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**GOVCOMMS PODCAST**

EP#168: From disaster to dialogue: crisis, community and communication

With MIchael player

tRANSCRIPT

# Transcript

Michael Player:

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Voice Over:

Welcome to the GovComms Podcast, bringing you the latest insights and innovations from experts and thought leaders around the globe in government communication. Now, here is your host, David Pembroke.

David Pembroke:

Hello, everyone, and welcome back to GovComms, a podcast about the practice of communication in government and the public sector. My name is David Pembroke. Thanks for joining me. As we begin our conversation today, may I first acknowledge the traditional owners of the land from where we are broadcasting today, the Ngunnawal people, and pay my respects to elders past, present, and emerging and recognise the ongoing contribution they make to the life of our city and this region.

May I also pay my respects to all First Nations people of the lands from where anyone listening to the podcast today is joining us from. Today's episode is part two of my conversation from the last fortnight when we spoke to Michael Player. Now, if you haven't already heard the first part, please go back and take a listen because it will make a whole lot more sense. So please go back and do that. Michael Player is described as this grizzled veteran of government communications in New Zealand. Over the past five decades of his wonderful service to the people of New Zealand, he was perhaps best known for his stint as the general manager of New Zealand Police Communications for 13 years, from 1999 to 2012.

During that time, he managed the communication of several major crises, and these sorts of disasters and crises are happening more and more often as we struggle with the challenges of climate change and other natural disasters. And unfortunately, Michael found himself amongst a number of these very serious crises in a short period of time. I start by asking him about the Rena oil spill. It happened on the same day that Steve Jobs died, and the Occupy Wall Street movement was on, meaning that global media attention was perhaps elsewhere. However, it was very serious, and I asked him to run me through what it was like to be a part of the recovery from the Rena oil spill disaster.

Michael Player:

It happened after we'd had real-life practical learnings from previous crises, as you say, in quite a short order of time. And I'm sure you'll ask me about Pike River and the Christchurch quakes, but my role was... is really more of a system space. The further you go up the tree, what you realise is a spotlight might be on you, but it... the demands on you are often more at a strategic level. And so you don't actually get to do the fun bit so much. You don't get out to the scene and get your gumboots on and do stuff.

So for much of the Rena time, my role was to make sure I could assemble a team of communications people who would go to Tauranga and be on site for several weeks to actually deal with the media scrum. And even though there was lots of competing stories, as you've said, there was sufficient interest that it actually did keep a team of 10 or so to be there for three or four weeks before we handed over to the local people. And so a key thing is to actually be able to assemble a team who know each other but who are open to working with new people to make sure that the logistics are in place.

For early on in my career, I found that, often, communications people were sort of regarded as a nice to have rather than must have in terms of getting them to this... the front line quickly. So the key was to actually make sure that they had the transport to get to a place quickly, to be on-site, to have the technology to be able able to get an internet connection, to be able to operate from the get-go and to make sure that they were accommodated well and they got spelled out because, in a situation like that where it's evolves over a number of weeks, you can't just keep going.

You get the initial rush of adrenaline for 24 hours or so, but then you see people who can't sort of move on in terms of getting their rest and letting another team take over. So I always, and that was an early on key learning, was refreshment and replenishment of teams was an essential. The other dynamic about the Rena was that we found that because it was an oil spill situation in terms of the impact on land, when the oil started washing up and affecting a bit of the wildlife and rubbish and containers and stuff started landing on the beach, that there was a bit of a tendency that, "Oh, this is a marine operation that has to be handled by professionals."

But the local community made it quite clear it was their land, their beach, their taonga or treasure, and they wanted to protect it. And so it took 48 hours or so to stand up a community relations group that were able to facilitate beach cleanups, et cetera, in a safe way for the locals. And that's a very special area for the local Māori people for instance. And we involve them in helping organise such matters. And so it became a very successful operation in terms of managing the environmental impacts.

