

When to say what to whom

Australian school Heads are increasingly forced to address contentious, complex and dynamic issues with their communities.

Gender identity, mental health, climate change, natural disasters and digital citizenship are all issues that have landed on the desks of Heads in the last year. Add in school-specific issues – instances of bullying, parent misbehaviour, termination of a favoured staff member or traffic and parking – and it seems the communication decisions just get more difficult each year.

Increasingly, staff, students and parents now turn to school leaders for trusted information and guidance on issues. Thus, school Heads are expected to provide communications that are both accurate and appropriate.

So, how do you decide when to say what to whom?

After journeying through these issues with many school Heads, imageseven has developed the **School Issue Management Response Flowchart**. Each situation is different, and the flowchart is general in nature, but it is designed to give you a way forward when all around you is crying out for your attention.

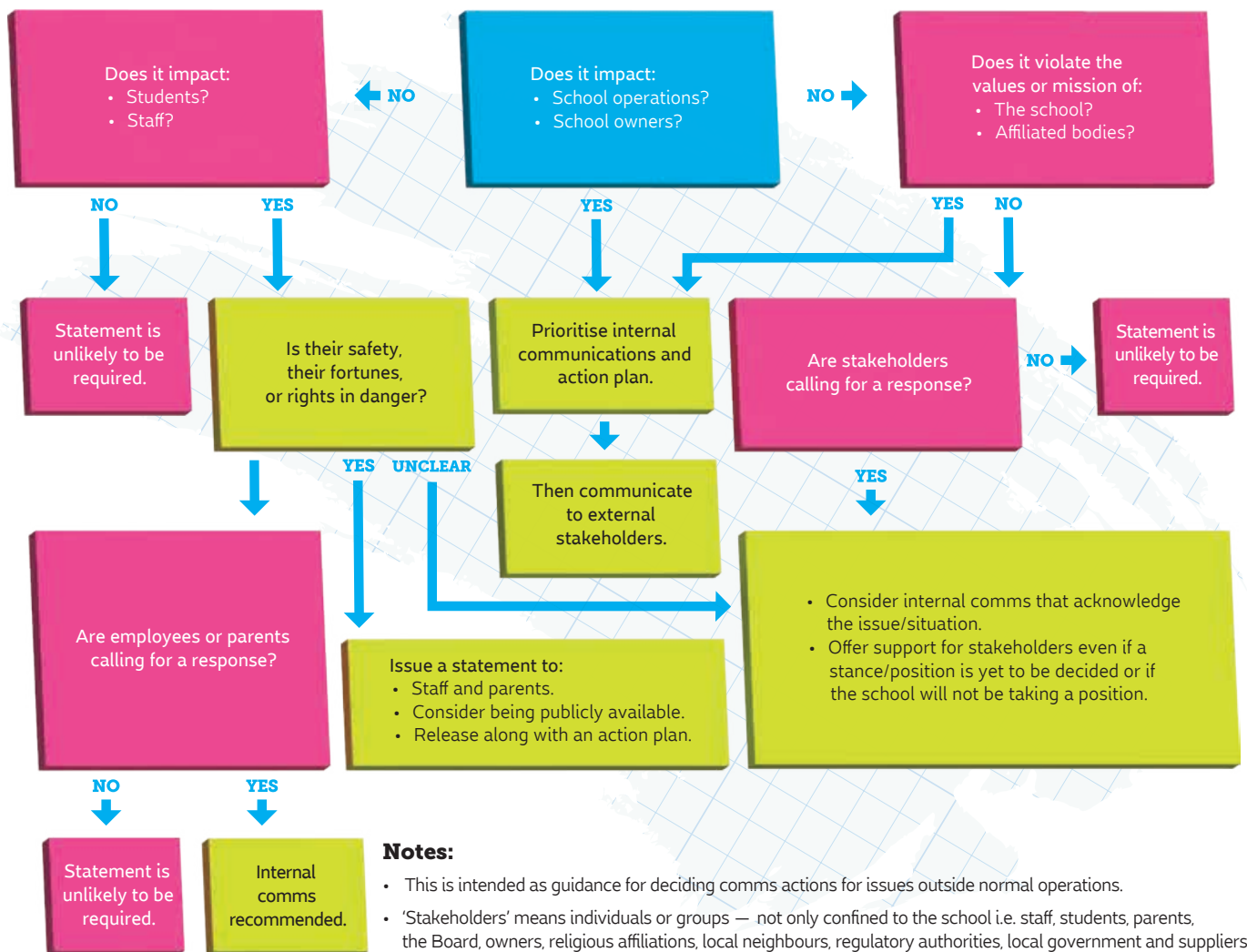
According to ROKK Solutions, a US-based firm specialising in social threat analysis and response, 72 percent of people will “remember the companies that took missteps” in response to recent crises. There is no school-specific research on this data point, but because your school’s relationship to your community goes deeper and lasts longer than their relationships with most companies, we believe it is fair to adopt this as a best-case indication of the potential damage of communication missteps.

The consequences of poorly executed response are very real. Sometimes, not responding can be even worse.

insight applied

- The need for stakeholder communication is becoming more frequent, complex and critical.
- School Heads are increasingly looked to for leadership in times of uncertainty.
- Poorly considered or executed communications can do significant damage to your school brand and your credibility.

School Issue Management Response Flowchart



The flowchart considers four key questions every Head should ask themselves before pressing send on the email to your community or a reporter:

1. Does it impact students or staff?
2. Does it violate the values or mission of the school or its owners?
3. Does it impact school operations?
4. Is the timing right?

There are also often external nuances to manage. For example, if a previous Head had made a public commitment to deal with bullying in a specific way, then that commitment must be considered even if it is not the way you would approach the specific issue at hand.

No flowchart is capable of capturing all possible scenarios, but too often Heads are inflicting damage to their school brand because they do not consider all the factors before responding.

Take decisive action when an issue arises with a sense of urgency. Parents, staff and the media do not care that it might be the school holidays: they have not pressed pause in their brain. Engage your school communications team early in the process, giving them a role to play in crafting your strategy and response. This proactive approach will strengthen your first line of defence and equip them to effectively manage new challenges as they emerge. ■



Brad Entwistle

is the Founding Partner of imageseven. Since 1990, he has led his team on a mission to amplify the impact of schools by working directly with school Heads, tailoring solutions to maximise their communication and marketing effectiveness.
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