

New language needed to help move Issue Management onto the offensive

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Abstract *The terms reactive and proactive are commonly used to distinguish different management responses to issues, particularly the defensive issue mode which is often categorised as 'crisis prevention'. But beyond the defensive stance is a further issue management mode which enables organisations not just to respond to issues already on the public agenda, but to deliberately seek to raise public issues and to pursue planned strategic outcomes. This paper proposes new language to identify this mode and examines detailed case studies to explore the concept.*

Introduction

Many practitioners and academics regard Issue Management primarily as a tool for 'crisis prevention'. At least in part this is due to the limitations of language used to define and categorise the distinctly different modes of Issue Management.

From its earliest days Issue Management was positioned largely as a process by which organisations can effectively deal with external issues early, in order to minimize their impact and perhaps help prevent them becoming crises.

This approach is typified by one early definition which presented Issue Management as 'the process by which the corporation can identify, evaluate and respond to those social and political issues which might significantly impact on it.' (Johnson, 1983).

To this basic concept was then added the element of incorporating organisational response into a more systematic, strategic mechanism, as typified by the assertion that Issue Management 'attempts to minimise surprises which accompany social and political change by serving as an early warning system for potential environmental threats... and... attempts to promote more systematic and effective responses to particular issues by serving as a co-ordinating and integrating force within the corporation.' (Wartick and Rude, 1986).

Fifteen years later a standard textbook summarised these two strands of development. 'Two points capture the essence of Issue Management:

- 1 early identification of issues with potential impact on an organisation, and
- 2 a strategic response designed to mitigate or capitalize on their consequences' (Cutlip, Centre and Broom, 2000).

At the same time, the development of various issue life cycle models reinforced the notion that Issue Management is primarily for crisis prevention, or in the popular phrase: 'A crisis is an issue which wasn't properly managed'. And this concept has been further reinforced by the compound expression 'issue and crisis management' being used to present the two disciplines almost as a single entity at countless workshops and conferences and in university courses and textbooks.

All of this has contributed to the continuing positioning of Issue Management virtually as a precursor to Crisis Management. However, while Crisis Management has become increasingly sophisticated over the past decade, Issue Management has been dragged along in its wake and has in some ways been overshadowed by the success of its 'big brother'.

One result has been to hinder the full development of Issue Management beyond its defensive mode.

Evolving Language to Categorise Issue Strategies

From the beginning of the discipline, various attempts have been made to categorise organisational responses to issues. The first substantial effort was in the seminal Chase-Jones Issue Management model which suggested three alternative management responses:

- Reactive** To oppose change and react to the initiatives of interest groups as well as elected and appointed officials
- Adaptive** To anticipate change and offer accommodation before unacceptable changes are legislated or mandated
- Dynamic** To anticipate and attempt to shape the direction of change by developing real solutions to real problems with real results (Jones and Chase, 1979)

The important point in this approach is that the terminology focusses not on the characteristics of issues themselves, but largely on the different ways an organisation can respond to an issue. In other words, all three styles are effectively defensive – reacting to issues as they are presented.

A few years later two American academics proposed a fourth strategy, which they defined as **Catalytic** (Crable and Vibbert, 1985).

They argued that 'organisational planners and executives seeking to succeed in the policy forum ... cannot afford to wait until others have defined and legitimised issues before entering the issue arena'. They proposed much earlier implementation of a Catalytic response which 'urged organisations to take the offensive (not the defensive) and to engage in affirmative (not negative) action'.

Subsequently, Bucholz and others attempted a different approach to the challenge of definition and formulated four generic responses to public issues. (Bucholz, Evans and Wagley, 1989)

Reactive Fighting change. Attempting to block or postpone any public policy issues which might change corporate operations rather than trying to develop a constructive position. Sometimes called stonewalling.

Accommodative Adapting to change. Adapting as well as possible to change resulting from the policy change and making no attempt to fight or influence change or take action to anticipate change.

Proactive Influencing change. Attempting to change the environment in which issues are resolved and taking the initiative to alter the expectation of stakeholders and change public opinion.

