



Public Chairs' Forum and Association of Chief Executives Being in the eye of a media storm

Event Summary

On 28th March, PCF and ACE were delighted to welcome Danny Shaw, BBC Home Affairs Correspondent Amanda Spielman, Chief Inspector at Ofsted, Dame Glenys Stacey DME, HM Chief Inspector of Probation, Peter Wilson-Smith from Meritus Consultants and Lord David Gold to host a panel discussion on how to handle media crises.

Amanda and Glenys began the seminar by reflecting on their previous roles as Chair and CEO of Ofqual. In 2012, they experienced a particularly challenging period over a decline in the national performance of GCSE English results after the introduction of new qualifications. Both Amanda and Glenys had to deal with significant negative media attention, public protests, appearances before select committees and a subsequent law-suit whilst they investigated the situation.

Amanda and Glenys provided many useful lessons learnt from these tough months, including:

- Engaging with all key stakeholders and taking the time to explain the situation, including media representatives, influential bloggers and the chair of the relevant select committees.
- Being prepared for judicial review from the outset and making sure to inform your sponsoring department of any risks.
- Keeping staff informed throughout. They stressed the need for intelligence through the whole system.
- Ensuring strong communications from the outset and understanding the challenges in managing perceptions as much as the reality.
- Understanding the value of objective advice.

Danny Shaw then shared his experiences as journalist reporting on such crises. He noted that national scandals can receive different levels of media attention depending on many variables out of the control of the Chair/CEO, such as the political atmosphere, popularity of the government and whether there are long-standing implications, for example policies affecting immigration. Danny had many useful tips for ALB heads including ensuring that you are relatable to the public, as it is “as much about image as everything else”. He recommended that CEOs take time to build relationships with journalists in advance and explain how their organisation works so they will know how to call in a crisis and can respond quickly. It is always better to say something rather than nothing.

Lord David Gold agreed that central to handling crises is building up relationships in advance. He also advised that Chairs/CEO operate quickly, identify the facts right through the organisation, work proactively and do not let the journalist set the agenda. David also reinforced the importance of being truthful at all times.

Peter Wilson-Smith then offered his perspective from a public relations angle. He again reinforced the importance of being truthful, preparing in advance, building relationships, having a risk management strategy in place and engaging with a range of stakeholders, including the Public Accounts Committee. He also noted that reputational risk is an issue for the whole board and organisations need to understand how they are viewed externally. He recommended that there should always be a communications expert within the organisation with a direct line to the board. Organisations should also think strategically about the timing of when they share information and whether it coincides with other big headlines. Moreover, whilst advancements in digital media mean that news spreads rapidly, they can pass quickly too; ALBs need to be prepared to 'weather the storm.'

The panel then opened the discussion to the floor. Key points included;

- It can be challenging to respond to the media when you cannot yet explain what has gone wrong or it is not necessarily your fault. However, it is still important that organisations show they are taking responsibility and that there is a plan in place.
- It is important to have a crisis team set-up within an organisation before a crisis begins, including a PR team that can give objective advice.
- Personal resilience and a strong Chair/CEO relationship are very important.
- Independent investigations with published terms of reference can be a good way to assure the public that an organisation is acting when something has gone wrong, however these should not be public inquiries.
- It is important to take control of the situation, respond quickly and clearly outline an action plan.
- The term "off the record" can vary in meaning and interpretation. It is better to be specific and explicitly say whether the information is for broadcasting or publication and whether it is attributable or not.
- ALBs need to have someone within the organisation that understands twitter as this is where journalists often get information.
- It is important to have a strong relationship with your minister and meet with them as quickly as possible in a crisis.