And then, of course, it was handed over gradually to the salvors to actually remove the wreck from the reef. So that was an operation that lasted probably about a month. Initially had a team, as I say, of probably about 10 people, a combination of local people and Wellington-based people. And at the end of it, we actually handed over to a local PR practitioner and gave them a contract to wash it up over a period of several months.

David Pembroke:

So did you have a crisis plan in you back... in your bottom drawer to pull out as soon as you understood, "These are the steps that we've got to have?" And if you did, would you recommend that people have to... should have a plan and should be thinking about these things well in advance of the crisis happening?

Michael Player:

Absolutely. Yes, we had a plan, and we had things like common talking points, but every situation's different. It's a starting point. I always say a plan, a crisis plan, is only a starting point. The best thing you can actually do is to have short, sharp tabletop exercises on a very frequent basis.

David Pembroke:

Okay.

Michael Player:

And that was one thing that police were very good at doing. We would... For terrorism events, et cetera, we would have regular, and under one commissioner, we had monthly tabletop exercise only about an hour or two hours, but you could simulate all the core things that would come at you in a tabletop exercise, much more effective and cost-effective in terms of time and resources where previous to that, they might've only had an exercise once a year or so in terms of setting aside time and having a red team and a green team and all the drama, whereas a little short, sharp table-type exercise.

And you need to do that frequently because the other thing is that communications people are very highly mobile and you find a lot, there's high turnover. So you might get lucky if you've got a team that holds together in a stable capacity for a year or so if you're lucky. But there's a constant in and out of people. And so you need to have exercised together in order to get that thing to go smoothly from the get-go.

David Pembroke:

And I'm also interested then in that particular story, you told that obviously you dispatched the team, they're on the ground, you're then looking to, "How do we solve this problem with the local people?" It's a precious area. Local people want to be engaged. Obviously, you then came up with this local community group to be able to manage the restoration or the beginning of the restoration of that process.

So clearly, someone was on the ground listening, consulting, came up with an idea, sent it back, and then it was implemented. So that, to me, sounds like good listening, understanding, "We've got a problem here. We're not going to be able to do it the cookie-cut way. We're going to have to do something different. We've got to stand up a solution." But then have the permissions to go, "Yes, it's now in place." So take us through that and how is it that people can get to that... those good solutions quickly and get the permissions quickly?

Michael Player:

Right. As I indicated, so I was still in police at that point, but I was also head of communications for the public sector. So I got a call from the head of the Prime Minister's department and was asked to relocate myself from my police office down into the Maritime New Zealand headquarters and work with their senior executive team, who then were responsible for actually reporting back to a whole of government team in our parliamentary offices.

And I found that model invaluable. So it is really good to have a lead agency that have a team working in their head office, one step removed from the actual operations at the front line and with sufficient time to be able to think beyond the hour-by-hour decision-making-

David Pembroke:

Got it.

Michael Player:

... and looking ahead about how things were going to go. And this was particularly in a crisis like that where you know that there will be very complex dealings with salvors and insurance companies, but there'll also be a criminal or and a transport investigation into how the hangers happened and what lessons need to be learned for the future. So you have big brain people working on these things, but they're also because they're the senior management team and the board, they have the hand on the resources, and they also are then able to talk to central government. And I spent a lot of time in meetings with central government advisors as well.

So you can bring the power of... the whole the state to solve a problem, and you get those... you'll find in crises, that's the best thing. I've never known a crisis in which the Office of Resources have not outstripped their ability to use those resources. And that's one thing that makes working in a crisis rewarding because you know that once you've come up with a plan and people can buy into it and it gets challenged and torn around for a few hours by the big brain people, then you can actually get things to happen. You can only do that if you've got good links between the whole of system, both at local and central government level. In the New Zealand context, it's even more complex. And your part of the world where you've got states, a local government, and federal government, that's the key to it.

Maintaining those relationships with people throughout the system. And it's unfortunate that several times in recent times with climate change, we have had floods here that were... came out of the blue a couple of years ago and were overwhelming in a very short period of time, both in rural areas and in Auckland, our biggest areas. And the lessons that I've just talked about had to be learned, again, unfortunately. I think it was because you get that turnover and institutions aren't good at passing on learnings, and the libraries are full of documents of reviews and interrogations. It's all there. The lessons learned, they seem to have to be re-learned by every generation of managers, which is unfortunate.

