

# Communicating Projects<sup>1</sup>

## Communicating in Crisis

*By Ann Pilkington*

Getting communication right in a crisis matters.

History is littered with examples of never-recovered share prices and products.

Andrew Griffin in his [book on crisis management](#) quotes a senior executive at Total, the French energy giant praised for its handling of a gas leak in 2012: “to take care of reputation, you have to take care of people .... first.” Organisations dealing with crises should view at all times what is happening through the lens of the victims.

[Chris Tucker](#) who delivers courses in crisis communication management blogged some time ago about how in a crisis, it’s important to work with, and learn to love, the lawyers:

“In a crisis the obvious instinct of a lawyer is to minimise the chance of any prosecution and any future compensation claims. That usually means telling the organisation to minimise any public statements. So there is an obvious clash with the classic PR crisis management principle of tell it all, tell it fast and tell the truth. The standard legal advice is relatively short-term when compared to the longer term view of reputation management taken by the PR professional.

“Make having a good relationship with the legal department a top priority before the crisis hits.”

Projects contain risk, we all learn on our project management courses, and the management of risk is something that project managers excel at. However, as a communicator coming into the project world, a big thing for me is that the identification of risk is often about risk to the project; there isn’t always enough attention paid to potential risks to the wider organisation’s reputation.

This is why it matters to have a communicator involved in risk identification, because he or she will have the reputation of the organisation in mind and may be sighted on issues elsewhere that could combine to make the perfect storm of a crisis.

How does an organisation recover its reputation after a crisis? [Research by the Ipsos MORI Reputation Centre](#) was done among UK Members of Parliament (129 of them) and business and financial journalists (88 of them).

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<sup>1</sup> This series of articles on effective stakeholder engagement is by Ann Pilkington, founding director of the PR Academy (UK) and author of the book *Communicating Projects* published by Gower in 2013. Ann is one of the UK’s leading experts on communications; she shares her knowledge with project managers and teams in this series of articles in the *PM World Journal*. Her author profile can be found at the end of this article.

For me, two things came through strongly: trust and the need to have “credit in the reputation bank”. One thing that didn’t come through so strongly was the role that employees play.

The recent [Edelman Trust Barometer](#) revealed that respondents are increasingly reliant on a “person like yourself”, who, along with regular employees, are significantly more trusted than a CEO or government official.

However, as Dr Kevin Ruck highlights in his [blog on advocacy](#), there is a danger if organisations start to manage advocacy, for example by supplying social media soundbites for employees to share. This simply isn’t authentic and will be seen through straight away.

The [Ipsos MORI research](#) says that building reputation resilience takes time. One journalist respondent said: “If you’ve got a long term relationship with a company or the people that work there, then it’s about ‘OK, we’ve messed up but here is what we are doing’. Obviously we build trust faster than with some random guy who hasn’t actually taken the time to meet you or ever have a conversation with you who’s now pleading with you to trust him.”

Well, it is just the same with employees, building advocacy takes time. Ruck’s AVID model explains how to do it and I think can also help us understand how to run employee comms in a time of crisis.

The “I” in the AVID model is identification, this means employees identifying with the organisation’s plans for the future. Employees know that their job security depends on it and I would argue that this is never more acute than in a time of crisis. So organisations must make sure they have someone on point to look after employee comms alongside other stakeholder groups.

The “A” is about alignment which means line managers helping employees to align their work to the corporate strategy. In times of crisis this can mean discussing how the team is going to contribute to the recovery.

The “V” for voice and the “D” for dialogue are about giving employees the opportunity to have a say in what goes on and having conversations about ideas and solutions, surely of tremendous value in helping the organisation to get back on track. And who knows, if that was in place already maybe that crisis would never have happened.

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## About the Author



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**Ann Pilkington** is the author of *Communicating Projects* published by Gower. She is a founding director of the PR Academy which provides qualifications, training and consultancy in all aspects of communication including change project communication and project management.

Information about Ann's book, *Communicating Projects, An End-to-End Guide to Planning, Implementing and Evaluating Effective Communication*, can be found [here](#) and at <http://www.gowerpublishing.com/isbn/9781409453192>.

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