

Less outspoken people have time to formulate their thoughts on the screen & send them only when satisfied with what they have "said." And outspoken people can't dominate.

- Only about 20% of the meeting is spent using the system; remaining 80% of discussion is "typically much more productive than usual.... Many groups have reported that during these sessions they have felt for the first time a high collective potential: the possibility of doing really great work together."
- Large groups (in the hundreds) can work meaningfully together.
- Instant documentation of meeting minutes. Everything done on the system becomes part of the meeting record, available in hard copy to each participant at the end of the meeting, or anytime.
- It works even if participants aren't in the same room, using basic conference call technology, since groupware data can travel over regular phone lines.

## CYBER FUTURE PREDICTS CRACKDOWN ON CASUAL USE OF E-MAIL

Among 92 ways listed that info tech will change our lives:

*"Casual e-mail chatter can cause big trouble in a lawsuit because e-mail records are often preserved even when they are believed to have been deleted. Lawyers can use the discovery process to find incriminating evidence against a company in its electronic records."*

*"E-mail is particularly treacherous because people treat it like idle talk at the office water cooler. After the Rodney King beating, Los Angeles police officer Laurence Powell typed into his squad car's computer: 'I haven't beaten anyone this bad in long time' -- words that later came back to haunt him."*

### TIMELY OPPORTUNITY, WHY WAIT

Practitioners needn't wait for the reaction to set in. The problem's here now: not only dangerous chatter on e-mail but morale-afflicting gossip that moves beyond 1-on-1 to many -- plus time wasted that could go to productive work.

There's also the issue of access. Everyone can e-mail the CEO or anyone in key positions. Can they possibly respond to it all? If they don't, what's the scuttlebutt about their openness or accessibility?

Establishing -- and enforcing -- electronic communication guidelines & policies is a sticky issue. PR can, probably should design them. Should it be expected to enforce them as well? (The Cyber Future, \$4 from World Future Society, 7910 Woodmont av., Bethesda Md 20814)

## CASE: WHEN YOU'RE WRONG, THE BEST COURSE IS TO SAY SO

Philadelphia's gas & electric utility, PECO Energy, took "full responsibility" for an early morning explosion that killed 2, critically injured 1 & destroyed 2 Norristown homes Dec 19. Several calls came in reporting a gas leak but PECO's response took twice the expected time.

CEO Corbin McNeill apologized to the victims' families & told the press admitting responsibility was the right thing to do both morally & pragmatically. "It took a lot of soul searching but senior leadership fully agreed it's the right thing to do," Bill Jones, media rels mgr, told prr.

### CORPORATE VALUES

For 18 months, PECO employees have been involved in values training. With competition coming, and utilities becoming leaner & working to keep rates from rising, the values training is part of the changeover from being process-driven to becoming people-driven. A code of 8 values (called the PECO Advantage) was created to make the company's mission, vision & values part of its culture. "We preach this, say this is the way it should be. All of a sudden here it is, living proof that doing the right thing works."

PECO received very favorable press coverage & editorials, commending the company's honesty & openness. AP wrote:

*No excuses. No hedging. Hours after a gas leak caused two homes to explode, killing two & critically burning another, PECO Energy Co. uttered the magic words: It was our fault.*

*The utility's decision to take immediate responsibility for Tuesday's deadly blast is uncommon in the business world, but may strategically defuse negative public opinion and even reduce damage in lawsuits, experts said.*

Accepting responsibility "was not a product of the public relations department but of the leadership of the company -- where it has to begin. Their decision didn't surprise us in corporate & public affairs because they're that kind of people. Communications leadership begins at the top & this is a clear example."

Having it come from the top "makes the communication professional's job a joy. Any professional communicator worth his or her salt tries to counsel the leadership of their organization that openness is the best policy."



"We wanted to get out front of the issue. It was evident to the leadership that the response [to the calls about the gas leak] was inadequate & regrettable. We wanted to admit that up front for 2 reasons: 1) we owed it to the public; 2) we wanted to demonstrate that type of accountability to our employees."

