

## **NO POWER, NO LEADERSHIP, NO CONFIDENCE**

In times of crises it is critical that the head of an organisation takes centre stage to communicate consistently until the crisis is deemed over.

“The same is true of South Africa,” says Evan Bloom, MD of Crisis Communications Consultancy. “The country is experiencing a crippling energy crisis and President Thabo Mbeki has been conspicuous by his absence for almost the entire duration of the nationwide power outages.”

The challenges facing South Africa due to its inability to supply enough electricity to satisfy its daily domestic and commercial requirements has become international news with far-reaching consequences.

According to the Sunday Times (27 January 2008), the crisis had its roots in 1998 when President Mbeki ignored a warning by the national energy utility Eskom, that there would be a power crisis 2007.

“It is at this stage that the President should have initiated a strategic crisis plan that focused on addressing the pending problem at hand and communicating to the public, and to local and international business,” continues Bloom. “Current circumstances indicate that this was totally ignored and South Africa and its people are paying a very steep price with some mines closing temporarily. Furthermore, questions are being raised about our ability to complete the 2010 Soccer World Cup stadiums and host the event here.”

Thus, bearing in mind that President Mbeki ignored warnings nine years ago, how should he have taken charge of the current situation following the power failures that have cut a swathe across South Africa during January 2008?

“The president could have followed a basic eight-point crisis plan that would have gone a long way to instil some measure of confidence in the government by local business, international markets and the South African public,” explains Bloom.

These eight points are:

### **Rule 1: Tell it all, tell it fast**

The President should have taken control of the communication process proactively by telling all stakeholders in South Africa why the power outages are happening. What this would have done is help the government stamp its authority on the management of the current predicament and thus limit speculation and rumour mongering.

### **Rule 2: The President must take centre stage**

President Mbeki should have taken the centre stage. He should have been the primary person that dealt with all key media issues. This would have gone a long way in conveying to the public that he and the government are taking the current situation very seriously.

### **Rule 3: A single spokesperson with constant messaging**

President Mbeki should have been communicating consistently, on a daily basis, talking his citizens and business through the crisis. His spin doctors should have

sought every opportunity to get the President in front of the media across South Africa as well as meeting relevant international media.

**Rule 4: Bring in third parties**

In addition to communicating consistently, President Mbeki could have brought in third-party experts to help him add credibility to what he was saying. Sadly this strategy is now a lost opportunity. Whoever he brings in to help him address South Africans as to what action government is going to take will do little to restore the public's confidence in government to manage this crisis. In fact, the public's confidence can best be described as 'insolvent' when it comes to the power crisis.

**Rule 5: Honesty and openness wins the day**

Possibly the most important action for the President would have been to stand up and take immediate and absolute responsibility for the power crisis in a direct way. Saying "Eskom was right and the government was wrong" (Sunday Times, 27 January 2008), is a lame duck way of apologising, especially as it is after the fact and following almost two weeks of horrific power outages.

**Rule 6: Keep the messaging constant**

Messaging relating to the energy crisis should have been transmitted consistently to all audiences. A break in messaging would allow disinformation and wild speculation to take root. Clearly, speculation as to what is happening in South Africa is rife!

**Rule 7: Cast the communication net far and wide**

The President should have been talking to big business, organised labour, international and domestic investors, the media and most importantly, his people - the people of South Africa.

**Rule 8: Announce new preventative measures**

Finally, the President should have announced a host of preventative measures and strategies that government was going to roll out to meet the issues and challenges. To date there has been almost nothing concrete from the President or government on what government is going to do and what business and South African's citizens can expect and should themselves be doing. Having Eskom and the media telling consumers what they can do to save energy is a lost opportunity for the President. He could have used his briefings as a unifying tool.

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