Interactive Adjusting to and influencing change. Acknowledging the relationship between business and society, the organisation emphasises mutual participation and adaptation, and involves development or negotiation of an arrangement which commands the co-operation of all significant parties.

Despite these and other efforts to broaden the identification of genuine distinctions in management processes, the most generally and widely accepted definitions in the Issue Management discipline remain **Reactive** and **Proactive**.

A key problem here is that there is no agreement about what proactive means. A Danish paper, for example, states that 'instead of waiting for threats and opportunities to become manifest imperatives, the proactive organisation attempts to influence and shape external developments in ways perceived as favourable in terms of its own aspirations.' (Christensen and Jones, 1996). But the authors then go on to argue that proactivity, by definition, tends to circumscribe legitimate public dialogue in pursuit of a self-defined universe.

Regardless of differing understandings, the reactive/proactive language largely describes styles of defensive management response rather than distinct modes of Issue Management. And it is a limitation which has helped to inhibit the full realisation of the value and scope of Issue Management as a business discipline.

To fully optimise the discipline it is important therefore to explore beyond the defensive mode.

In their presentation of the Catalytic approach, Crable and Vibbert (1985) not only argued for organisations to 'take the offensive (not the defensive)' but added that this approach 'seeks to create policy opportunities rather than to deflect trends or policies which seem undesirable'.

This idea was taken up two years later by the pioneer theoretician Ray Ewing (1987), who acknowledged the role of Issue Management in defending a corporation against 'surprises' but added: "Issue Management's second responsibility is to seek out and identify opportunities inherent in issues others generate *or the company seeks to generate*". (Italics in original).

It is this 'second responsibility' that provides the basis for defining a mode of Issue Management beyond the defensive. Moving from the reactive, crisis-prevention mode to truly seeking to use the full scope of Issue Management to deliberately generate issues for the public agenda and pursue specific societal outcomes.

New Terminology to Capture Another Mode

Like the maxim 'If you can't measure it, you can't improve it', there seems to be a parallel concept within management theory that 'If you can't name it, you can't define and promote it'.

Some new language is therefore needed and it is proposed that the two modes of Issue Management be categorised as **defensive** and **offensive**.

A **defensive** issue is one where an organisation faces or is likely to face a hostile or potentially hostile public or regulatory environment. The organisation must choose either to respond or not to respond, and if it does respond it may do so either reactively or proactively.

An **offensive** issue is one where the organisation is not required to react to any external environment, but chooses voluntarily to generate an issue. This would normally be in the expectation that the issue being generated has the potential to create a positive environment or yield positive outcomes for the organisation. (Jaques, 2002)

In the late 1980's Wartick and Rude appeared to argue against this latter use of the discipline. They warned that 'issue management is not intended to be a vehicle for creating social change or for controlling societal events'. (Wartick and Rude, 1988)

However, that warning has certainly not been heeded in the last decade, particularly among non-government organisations (NGOs) and other community organisations, some of which exist almost entirely to initiate and promote a specific issue.

Business has been slower to recognise the very real strengths of offensive Issue Management, perhaps because of its close link to another recognized business activity – strategic planning. But offensive Issue Management is in fact a distinct discipline that brings particular tools and techniques to bear.

The difference between offensive and defensive Issue Management is at its most evident in the context of agenda-setting, distinguished by the difference between responding to issues already on the public agenda, and setting out deliberately to position issues on the agenda.

A good example of offensive Issue Management to drive a subject onto the public agenda is seen in the now famous campaign of Vermont schoolteacher Jody Williams. Distressed by the long term damage caused by land mines and angered by international apathy, Ms Williams began a landmine awareness initiative which grew into a fully fledged Issue Management strategy and became the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) involving more than 1,300 NGOs in over 85 countries (www.icbl.org). The campaign eventually drew in high profile supporters (including Princess Diana) and ultimately led to an international Convention on land mines and won ICBL and Ms Williams the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize.

