainstorming session in which potential crises situations and warning signs are identified. This group needs to be equipped to compile an effective crisis team.

6.4.19 That the communication unit identify the Potchefstroom City Council's key publics. Key publics can be divided into two main groups: internal and external. Once

this is done a number of research methods can be employed to gather the information that is required to anticipate potential crises.

6.4.20 That the community be approached to help identify potential crisis situations.

The communication unit can co-ordinate this action while working closely with ward councillors to co-ordinate a communication campaign with all its key publics with the purpose of identifying vulnerabilities, potential crises and warning signs. The Potchefstroom City Council must establish communication channels specifically for the use of reporting warning signs or vulnerabilities. These channels must allow both internal and external publics to report possible problems. The city of Potchefstroom already has a well-established channel for the community to report emergencies with the Directorate Public Safety. These emergencies are reported to the emergency control room of the directorate of Public Safety. The member of the public reports the incident and the control room dispatches the necessary emergency services. However, there is no channel in place with the specific objective of reporting warning signs or possible future public relations crises or incidents which do not pose a physical danger to the caller but rather a danger to the Potchefstroom City Council's reputation. A channel must be established specifically for this purpose. Existing channels of communication could be used. Whatever channel is decided on, must be:

- timeous;
- have clear objectives linked to its use;
- have a specific person held accountable for its effective operation; and
- the contents must be analysed and reported back to council.

6.4.21 That the communication unit co-ordinate and facilitate a brainstorm session with the top management once vulnerabilities and warning signs have been identified.

All potential crises listed by key publics must be brainstormed and prioritised through the process of described in chapter 3. Each item is to be prioritised for the likelihood of occurrence as well as the potential damage to the Potchefstroom City Council. The top management must attend this brainstorming session.

- 6.4.22 **That plans must be drawn up to prepare for high priority, anticipated crises that cannot be prevented.** Those potential crises which cannot be prevented must then be planned for. According to the former mayor, PRO and the community liaison officer at the Potchefstroom City Council, (Fransman, 2003; Roopa, 2003; Metswamere, 2005) no crisis plans exist and no crisis communication plans have been compiled. All forms of communication concerning crises is conducted reactively.
- 6.4.23 **That the communication unit compile a database of key publics and opinion leaders within the community.** Once this is done a number of research methods can be employed to determine the information that is required for communicating with them and for using them as channels of communication where possible.
- 6.4.24 **That the Potchefstroom City Council identify crisis communication teams for each potential crisis.** The composition of the crisis team must be as described in chapter 3.5.
- 6.4.25 **That the communication unit prepares as much communication for the top priority anticipated crises as possible.** All this material must be approved in principle by the head of crisis communications. Hard and soft copies of all materials must be kept in a well organised database. A full copy must also be sent the records department for the safe storage. Any updates made prior to a crisis must be made to each hard and soft copy so that the material is ready for use at a moments notice.
- 6.4.26 **That the Potchefstroom City Council ensures permeability of its system by allowing information to flow in and out of the system.** It must allow the exchange of information between itself and its key publics. This information must be used to assess whether its actions and decisions are moving it towards its goals, and whether these goals are aligned with those of its publics. This will improve the openness of the system and will improve its ability to adapt and survive as described in section 2.3 and 2.4.
- 6.4.27 **That the communication unit practice excellent public relations principles.** This will ensure the optimum formation of relationships with publics before a crisis event occurs. The principles of excellent public relations can be reviewed in section 2.4.

