

## **CRISIS CASE STUDY 02: The President, his health minister, her bottle and the theft conviction**

The battle between the Minister of Health, Manto Tshabalala-Msimang and the Sunday Times has a lot more to it than just the allegations about her being an alcoholic, being pushed up the liver donor list and having a criminal record for theft in Botswana.

"From a PR crisis perspective what is so telling is how her boss, President Thabo Mbeki, has dealt with the allegations around the developing issues," says Evan Bloom, MD of Crisis Communications Consultancy.

Politicians are like anyone else in the business world, you get good and bad, those who deliver and those who do not. "The private sector, in most cases, deals swiftly with senior employees who bring their company or brand into disrepute or negatively affect the smooth running of a company. They are either shown the door or are very nicely asked to resign or retire," adds Bloom.

The question must be asked: why has the President not fired his health minister or at the very least initiated a public enquiry? The President sacked his deputy, Jacob Zuma, at the mere suggestion of him being corrupt, yet he does not dismiss other corrupt and totally incompetent senior police officers and government ministers and officials allegedly because of their struggle credentials.

"Surely the opposite sentiment should prevail," says Bloom. "The battle for liberation and democracy was so hard that it should be expected that every person who holds a position of authority will do their utmost to get the job done honestly, without personal gain and for the good of the people. Anyone who cannot live up to the standards of excellence demanded and expected by the people of the country and who is not capable of delivery, should not hold public office."

The following analysis of the unfolding issues of the crisis surrounding the minister of health looks at what President Mbeki should have done as soon as the story broke.

### **THE BACKGROUND:**

Imagine being the President and waking up one Sunday morning to find a major Sunday newspaper has your minister of health on its front cover and is telling the nation and the international community that she is a drunkard and a thief. You would probably spit your grapefruit across the room!

Now imagine this... as the minister, you deal so abysmally with the media that both you and your boss, the President, basically say and do nothing to take control of the situation. Members of the public start telling jokes about you: "Hey Manto has two new guys working for her, Mr Jack Daniels and Mr Johnnie Walker" and "Did you know the Johannesburg General Hospital is going to be renamed? Yup, Manto's pub and grill!"

The 12 August headlines of the Sunday Times screamed "Manto's hospital booze binge" and alleged that Tshabalala-Msimang "disgraced herself with wine, whisky and tantrums" before she went into surgery in Cape Town at the Medi-Clinic in Hof Street in 2005 for a shoulder operation. The paper went on to elaborate how the minister's bodyguards, a female friend and a senior sister "dispatched hospital staff" to buy alcohol on a number of occasions. It also mentioned that "after a party in her room one night, at about 1:30 am, the minister demanded lemons," and how 'Tshabalala-Msimang demanded food from Woolworths at odd hours.'

The Sunday Times also mentioned that within hours of receiving a new liver from a teenage suicide victim, doctors are alleged to have said that the minister had been diagnosed with autoimmune hepatitis, and that the cause of her cirrhosis was not alcohol related.

During the course of that week many South African radio stations, daily newspapers and eTV covered the initial allegations and approached the minister and President's office for comment. Nothing of substance was communicated to the media bar the odd threat of legal action and allegations that the Sunday Times stole medical records from the hospital concerned.

The minister and Medi-Clinic also filed an urgent application in the Johannesburg high court asking for among other things, her medical records to be returned. They also wanted the paper to stop publishing further details around the minister's health, and to destroy its reporters' notes and records.

## **No public action from the President's office to take control of the situation**

On 19 August, the Sunday Times ran another front page article with the headline "Manto: A drunk and a thief" and two sub headings "The big cover up: Chronic alcoholism the real reason she got a new liver" and "The dirty little secret: She was kicked out of Botswana for stealing from a patient."

The article mentioned how, after being convicted of theft of numerous items including hospital blankets, linen and heaters from the Athlone Hospital in Lobatse where she was the medical superintendent, she was declared a "prohibited immigrant" and barred from Botswana for 10 years from 1976.

The paper also alleged that the minister's medical team stated publicly that their patient's new liver had been damaged by autoimmune hepatitis, a long-term disease in which the body's immune system attacks liver cells.

Still no comment from the President to take control of the situation, only veiled requests for proof of the allegations.

Later that week, eTV sent senior news reporter Ben Said to Botswana and he tracked down former staff members from the hospital where the minister worked in the 1970s. He also interviewed the person responsible for disciplining her and, of major importance, he found her original case number.

Local political parties climbed in on the action with the Democratic Alliance calling for the health minister's resignation.