**TIMING** PECO's decision to accept full responsibility occurred the day of the blast. "Timing...speed is incredibly important. The longer you wait, the more you appear indecisive." If you wait a day or 2, "it becomes abundantly evident that your response is inadequate," as if you were pressured into it, notes Jones.

**CRISIS COMMUNICATION PLAN** Because PECO operates 2 nuclear power plants, it is mandated to have a crisis preparedness plan. From its experience creating that, a non-nuclear crisis communications plan was put together. What it amounts to is a path for "quick communication." How the communications plan worked:

- Blast occurred at 1:50am.
- By 2:30am a media relations person was on call, alerted by the shift supervisor on duty that night.
- Then Jones, his boss & a colleague of Jones were alerted. Jones went into the office, the other 2 to the scene -- before daybreak.
- "We facilitated comms between & among the chrm, the CEO & the various divisions. The plan worked. By having everyone in touch with everyone else, we knew the parameters of the problem by 6am.
- "By midmorning I was drafting a statement. It was reviewed around noon & agreed that we ought to do this. Chrm set another conference call for 4:30. We advised him it couldn't wait that long; that if we're going to go public we'd have to do it in time for the evening news. The call was moved to 3pm.
- "At 3:15 the decision was made to do it. Even the lawyers concurred. Statement was already finalized. At 3:30 we began putting the wheels in motion for a 6pm news conference in the lobby of our building -- during a snow storm." Numerous media showed up -- a couple stations did live feeds right after the news conference, getting on the 6 o'clock news.
- CEO wanted to make the statement personally -- to hold the company to the PECO Advantage code. One of its planks, on accountability, mandates acknowledging mistakes & failures. (For copy of code, call pr.)
- PECO & the state utilities commission are investigating. Conclusions will be shared with officials in Norristown privately, then publicly

"PECO president Corbin McNeill & his colleagues should be role models for those in corporate America with the disturbing tendency to try to avoid the truth & its consequences."  
-- Philadelphia Daily News

during a news conference. "We made that commitment & will follow thru." Some changes in response policy have already been made, such as having emergency technicians on duty in their trucks at all times.

"As communication professionals, we've all been talking for years that being open & honest is the right thing. It just seems that now more & more businesses are agreeing. PECO didn't reinvent the wheel here. Johnson & Johnson with Tylenol is probably the landmark case. Ashland Oil took full responsibility for its oil spill in Pittsburgh. But it's unusual in the utility industry -- highly unusual apparently, based on the reaction we're getting from other companies."

### "MY PEOPLE" A GOOD PHRASE IF USED IN RIGHT CONTEXT

Responding to the First of the Year Issue which says top mgmt should "treat frontliners as their customers, not as 'my people,'" Bob Roemer of Amoco (Oak Brook, Ill) writes:

You "may have missed a point, perhaps semantically, about leadership. I want my leaders to consider people on their teams as 'my people' and take a personal & professional interest in them as such. We're talking here about quality leadership that builds credibility & loyalty (despite the rhetoric, not an undesirable quality in today's business environment)."

He disparages the current MBA "Gospel of the Nineties. You'd think some of the basic concepts of leadership like Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs & Herzberg's Motivational Hygiene Factors have been suspended. They haven't....

"Yes, treat members of your team as 'your people' if that means you are concerned about them & want to provide them the kind of environment in which they can motivate themselves for creative productivity. They are your people & you are responsible for them as a leader!"

### A GROWING TECHNIQUE WITH PROMISE FOR PR IS GROUPWARE

Used in a meeting, each participant has a laptop & all are linked together. A technician operates the server, allowing him/her to control all the other computers (whether 5 or 50 or more). Groupware facilitation software allows the technician to send written questions to the participants who then all type in their answers (anonymously).

At any time, participants can click on an area of their screens to see the accumulated comments from all other participants, instantly. "Twenty people brainstorming on a few topics in this fashion can easily generate 150-200 ideas in less than 10 minutes," notes Catalyst Groupware Update, newsletter from Catalyst Consulting Team (Soquel, Calif).

**BENEFITS**

- Aside from being fast, participation improves. Anonymity helps people feel more comfortable speaking their minds.