



Great Lakes Garments, Inc.

TEACHING NOTE

Purpose of Case Study

1. To encourage students to think about the role of strategic communication within an organization.
2. To enhance understanding of managing a large-scale corporate communication effort in response to a negative situation.
3. To help students understand the role of media in focusing public attention on negative issues.
4. To give students an appreciation for the importance of effective communication, both internally and publicly, to the long-term success of any business.

Identify the Business Problem

The business problem in this case involves communicating a clear, precise message to employees of Great Lakes Garments (GLG). In addition, the company must also think about the implications of this message to other stakeholders (customers, business partners, the community at large). Successfully communicating the company's position to its employees, customers, and the community is crucial to Great Lakes' ability to sustain its business through the critical period of the layoff.

This teaching note was prepared by Cynthia Maciejczyk under the direction of James O'Rourke, Concurrent Associate Professor of Management, as the basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of an administrative situation.

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Forecast the Most Desirable Outcome

The most desirable outcome for GLG in the short term is that the layoff will not adversely affect the company's public image. To accomplish this, the company must communicate the situation clearly to employees so that those who are being laid off understand the conditions. The long-term outcome is that the company will be able to ride out the drop in production and rehire most, if not all, of its laidoff employees.

Identify the Critical Issues

These are the main issues involved in this case:

- Developing a communication strategy that addresses all constituencies.
- Maintaining the goodwill of employees, customers, shareholders, and the community in view of a negative situation.
- Addressing the specifics of the company's contract with the ILGWU (International Ladies Garment Workers Union).
- Drafting messages for another person's signature.

Stakeholder perspectives include:

- Employees (those being retained and those being laid off)
- Management
- ILGWU
- Customers
- Vendors and suppliers
- Community-at-large
- Shareholders
- Competitors in the industry

Identify and Discuss Possible Solutions to the Problem

The case calls for a communication strategy plan and a letter or memo written to all employees. (Instructors: You may choose to modify the case and have students write either an "all-hands" memo to all employees, or to have them write a memo only to those employees being laid off, or to write both an "all-hands" message and a more targeted message to laidoff employees.)

Explain How to Communicate the Solution

Great Lakes Garments management must communicate their position clearly to all constituencies, but most importantly to Great Lakes employees. The form of communication for the employees is an “all-hands” memo written by the student for the signature of the president of the company. The student must also address the company's communication strategy in general in a communication strategy memo.

All-Hands Memo

This memo should explain *clearly* why the layoffs are necessary (the conditions leading up to the decision), what the layoff procedures will be (when the layoff will go into effect, how people will be notified, what services will be offered, etc.), and how the company as a whole plans to deal with the situation. The goal is to inform the employees so that they will have a better understanding of the situation. This can potentially prevent negative publicity originating from disgruntled employees. If they understand the conditions that have created the situation, they are less likely to feel abused by the company.

Communication Strategy Memo:

The key to successful communication plan is to develop strategies tailored to the information needs of each stakeholder group. Strategies for communicating with external stakeholders may include a press release, talking with the local and national media, letters to current customers, memos to business partners (suppliers and vendors), posting information to the company's Web site, e-mailing or writing to shareholders, to name a few. This memo must also communicate the strategy clearly to the other managers within the organization and identify their roles in the plan.

Potential Difficulties for Students

Many students may not be familiar with unions – how they work in relation to the companies that employ their members. When an employee is a member of a union, the union becomes the formal representative of the member with regard to all dealings with the company on personnel issues. It will be important to point out to them that the company is bound by its contract with the ILGWU to communicate in the specified manner. If the company does not follow the procedure outlined in its contract, the union can (and certainly would) sue for breach of contract, which would further damage the company's public image and its reputation with employees.

Teaching the Case

One week prior

Distribute the case at least one lesson before you intend to discuss it in class. Tell the students that you will focus on several issues during the discussion of the case, including the following:

- The best way to inform employees of bad news
- Drafting messages for another's signature
- An effective communication plan for this crisis
- Identifying the key issues of the case
- Identifying the major stakeholder groups in this situation

First 30 minutes of the class

Spend the first 5-10 minutes of the class session briefly recapping the facts of the case. Then, for the next 20 minutes, have the students identify the issues listed above.

Some points for student consideration may include:

What are the issues involved when writing for another person's signature?

Should the writer adopt the "voice" of the person who will sign the message? How easy is this to accomplish?

Is there a right and a wrong way to inform people of bad news? You may want to spend some time talking about the indirect approach to developing a message. The indirect approach is useful for persuading an audience or delivering bad news. In this case, the writer will want to encourage the target audience (laidoff employees) to read and understand the conditions that caused the layoff, before jumping in to the bad news.