- 6.4.28 **That measures and resources be put in place so that the crisis communications programs can be managed strategically.** A specific person within the council must be made accountable and responsible for the management of a strategic crisis communication function. By doing this everybody will know who is accountable if the management process is neglected. It will also be more difficult for necessary tasks to “fall through the cracks” with people thinking, “somebody else will do it”.
- 6.4.29 **That the Potchefstroom City Council nurture, maintain and grow its existing relationships with key publics.** These relationships are built through communication with the publics. The communication unit must analyse the existing relationships with each group of key publics identified. If the relationship is less than satisfactory then communication needs to be implemented to build these relationships. Were relationships are satisfactory (according to both parties) then the communication needs to be maintained. It must be remembered that the status of the relationship must be considered from the key public’s point of view as well as the Potchefstroom City Council’s point of view. The Potchefstroom City Council cannot assume that the key public is satisfied simply because it thinks it is.
- 6.4.30 **That the Potchefstroom City Council outsource the crisis communication function (only if it is certain that internal capacity does not exist).** This should only be done if the communication unit is unable to manage the function effectively. The communication unit must be intimately involved in the process even if the function is outsourced because no third party will have the clear understanding of council’s environment necessary for effective communication.
- 6.4.31 **That the crisis team compile a database of professionals who agree to volunteer their services in the event of a harmful incident.** This could include health professionals, psychologists, community leaders, religious institutions, etc. The names and emergency contact details must be kept on file and updated regularly as a part of the crisis manual. There are a number of professional institutions within Potchefstroom with a combined wealth of professional knowledge and expertise. The Potchefstroom City Council can build relationships with these institutions and make

prior agreements to assist with professional services needed in the case of a crisis. The Potchefstroom City Council has a co-operative governance forum, which invites members from all major institutions to meet regularly and discuss co-operative governance. The current members of this forum include (amongst others) the South African Defence Force, the South African Police, the various tertiary institutions, the various medical institutions. The communication unit should arrange a short presentation to show the importance of cooperation during an emergency situation. This is important since in an open system situation, a crisis in any form affects the entire community.

6.4.32 That the internal publics be rewarded for reporting potential crises. The City Council of Potchefstroom should introduce incentives to encourage employees or stakeholders to report warning signs or vulnerabilities.

6.4.33 That the City Council of Potchefstroom provides sufficient media training for all identified spokespeople. The main spokesperson should ideally be the relevant director in charge of the response to a specific crisis since this is the person who is closely responsible for the everyday operations of the directorate and should already have a background on any incident. The director also has a technical knowledge of the directorate operations and would be able to answer technical questions after being briefed by employees close to the situation. However, the writer suggests that the executive mayor and MMC of each directorate also receive media training. The political and operational components of the directorate affected by a crisis should stand united as a team and should attend press conferences and interviews as a team. However, if the crisis is of such a nature that the council as a whole will be held accountable, then it is important that the executive mayor become the political spokesperson and the municipal manager or PRO be the official spokesperson. The choice of spokesperson must be clearly stated in each crisis plan to minimise the number of internal arguments or delays when the crisis strikes. It is the government communicator's responsibility to package messages in such a manner that neither the administrative or political mandate of local government is neglected. In fact it is their

responsibility to find the interface where the purposes of both mandates are represented in such a way that both mandates never appear to be in conflict with one another. The message given to the publics must be in one voice from both mandates. This is especially important in a crisis situation where no internal faction within the City Council can appear to be in disagreement in their response to whatever situation has occurred.

- 6.4.34 **That someone is trained to oversee the everyday duties of the PRO so that he is freed up completely during a crisis.** An assistant can be appointed for this purpose. Alternately one of the current communication unit team members must be trained to take on this responsibility provided that he or she is not an integral member of the crisis teams.
- 6.4.35 **That the PRO of the Potchefstroom City Council builds solid relationships with the media that could report on potential crises in this sector.** The PRO must make it a core responsibility to build good relationships with journalists from each of the publications that could reach its key publics. Each journalist should preferably have met the PRO in a one-on-one meetings and / or interviews before a harmful incident. These relationships should stretch beyond the local North West media to other dailies which are read by the key publics. Media breakfast interviews could be arranged for the executive mayor and the municipal manager on an ongoing basis. This will ensure that, if a crisis is to strike, the journalists who would pick up the story would already know who to contact and would already have a positive relationship with the PRO. It is also more likely that the journalists will approach any of the three parties to clarify information in a crisis situation instead of forming an opinion based on rumours or to go find another source who may be inaccurate. In the situation that the PRO is not the official spokesperson in a crisis, he will be able to refer the journalist to the correct person after being approached.
- 6.4.36 **That all officials and politicians, who are identified as members of the various crisis teams, receive proper training in the field of crisis management and crisis**

communication. There is no time to train anybody during a crisis. All training needs to be done ahead of time and needs to be refreshed from time to time.