To be fair to Tshabalala-Msimang, the allegations around her alcoholism and being bumped up the donor list are still, at the time of writing,, not proven as Brendan Seery says on the Opinion page of the Saturday Star of 25 August 2007. He goes on to state that "It's a sad day for our democracy when, just because she is not likeable and may well even be incompetent at her job, a person is denied the basic rights of a citizen. And those rights include that one is innocent until proven guilty."

By 30 August, The Citizen ran a front page article with the headline "Thabo knew about Manto theft." In the article, ANC head of the presidency Smuts Ngonyama said "President Thabo Mbeki actually knew about it because the ANC knew about it."

So how should the President have dealt with an exceptionally public crisis that focused on two critical issues, disclosure of a "hidden" issue that basically tells the world our minister of health has a criminal record and that she is alleged to be an alcoholic who received a liver transplant simply because of her position in government?

## **LESSONS LEARNT:**

- **Lesson one:**

**When there are storm clouds on the horizon, deal with them immediately!** If it was in fact true that President Mbeki was aware of the minister's conviction of theft in Botswana, then either the President or his official spokesperson should have issued a public statement immediately confirming that they were aware of the conviction for theft. One golden rule of PR crisis management that is crucial in this case is to "tell it all, tell it fast and tell it honestly." This may have helped the Government and the ANC to take back some form of control of the situation. It would have also acted as a measure to slow down or control speculation and rumour mongering.

- **Lesson two:**

**Do not practice ostrich management - communicate consistently.** News reports contained significant comment in general about the series of Sunday Times articles but there was no consistent comment either challenging or dealing with the issues in the public domain by the Presidential spokesperson. In addition, most of the communication initiated by the President went straight onto the ANC's website. Communicating only to the party faithful is not the best strategy as you marginalise the rest of South Africa.

- **Lesson three:**

**Never get confrontational with the media.** The Sunday Times' allegations have been termed "Garbage" by Tshabalala-Msimang's spokesperson Sibani Mngadi (Mail and Guardian, August 17-23). Comments made in the media also alleged that the Sunday Times was engaged in "gutter journalism.". A classic mistake that companies and organisations make when confronting a crisis is to hurl abuse at the media. The best strategy is to simply deal with the issues at hand, communicate openly with the media and always be accessible to them when

they need additional input. View the media as a critical part of your communications chain; attack them and you negatively affect your ability to reach your audience.

- **Lesson four:**

**If you are a boss and a staff member has been caught out, take the moral high ground and do the right thing.** While the jury is still out as to whether the minister was bumped up the donor list and the President was aware of her criminal record, he could have immediately initiated a commission of enquiry to investigate the allegations and asked the minister to take a short leave of absence. If nothing untoward was found then she could have resumed her normal duties or she could have resigned if damning evidence was found.

Just recently the American senator for the State of Idaho, Larry Craig, resigned over allegations of soliciting sex from an undercover police officer in the men's toilet at an airport. British cabinet ministers have also resigned over various allegations including Liberal Democrats Home Affairs spokesperson Mark Oaten resigning in 2005 after it was revealed by the News of the World that he paid rentboys for sex. Why should South Africa be any different?

- **Lesson five:**

**Always have a succession plan for senior staff members.** As soon as a company or organisation hires someone to hold a senior position, a succession policy and plan needs to be put in place. This succession plan will lay out what will be done and said publicly and privately by the employer should the senior executive need to be "shown the door", resign or become a victim of tragic circumstances. The succession plan must strategically consider all potential scenarios that could cloud over the employee. Clearly based on how the Government dealt with Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge and with the sacking of then Deputy President Jacob Zuma (the country waited a few weeks for the new deputy president to be announced) there is allegedly either no succession plan or a very scant one at that.

- **Lesson six:**

**Make sure you have a robust media relations plan.** Possibly one of the most crucial strategies any organisation should have before they face a crisis is an active strategy of media engagement. A core part of this is to communicate with the media as often as possible, hold specific one-on-one briefing sessions, all with the express aim of fostering good relations and opening up channels of communications on key issues and developments. By the way the events detailed above have rolled out, the Health Ministry's media relations plans either do not exist or are haphazard in their roll out.

- **Lesson seven:**

**If you had some media credits stored in the media bank, you could cash some of them in.** The fact is that the health minister and her ministry have such an abysmal track record of delivery that there is almost nothing on which to spin her crisis PR. "It is pretty safe to wager that Tshabalala-Msimang has been the worst minister in post-apartheid South Africa" (Mail and Guardian, August 17-23). If the minister had a superb track record of delivery against brilliant healthcare strategies, then it may have been easier to defend her against the allegations that emerged in the Sunday Times. Simply put, the Minister's PR bank is insolvent, there is nothing strategic to build any recovery strategy on.

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