The media's role in this situation. Students will have to address communicating with the media as part of the communication strategy. How can GLG use the media to its advantage in this situation?

The union's role in this situation. Students will need to give some thought to how important communicating with the union will be.

Strategies for communicating with the different stakeholders. Who are the various stakeholders, what are their interests, and what type of message will they require (see below)?

Next, identify the stakeholders in this case and their separate interests and concerns:

Employees. The employees in this case fall into two broad categories: those being retained and those being laid off. Students should give some thought to how a message should be developed for each group, if a different message for each is necessary, and how to craft that message. Students should keep in mind primary and secondary audiences for these messages. Once a memo or letter is sent out, it becomes the property of the recipient, who can choose to publicize its contents.

Management. The communication strategy memo should address the various management roles in the plan. Students should make reasonable assumptions about the existence of a Public Relations department, Human Resources department, Corporate Communications office, Legal, etc.

ILGWU. The union has a vested interest in its members. The union becomes the bargaining force for the employees in a lay-off situation. It will be critical for the company to maintain a positive relationship with the union throughout the layoff. One of the ways to do this is by keeping the union informed of any developments.

Customers. Customers will be concerned about Great Lakes' ability to produce. Demand for its product has already slowed, which has contributed to the layoff situation. What message would GLG want to convey to customers?

Vendors and suppliers. GLG's business partners will be concerned about the company's ability to pay for supplies and services. It's a safe assumption that these companies also deal with GLG's competitors.

Community at large. As a large employer in the area, GLG has a presence in and a relationship with the surrounding community. Students will want to give some thought to how GLG is portrayed by the local media and how GLG can preserve a positive reputation within the community.

Shareholders. This group will be concerned about the financial well-being of the company as it manages this situation. Many also want to be associated with an ethically sound company (as do consumers and employees). Management needs to keep this group informed so that shareholders will make informed decisions with regard to their investment.

Industry competitors. Competitors always watch closely when a situation such as this arises. They pay particular attention to how the events are perceived in the marketplace and how the company handles its public relations. They are interested in not only capitalizing on the fallout of the situation, but also learning from the mistakes of others.

Last portion of class

Summarize student responses. Ask students for their communication plan. What would they do in Great Lakes Garments management's shoes?

Issues to consider include:

Strategic communication objectives. What are GLG's strategic business objectives and how can they be linked directly to the communication objectives?

Audience analysis. Who are we most concerned about reaching? Why do we want to communicate with them? What outcome do we hope for when we reach them?

Message construction. What do we want to say to each of these audiences? Will our message differ from one set of stakeholders to another? How simple or complex should the message be?

Medium selection. How should we try to reach these stakeholders? Should we consider electronic means? How about print means? Should we telemediate our message through the press? Should we try to communicate directly with one or more of the stakeholder groups?

Measurement of outcome. How will we know if we have succeeded? What criteria should we use to determine success? If we're not successful, what should we consider changing first: medium, message, audience, or objectives?

Last 5 minutes of class

Conclude the discussion.

The key to this case, as with nearly all other management communication cases, is to let the students speak freely, but guide their comments toward the situation facing Great Lakes Garments and the communication issues the case presents.

Key Facts

This list of key facts is included for your reference. A list of discussion questions follows.

- GLG is a mid-sized, publicly held manufacturing firm located in the Midwestern United States.
- The current collective bargaining agreement with the ILGWU (International Ladies Garment Workers Union) is in the second year of a four-year term. The contract calls for a minimum two-weeks' notice in writing prior to layoffs.

- The board voted for a structured lay-off plan to avoid a near-term cash flow problem, caused by reduced demand for product, and interest payments on a series of long-term bonds, pension payments, and tax payments all coming due.
- All management employees are subjected to a pay freeze, with all senior management agreeing to a 10 percent pay cut. These measures, while symbolic, will not generate the needed cash.
- The layoffs will involve mostly recent hires, but may include some who have been with the firm for as long as five years. Targeted are 200 out of 1,500 employees.
- These will be mostly third-shift production employees (including assemblers, finishers, sorters, cutters, and other lower wage-scale employees).
- Lay-off period will be a minimum of 90 days, perhaps as long as six months.
- Some employees (25-50) will probably not return at all.

Questions for Discussion

These questions are for use in class and may help provide a deeper level of understanding--they will be most helpful after the case has been digested by the students and some initial discussion has taken place. Discussion questions should focus on communication issues involved in the case.

1. How important is the union's role with regard to the company's communication strategy for employees?
2. How important is a clear corporate communication strategy to a company's strategic objectives?
3. Who are the most important stakeholders in this case? How would you go about prioritizing the various responses this case requires?
4. How do you deliver bad news and still maintain the goodwill of those affected?