6.4.37 That the communication unit identify effective channels of internal and external communication. The communication unit, with the assistance of each directorate, must identify effective channels of internal communication already used effectively in each directorate. These may differ from directorate to directorate since the composition of each directorate differs. The communication unit must also evaluate these existing communication tools and channels and if they are found to be ineffective for the use of crisis communications then more effective channels must be developed and put in place immediately. Similarly the communication unit, with the assistance of key community members, must identify effective channels of communication for external communication of crisis related information between the council and the community. There should be an integration of interpersonal communication and new technology if the media is to be used effectively for development purposes. The crisis communication teams must familiarise themselves with these channels.

6.4.38 That the Potchefstroom City Council discuss its crisis management strategies with the district council for purposes of synergy, coordination and partnership. In terms of legislation the Potchefstroom City Council must comply with the disaster Management Act (57/2002) on an operational and management level. However the proposed communication responses should be discussed with the district council during Potchefstroom City Council's pre-crisis planning. At all times the Potchefstroom City Council must respect the jurisdiction of the district council. If necessary the Potchefstroom City Council should present its crisis communication policy to the district council to show that it has no intention of overriding authority, but that it only has its residents' (who are ultimately a percentage of district council's residents) best interests at heart. It is recommended that the two teams meet to come to a common understanding before meeting with the executive mayor of the district

council. Communication with the district council's executive mayor must always involve the executive mayor of Potchefstroom City Council for protocol reasons.

6.4.39 That the top management openly supports the crisis communication function.

This will help entrench the function as part of the strategic objectives and culture of the Potchefstroom City Council. One way to openly support the function is by allocating physical and financial resources for crisis communication. A second way is if the top management ensures that crisis communication is included in the annual planning and reviews of the Potchefstroom City Council.

6.4.40 That the council hold ward councillors accountable for the effective functioning of their ward committees.

As discussed in section 4.4.4, ward committees are considered to be a vital link between the community and local government. The need to ward councillors to take charge of ward committees has been mentioned at a number of imbizos. This need is being heard by government leaders as high up as the president of South Africa. Potchefstroom City Council should ensure that all its ward councillors are trained to effectively manage their committees as well as report the issues raised by these committees back to government. When issues such of lack of resources or capacity are raised then these should not be ignored but investigated and dealt with. The council should try budget for viable solutions so that this communication instrument can be used to the full potential. Members of the communication unit should take turns to be placed on at least one meeting of each ward committee to discuss the importance of the ward committee during a crisis. This information must be prepared prior to such meetings. The same information must be used by all communication official attends the meetings so that a unified message is conveyed.

6.4.41 That the Potchefstroom City Council arrange its own imbizos.

The discussion in section 4.4.1 showed that national government places a great amount of trust in the imbizo system to allow communities to raise their issues directly with government. The Potchefstroom City Council should follow this example and hold annual imbizos where the community is allowed to directly address the executive mayor and

councillors. This interactive medium allows councillors to answer questions immediately as well as to note the issues and concerns of the community (many of which will be warning signs for potential crises). The community must be divided into manageable groups, perhaps three wards per imbizo, to allow for effective interactions. Councillors should refer to issues raised by ward committees prior to each imbizo so as to anticipate the type of issues that will be raised. This will provide and opportunity to prepare answers as far as possible and provide the community with these answers immediately.

6.4.42 That the communication unit make regular use of the Bua News Online service (see section 4.4.2). Since Bua New Online is a timeous newsworthy source of information for the media, the communication unit should submit positive articles of interest to the publication team to help build its reputation amongst other government entities and the media. This will be valuable in keeping the trust of the media who have already been exposed to the positive news, if a crisis was to occur.

6.4.43 That the Potchefstroom City Council compile a crisis communication policy (and subsequent plans) where the management, operational and communication components are all integrated. A crisis communication policy and plan will not be effective unless it is matched with an effective management and operations policy and plan. No amount of good and strategic communication before, during or after crisis will win the publics favour if the necessary management and operational actions where not in place too.

