

Troublemaker tactics

Tim Toulmin and **Anthony Longden** consider a scenario where a head is having difficult relations with his or her staff

In this imaginary scenario, a recent review and reorganisation at a prominent independent school has resulted in tension between the head and a small number of disgruntled staff members, who are resistant to the changes.

In an attempt to derail the exercise, they have contacted the regional BBC News programme claiming that the head's plans have reduced the school to near chaos. They tell the journalist that the head and the senior leadership team have forced the changes through by bullying anyone opposing them. Morale is at rock bottom and, the informants add, there has been a revolt in the staffroom, teaching quality has been compromised, and there's mounting concern over safeguarding.

The BBC contacts the school, saying that having spoken to several staff, past and present, it intends to run a story on tomorrow's evening news bulletin. In the interests of right of reply it asks the school for a response and offers the head an interview on camera.

The head strongly suspects that one of the former members of staff referred to by the BBC is someone who left the school after being disciplined for poor performance and inappropriate behaviour. The staff member signed a non-disclosure agreement on his departure.

This individual has not managed to find a satisfactory new job and is known to have turned his anger and frustration back towards his former employer.

In addition, two current members of staff have been on bad terms with the head ever since the plans were announced.

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One of them is a close friend of the ex-member of staff, and the head believes this lies behind much of the campaign to cause trouble; the other is unhappy about a reallocation of duties which she sees as a demotion and has been vocal and indiscreet in her criticism of the entire senior leadership team.

The head believes the sources all have an axe to grind, and she doesn't recognise the situation as described by the BBC.

HOW SHOULD YOU REACT?

Option 1

Do nothing. These are plainly ridiculous and vexatious allegations, and any reasonable person will see them for what they are – a malicious attempt to undermine the authority of the head. Attempting to engage with this will entail time and expense, as well as giving the troublemakers what they want by effectively acknowledging that there's something wrong that requires a formal response.

Option 2

Call in the lawyers and threaten to sue those you suspect of being sources for the story – it's the only language these people understand. Don't issue any statement for broadcast, but tell the BBC that taking legal action is the most appropriate course in the face of such serious, inaccurate

and malicious claims. Remind the BBC of its obligations regarding accuracy and fairness.

Option 3

Reply to the BBC journalist with a 'strictly not for broadcast/publication' note that pushes back firmly against the allegations being made and highlights their likely motivation. Challenge the basis for broadcast by supplying counter information on a 'background' basis only, citing evidence including independent audit and inspection reports, and state there are no grounds for broadcast. Resist pressure to give an interview, since this will merely help to give the story credence.

Option 4

Launch an internal inquiry to find out who's behind the allegations, with a view to dismissing them for gross misconduct. Don't engage with the BBC – it can't run a response it doesn't have, and there's no need to dignify such malicious nonsense anyway.

Option 5

Issue a balanced statement to the BBC featuring a positive explanation of the changes, but also an acknowledgement that while there was a little resistance in the common room initially, this is all in the past and was not in any case of great significance. Draft and send an explanatory



letter to parents and other stakeholders before broadcast, so they know what to expect.

WHICH IS THE BEST OPTION?

Option 1

Not advisable. Passing up the opportunity to put your side of the story could result in significant reputational damage. Doing nothing will certainly not kill the story and is likely to be taken as acceptance the allegations are true. It's very difficult to regain any degree of control once something has been broadcast and it will take time and expense explaining the school's position to parents and other stakeholders – an explanation that will necessarily have to explain the school's initial silence.

Option 2

This will escalate matters needlessly and dramatically, portraying the school as heavy-handed, and giving truth to the lie that the school bullies its staff. It will be a gift to the BBC, which will waste no time in fully exploiting such a juicy new angle. Avoid.

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Option 3

Definitely worth trying in the first instance. The BBC journalist will, quite properly, want to balance the report, pitting the allegations against the school's response. Giving a ‘strictly not for broadcast/publication’ background briefing clearly demonstrates the school is trying to be cooperative, but is dismayed at the vexatious allegations that are being dredged up. A robust explanation of the position can often help a journalist realise that the sources have an axe to grind that could undermine their credibility. There's a good chance here that nothing will be broadcast – but if the BBC insists on going ahead, then you can offer a statement at a later date. Do not offer a spokesman for interview on a story like this: face-to-face encounters immediately boost the value of the media story and may move it up the running order.

Option 4

Unwise. Leak inquiries create an atmosphere of suspicion and fear. They invariably look puny, paranoid or defensive, and seldom if ever achieve anything other than making the hole deeper and fostering discontent. Any inquiry will detract from dealing with the issue at hand and do nothing to put the BBC off.

Option 5

Depending on the exact circumstances of the case, this approach can often be the right thing to do. However, it should be weighed against the fact it will guarantee a story being broadcast, since the statement confirms the school accepts something has happened. In this case there may still be a chance to head it off completely – see below.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Have confidence in the strength of your position and don't be tempted into knee-jerk responses at the first sign of media attention. Journalists will not concede any weakness in their position at the start of the process, but this doesn't mean that they have total confidence in every story. Bear in mind that dealing with the media can be like a formal negotiation – you might get a much better outcome if you are robust from the very start of the engagement.
- Do not attempt to root out or pursue sources. An aggressive response will be likened to a witch-hunt and is likely to make matters far worse.
- Once specific problems have been identified, carefully consider them – ignoring them will magnify the issue and will look like an admission of guilt.
- Remember that the media operates in a regulated environment and has to satisfy the requirements of various laws and codes of practice relating, for example, to ensuring accuracy and offering a reasonable right to reply. The end result may not look like the situation as described to you – journalists have to take into account what they are being told on both sides, and will then make an editorial judgement about whether the story is worth publishing or broadcasting.
- Situations like this can be very unsettling indeed, so it's important to avoid operational paralysis. Respond quickly to developments and make the most of what thinking time you have – the more you can carve out for yourself, the better the quality of your response. ■

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