David Pembroke:

Have you got any ideas on how that could be improved?

Michael Player:

I think it does mean that I'm a great fan of this short, sharp exercise, and I think that should be a very much a compulsory part of all department's responsibilities.

David Pembroke:

But it's also that whole of government piece, though, isn't it?

Michael Player:

Yeah, it is.

David Pembroke:

It's almost being able to exercise, pulling people in, and giving them the experience of having to move to the centre from their line agency perhaps and taking on a different role and be perpetually in training. And perhaps there's something we can learn from the military in that because that's exactly what the military does. Their own exercises. They exercise all the time.

Michael Player:

That's true. The other thing I think is that you need a common technology platform, and that's gradually getting there. But I was sort of astounded to see they've seemed to be working on a common emergency management platform for a decade or more, and it's still not quite there. So I think that if every agency was working with the same platform system, then that real-time communication ability would help.

David Pembroke:

Yes. But Michael, as you understand, everybody is different. We're different.

Michael Player:

Everybody's different. Everybody's different. That's true.

David Pembroke:

So listen, take me to the Pike River, and again, this is a horrendous story, and I remember this, and this... I remember it clearly and just being absolutely shattered again, devastation, an explosion, 29 dead, awful stuff, a coal mine there in New Zealand. Tell me that story about how you managed communication around that tragedy.

Michael Player:

Yeah. Well, my involvement of that one was a bit different than what I've just described with the Rena, for instance. So there, in that situation, I was actually directed to get down to Greymouth and to get into the front line of the situation. And the reason being was that the mine blew up on a Friday afternoon. And actually, I was at a public relations seminar related to sort of crisis management at the time, and I was walking back along the Wellington Waterfront, I got this call. I couldn't believe it that this mine had blown up.

So we went into a crisis mode immediately. The mine company happened to have its key executives not far from Greymouth, and they got there really fast, including their head of communications, their corporate PR people. And so, there was a need immediately to commence having media briefings. And the mine company PR person started being the chair or the facilitator of the media conferences, and we and police realised that this wasn't really going to cut it because police were the lead agency and the mine company was highly compromised.

And as time would tell when we moved beyond the immediately... immediate rescue and response phase into a recovery phase and a criminal investigation phase. So I was set a hotfoot off to Greymouth as quickly as I could. And I arrived on the Saturday, I think after about two media conferences had been taken place, to wrest control back-

David Pembroke:

Right.

Michael Player:

... for police. And the fact I didn't have to wrest back at all because I...

David Pembroke:

They handed it over.

Michael Player:

Well, I had a good peer relationship, didn't I, with my comms equivalent.

David Pembroke:

Uh-huh.

Michael Player:

And he been... he said, "Well, look, I was the only one here really. I was..." He was a reluctant to participate as it were. And so there was no disagreement at all. But she was a pretty difficult situation because, as people who might read Rebecca Macfie's book Tragedy at Pike River, and I encourage people to read that. It's a really ripping yarn and a good summary, overall summary of what happened. I don't agree with every bit in it, but it's pretty good, really.

And the chief executive, Peter Whittall, was very much a glass totally full person, and he was a very persuasive communicator, good immediate performer who held out hope well beyond the time that hope should be held for the possibility of rescuing the people. And, of course, several days later, there was a second mine explosion, and all hope was lost. And in that situation, it was the police district commander who had to actually step in the middle of a family meeting and deliver the bad news as police traditionally have to do.

So it was... I was in that meeting and it was the most astounding time of my life seeing the sheer emotion of when the penny dropped, having been built up just half an hour before that there was still a possibility of rescue that suddenly all hope was lost and human emotions, as you can imagine, just poured out. And I... For somebody who's reasonably calm most of the time.