6.5 Limitations of the study

Very little information was available about crisis communication within the South African local government structure. The researcher made contact with the GCIS requesting specific guidelines for crisis communication but nobody could assist with the topic.

Government officials at the Potchefstroom City Council were eager to assist with the study. However due to the lack of knowledge about the field of crisis communication they could not always provided the necessary answers to the questions. Key government employees were briefed on the crisis communication process during their interviews. It was also explained that their lack of knowledge was “the norm” and that recommendations would be provided to assist the council in involving them in a non-threatening manner when their input was needed. Very few key employees could be interviewed because nobody was involved in crisis communication at the time. The key employees responsible for communications were interviewed.

Since this is an exploratory study, it will need to be adapted before it can be applied to another local government. Chapters 2 and 3 may be applied as is but chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6 would need to be adapted according to the specific needs identified in a different local government. These needs can be determined using the same methods of investigation as described in chapter 1. Interview questions will need to be adapted slightly but can be used as a foundation for interviews in other local governments.

6.6 Potential for further study

The potential to further this study are seemingly endless when considering the fact that:

- Only one sphere of government was studied;
- Only one city council was used in the study; and
- Only the crisis communication component of the crisis management function was investigated.

This study has large potential for expansion. Although it is based on the Potchefstroom City Council it can be adapted to suit other local governments with the purposes of answering similar research questions. Alternatively, the study can be expanded by investigating crisis communication within other spheres of government or government related entities. It could

also be extended to cover a broader interdisciplinary approach by including a more in depth study of the three legs of crisis management in totality namely, the management, operational as well as communication legs.

In conclusion, crisis communication for any government entity needs to draw from the communication guidelines provided by national government so that it complies with the prescribed principles and rules, while at the same time drawing from general communication principles as described in this document. Not only will government's reputations be exposed to less scrutiny, but relationships will also be formed to withstand public scrutiny. The publics will see that government is looking after their (the publics') best interests by anticipating and preparing for incidents which cause them some degree of damage. Two-way communications before, during and after crises situations will build, maintain and even strengthen relationships. These are results of any communication campaign applied using excellent public relations principles.

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Annexure A: Questionnaire for executive mayor

5 October 2003

- What difficulties does the council face when communicating with its residents?
- What difficulties does the council face when communicating with its employees?
- What role would the district council play in preparing for or dealing with a crisis?
- What preparations (if any) has the council made to deal with crisis events?
- What preparations (if any) has the council made to avoid crisis events?
- How do you define an organisational crisis?
- Do you feel crisis management should be a strategic part of council management?
- What difficulties were experienced during the meningitis crisis?
- What successes were experienced during the meningitis crisis?
- Roughly what was the process used to deal with the meningitis crisis?
- What needs to occur before top management will buy into the strategic role of crisis management?
- What crisis events have occurred for which the council was unprepared?
- Does the council have any reporting system used by staff who identify issues they feel could escalate into a crisis?
- What physical and financial resources have been allocated to dealing with crisis?
- What is the role of Public Safety's Disaster Management team at the council?
- What are the council's key publics – i.e. those who are important to the council's existence?
- What communication methods do you personally use to communicate with employees (generally)? And how effective do you feel these mechanisms are?
- What communication methods do you personally use to communicate with your residency (generally)? And how effective do you feel these mechanisms are?
- Are mechanisms in place to communicate effectively with residency hastily?

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Annexures

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- Are mechanisms in place to communicate effectively with employees hastily?
- Is there a strategic method in place for supervisors to investigate all claims and concerns of employees? And is there a method in place for the valid results of these investigations to reach top management?
- Are there incentives for employees who warn management of potential dangers to the council's business and / or reputation?
- Do you feel the head of communication is seen as an important part of top management?
- Have executives ever worked together to identify vulnerabilities that could lead to crises?
- Have any formal crisis plans been drawn up for specific crisis scenarios?
- According to legislation, whose responsibility would it be to champion crisis management as a strategic communication process?
- Is the council accessible and prepared for hearing concerns from its residency?
- What preparations have been put in place to provide general psychological support to employees?