There is a very extensive literature on agenda-setting (Kosicki, 1993), particularly in the field of mass communication, where the focus is primarily on how subjects reach the public agenda and how they secure a share of attention. But in the field of Issue Management, the key element

(as exemplified by Jody Williams) is not only forcing an issue onto the public agenda, but also having the specific objective, strategy and tactics which characterise effective Issue Management. That difference is perhaps best captured by the distinction between influencing **what the public think about** (cognition) and influencing **what the public think** (predisposition).

The challenges and characteristics of true offensive Issue Management as defined can be illustrated by two high profile and very public Australian case studies.

The first was the sustained effort by a small group of furniture retailers in Victoria to drive the issue of Sunday shopping and change the trading laws of the state. The other was the ambitious campaign to persuade the Australian government and public that high-level nuclear waste from around the world should be brought to Australia for disposal.

The Case for Sunday Shopping

When the Victorian Ministry for Industry Mark Birrell announced in September 1996 that the State Government would scrap restrictions on shop trading hours (Green and Faroque, 1996) the public knew the decision followed months of 'civil disobedience' by retailers who were openly and systematically defying Sunday trading laws to stretch the resources of shop inspectors and clog up the courts. One rebellious, high profile hardware shop came to symbolise the resistance movement.

It was only later revealed that the decision came after a year-long covert offensive Issue Management campaign waged by an alliance of eight furniture retail chains who had funded a strategy to overturn the existing laws (Elias, 1996).

Following a similar and successful effort in the United Kingdom, the international furniture retailer Ikea, with seven like-minded local retailers, pledged a reported \$100,000 to mount an Issue Management strategy which had three key elements:

- a lobbying campaign targeting Government Members of Parliament and the Liberal Party State Council;
- sustained defiance of the law with as many stores as possible staying open to overwhelm the enforcement agencies; and
- a consistent legal defence based on a legalistic constitutional claim made by Ikea which went to appeal and stalled other prosecutions.

With 320 cases banked up in the courts, a further 1,300 enforcement notices snarling the administrative process, and the validity of key shop trading legislation under appeal, the Minister capitulated, admitting that 'the government could no longer uphold the law because the legal process was difficult and prosecutions did not appear to serve as a deterrent' (Elias, 1996).

In essence, for the apparent cost of perhaps 20 or 30 lounge suites, a handful of determined and united furniture retailers had forever changed the trading laws of the entire state.

Within two years, one of the campaigners, retailer Harvey Norman, commenced a similar strategy to defy the law in Western Australia (Kitney, 1998).

But there the campaign met some new hurdles, including a very determined political leader and powerful lobbying by small business demanding protection. After five years of controversy, Premier Geoff Gallup announced in June 2003 that week night shop trading hours would be extended after the next election, in 2005, but that extending Sunday trading laws was ruled out until at least 2008 (Bolt, 2003).

Even Harvey Norman CEO Gerry Harvey, a veteran of the successful Victorian campaign, finally had to concede defeat. 'The game's over... The Government won, the people lost. They've effectively closed the door on Sunday Trading for 10 or 20 years' (Macfarlane and McGary, 2003).

Discussion

From a public affairs perspective, the Victorian shop trading hours campaign had all the hallmarks of classic offensive Issue Management:

- a determination to aggressively drive the agenda and change the status quo;
- an alliance of like-minded proponents prepared to take a risk;
- a well funded and clearly focussed strategy; and
- as is often the case with successful Issue Management, a campaign organisation which is not necessarily obvious (at least to the general public) until after the event.

When an attempt was made to reproduce the same effort in Western Australia the social, political and economic environment may have been different. But in addition, the fact that the Victorian plotters had perhaps unwisely permitted their clandestine strategy to be so publicly revealed,

may have created an additional hurdle against the likelihood of success in the west.

'Nuclear Catacombs' in the Desert

In March 1997 Pangea Resources Australia was formed, with heavy backing from British Nuclear Fuels Limited (100% owned by the United Kingdom Government), to push a proposal for a giant underground storage dump in Australia for high level radioactive waste from foreign nuclear power plants. The plan became public in a leaked corporate video in December 1998 and was later spelled out in a lengthy investigation by a Melbourne newspaper, *The Sunday Age*, where a more detailed account of the project can be read (Daly, 1999).

