

# Issues Management

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Nostradamus has nothing on W. Howard Chase.

Many people in the 21st century believe Nostradamus had an uncanny ability to predict the future. While the 16th century French scholar wrote extensively about his visions of the future, he did nothing to change the course of "future history." Enter W. Howard Chase, a corporate public relations practitioner who designed the first issues management model in 1977.<sup>1</sup> Predicting the future wasn't good enough for Chase. He wanted to do something about it.

Issues management is the process of identifying emerging issues and trends that may affect an organization -- and then preparing a proactive response to deal with them. Think of the major issues of our time, such as health care, terrorism, and the environment. None of these appeared over night. They evolved over a period of time. Organizations that took notice of these issues as they developed are probably better positioned than most others to address the problems and challenges of the future. By engaging in issues management, organizations are able to identify challenges and administer solutions on their own terms, rather than on someone else's.

Terminology is important in issues management. There is a difference between an incident and an issue. An incident tends to be a one-time episode isolated from those not directly involved. For example, a random act of violence that is not repeated may be traumatic for those involved but of little meaning to society at-large. For something to be an issue, it must meet three criteria: it must be evolving, must influence the actions of multiple stakeholders, and must have the potential of evolving into some form of policy. If the aforementioned act of violence involved the use of a concealed handgun on school grounds, that, unfortunately, would not be the first time something like that had happened. It

would become part of a much wider debate over gun laws involving a variety of stakeholders. Under these conditions, it would be part of an issue.

In many ways, issues management is similar to crisis management (see Chapter 13). Both are forward-thinking exercises that first identify potential risks and then develop contingencies to address them. However, issues management is more strategic than crisis management. Crisis plans tend to be tactical, event-specific. They provide guidance for how organizations should act under certain specific circumstances. Issues management tries to identify social and political trends as they emerge. Using this knowledge, organizations mold responses that help organizations use this knowledge to achieve their strategic goals before they reach a crisis stage.

As you might imagine, issues management starts with identifying issues. This is often referred to as scanning, as in scanning the horizon to see what is coming. Organizations can scan in a variety of ways. John Naisbitt won acclaim as a sort of modern-day Nostradamus with the publication of *Megatrends: Ten New Directions Transforming Our Lives* in 1980.<sup>2</sup> However, his vision of the future did not involve magical powers or the use of a crystal ball. Through content analysis of hundreds of newspaper clippings and magazine articles, Naisbitt identified the predominant forces pushing society at the start of the Information Age. That was heady stuffy back then -- and very influential. It was also the product of research -- something anyone can do.

The problem with adopting Naisbitt's approach to scanning is that most organizations lack the time, resources, and patience for that level of content analysis. Instead, they prefer quicker, less costly alternatives, such as subscriptions to news clipping services, focus groups, meetings with advisory boards, and in-house surveys. Like Naisbitt, they gather scraps of information as if each were a piece of a puzzle that when properly assembled provides a clear picture. A military intelligence officer does the same thing when trying to determine an adversary's intentions. If scanning identifies a relevant issue, organizations study the issue's evolution, a process known as monitoring.

Regardless of the scanning methodology used, an organization should address these questions:

- What trends/issues are emerging that could affect our organization's ability to achieve its goals? How can they help us? How can they hurt us?
- What trends/issues are emerging that could affect our stakeholders' ability to achieve their goals? How can those issues help them? How can the issues hurt them?
- For each of these issues/trends, where will our goals and values align with those of our stakeholders? Where will they conflict?
- Do these trends/issues suggest a need to establish new relationships and/or strengthen existing ones?
- What are the risks in taking preemptive actions to address these trends/issues? Are there risks in taking no action?
- Do we have the necessary resources to address these trends/issues?

Once these questions have been answered, the next step is to move to a traditional strategic planning process. As with any such process, the plan should be driven by the organization's values and goals.

Practically all managers say they want to be proactive. Everyone wants to see into the future and "be ahead of the curve." An ongoing program of issues management allows them to do it -- and they don't have to be a Nostradamus, either.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Robert L. Heath and Richard Alan Nelson. *Issues Management: Corporate Public Policymaking in an Information Society*. (Beverly Hills, Calif.; Sage Publications, 1986), p. 7

<sup>2</sup> John Naisbitt. *Megatrends :Ten New Directions Transforming Our Lives*. (New York; Warner Books, 1980) pp. 290.