Annexure B: Questionnaire for public relations officer and community liaison officer

12 November 2003

- Who are the council's key publics – i.e. those who are important to the council's existence?
- What communication methods does your office use to communicate with employees (generally)?
- What communication methods does your office use to communicate with your residency (generally)?
- What difficulties does the council face when communicating with its employees?
- What difficulties does the council face when communicating with its residents?
- Is the council accessible and prepared to listen to the concerns of key publics i.e. when they want to report a possible crisis? What mechanisms are in place?
- Does the communication team have any plans in place to communicate with residents and employees quickly if a crisis should strike?
- Has the communication team ever sat down to identify issues that could lead to a major crisis? I.e. to identify things that could give the council a bad reputation.
- Have any formal plans been drawn up to deal with specific crisis scenarios?

Annexure C: Questionnaire for Public Safety
(re: use of Disaster Management Act (57/2000))

12 January 2005

- What preparations (if any) has the council made to deal with crisis events that stretch beyond the everyday capability and resources of Public Safety?
- What preparations (if any) has the council made to avoid such crisis events?
- What crisis events have occurred that could not be managed by Public Safety alone?
- What is the role of Public Safety's Disaster Management team at the council i.e. when is this team called in to deal with a situation?
- Does Public Safety have mechanisms in place to communicate effectively and quickly with **residents** if a destructive incident were to occur in the community?
- Does Public Safety have mechanisms in place to communicate effectively and quickly with **employees** if a destructive incident were to occur?
- Who would public safety call in to assist if a situation is beyond its control?
- When would Public Safety call upon Provincial Government to assist?

Annexure D: Final Questionnaire – community liaison officer

29 December 2005

- Since the communication policy was prepared for the communication unit in 2003:
 - Has any crisis communication training been provided?
 - Do you feel the communication unit has been provided with a better understanding of what crisis communication is?

- What is your understanding of crisis communication?

(Interviewer explains to interviewee what crisis communication is)

- Does the council currently have a crisis communication policy?
- Does the council currently have a crisis communication plan?
- Is the communication unit keen to learn more communication skills such as crisis communication?
- Has budget been allocated especially for crisis communication?
- Have top officials and politicians received formal media training? Do all council officials have access to the email system?
- Are all council officials literate?
- Do a number of linguistic groups exist in the council? In the community?
- What are the main languages used to communicate internally and externally?
- How long will it take the team to post pre-prepared messages onto the website?
- Can you distribute one message to all employees simultaneously?
- Do employees know how to deal with media in a crisis?
- What difficulties does the council face when communicating with its residents?
- What difficulties does the council face when communicating with its employees?
- What preparations (if any) has the council made to deal with public relations crisis?
- What preparations (if any) has the council made to avoid public relations crises?
- Do you feel crisis management should be a strategic part of council management?

- What difficulties were experienced during the meningitis outbreak?
- What successes were experienced during the meningitis outbreak?
- Roughly what was the process used to deal with the meningitis crisis?
- What needs to occur before top management will buy into the strategic role of crisis management?
- What crisis events have occurred for which the council was unprepared?
- Does the council have any reporting system used by staff who identify issues they feel could escalate into a crisis?
- What physical and financial resources have been allocated to dealing with crisis?
- What role did the communication team play in the development of Public Safety's Disaster Management plan?
- What are the council's key publics – i.e. those who are important to the council's existence?
- What communication methods do you personally use to communicate with
- Employees (generally)? And how effective do you feel these mechanisms are?
- What communication methods do you personally use to communicate with your residency (generally)? And how effective do you feel these mechanisms are?
- Are mechanisms in place to communicate effectively with residency hastily?
- Are mechanisms in place to communicate effectively with employees hastily?
- Do you feel the head of communication is seen as an important part of top management?
- Has the team ever worked together to identify potential public relations crises?
- Have any formal crisis plans been drawn up for specific crisis scenarios?
- Is the council accessible and prepared for hearing concerns from its residency?
- What preparations have been put in place to provide general psychological support to employees?

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