In summary, the plan was to import 20% of the world's nuclear waste in thousands of 100-tonne containers, transported in 70 specially constructed ships, and to store it in 20 square kilometers of tunnels and caverns deep under the Australian desert. The benefits for Australia were claimed to be \$200 billion over the 40 year life of the project, plus \$90 billion in government taxes and royalties, contributing almost 1% of GDP and creating over 50,000 jobs.

Within the general field of communication it is well recognised that 'simply mentioning radioactive waste can spur immediate and emotional reactions from people' and that the subject needs much more than just the presentation of technical information (Price, 1994). However this proposal is particularly interesting from an Issue Management perspective because right from the start the Federal Government and Opposition completely rejected the plan. Despite that, Pangea President James Voss was reportedly confident the project had 'a reasonable probability of success'. He spelled out very openly his intention to use consultants and researchers to press the case, and to persuade local construction and shipbuilding companies of the financial benefits of direct participation. He estimated the approval process would take five to ten years.

The strategic essence of the campaign was in fact well captured by Dr Dominick Jenkins of Friends of the Earth (who had leaked the in-house video). He told *The Sunday Age*: 'These people are taking a very long perspective because they know the fundamental fact that there is a global nuclear-waste crisis and this crisis is growing. There is a lot of money in solving the waste problem and to lay the basis (of the solution) in Australia is the best policy for them. They are willing to wait it out.' (Daly, 1999).

In the event, it all became too hard and Pangea ceased operations in 2001 'since it appeared unlikely that such projects would be commercially

viable on a reasonable timescale⁷. The proponents concluded, in a masterpiece of understatement: 'A broader base of knowledge and consensus seemed necessary before a project could go ahead.' (McCombie, 2002).

Two key Pangea managers quickly surfaced as Executive Director and Programme Director of ARIUS (The Association for Regional and International Underground Storage), formed in Switzerland in February 2002 as 'an organisation without commercial goals but with a mission to promote storage and disposal of radioactive waste.'^(www.arius-world.org). Within months the new organisation was expressing interest in Australia, as a likely international storage site, prompting the Australian Federal Government to once again state its continuing opposition to such an idea (McGauran, 2002).

Discussion

As with the Victorian Sunday trading issue, this campaign too showed some of the hallmarks of classic offensive Issue Management:

- a clearly stated objective to place the issue on the public and political agenda;
- a very blunt admission of the difficulty faced and a statement of long term commitment; and
- every appearance of sufficient financial backing to sustain a highly controversial challenge.

Another important characteristic of any offensive Issue Management campaign is that it should also have at least some realistic chance of success, no matter how remote. Although this campaign was seemingly abandoned after four years, only time will prove it a success or not.

Interestingly, at about the same time, the Australian Federal Government was driving its own Issue Management campaign to locate and then secure support for a repository for the country's domestically generated low and intermediate level radioactive waste. The eleven year search for a site – involving all the inevitable argument and counter-argument, local opposition, consultation and parochialism – ended in July 2003 when the Federal Government purchased a site for the project near Woomera (McGauran, 2003).

This campaign certainly clouded the concurrent Pangea proposal and it is even possible that this confusion may have adversely impacted Pangea's chances of success. But regardless of whether there is any relationship

between the two projects, the contrast between them helps highlight the difference between defensive and offensive Issue Management.

In one case, the proponent (the Australian Federal Government) had no choice but to launch a programme to solve a recognised and accepted national problem – what to do with the country's own radioactive waste. It was a classic defensive Issue Management campaign.

The Pangea project was also based on a legitimate need to properly dispose of nuclear waste (albeit high level waste) but in this case, after reportedly studying and rejecting China, Argentina and South Africa, the commercial proponents chose to commence a large scale Issue Management campaign to promote disposal in Australia, which arguably had no apparent prior association with the problem.

Conclusion

Because most analyses of Issue Management have focussed on different defensive modes – either reactive or proactive – there has been insufficient attention to the important and productive offensive mode. Lack of generally accepted terminology in the field is self-evidently not the only barrier to full optimisation of the discipline, but adequately distinguishing these two key modes seems essential to supporting their proper development.

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