I did give a bit of a spray to a journalist on the way out who wandered up the street from, I don't know where, somewhere in Greymouth and said, "You've cancelled your press conference." He said, "And I've missed what's happened down the road here. What do you do that for?" And I just let fly with a bit of a spray, unfortunately, and said he needed to develop a bit more humanity. It wasn't about his deadlines.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. So what's your advice then to people who may find themselves in those very complex types of crisis moments? You've got big media attention, you've got different stakeholders with different motivations, and you've got leadership that really... The story is what is the thing that everyone is waiting on. And you may be in that environment. And again, it's increasingly likely that people are going to find themselves in these situations. So again, what wisdom might you be able to offer in those types of circumstances?

Michael Player:

You really find what... how people react and you need to understand that people react in different ways and it's no good belittling people or thinking that there's a different... there's a right and a wrong way to react because we all do react in different ways. So I seem to be a person that, in a crisis situation, does remain calm and, for some reason, my brain is able to focus on decision-making and problem-solving in that situation. So it's not a learned thing. It's just something that seems to happen. Luckily, it didn't get tested too many times.

But then there are other people who they just want to be told, "What do I do? What do I do?" They want to be busy. They want to help solve things. And then there is a third category of person who just doesn't want to listen. They think that they've got the right way. And so you need to make sure if you've got actually a crisis management team that they have... they're people who have met each other and work with each other and know each other's strengths and weaknesses. And then there's a fourth type of person who actually just wants to be removed from the scene and you need to let them go.

Don't try and get somebody to work in that situation if they're not comfortable working in it because they're actually not doing their own health and wellbeing any good, and they're not doing your teams any good as well. And it also comes back to that situation, which police were very good at actually, of making sure that you get into working on a roster basis so that you might last 12 hours working on the first shift, but then you need to try and get back into about a 10 hour with a one-hour overlap between the teams of briefing and debriefing.

Because these things, and particularly these days in the climate emergency ones, you've got... you might be there for weeks. We're only there probably a week. Mine blew up three or four days later. But these crises that are coming along today, they could... you can be there weeks. And so you've got to be equipped for the long game. And we learnt that in terms of spokespeople, we had uniformed spokespeople that also need to do that. And the key spokesperson doesn't have to be the top guy that's making the decisions.

You can't do... You actually can't do both. The media demands are just so much these days, and particularly with every diffuse channels. Often in this part of the world, the Northern Hemisphere, you just think, "Oh, things are calming down. In the evening, I'll just slope off and have a meal and get some rest." And the Northern Hemisphere crowd come into and want their pound of flesh. And no matter how many times you put in a standard piece of communication online or even if you managed to get some good moving imagery, they'll still want to talk to a human being.

David Pembroke:

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Michael Player:

And so it's very, very demanding and quite energy-sapping, and you've got to have strategies to deal with that.

David Pembroke:

Now listen, you've been very generous with your time, and I've been a bit greedy, but before I do let you go, I want you to tell me one more story about Christchurch and the earthquakes. And there's obviously some common advice that have come from them, but they're all different, these types of crises. So tell me the story of the Christchurch earthquakes from your position.

Michael Player:

My perspective. Well, Christchurch earthquakes, they're again... In some ways, we were fortunate. It was the same year as the Pike River situation. In fact, some of the key police senior people were only just had taking couple of weeks off before the first-

David Pembroke:

Yeah, right.

Michael Player:

... Christchurch quake came along. The first quake happened late in the year, and there was a bit of building damage, a bit of infrastructure damage, but not a lot of human damage. And I think that, unfortunately, made us all relaxed a bit until very early in the following year when the big one happened in the middle of the day. So we'd been given a bit of sort of a wake-up call where they had had dusted off our plans back at headquarters, et cetera, because we were... had very, very good advice around an intelligence from the geotechnical people about the possibility of another big quake.

But it still came as a big surprise when it did, and particularly the fact that there was lots of people who died in two big buildings that one of which in particular, the CTV building, collapsed entirely. So the police district communications manager in Christchurch, very experienced person, did well. I got on the blower. Here, again, it was one of those situations where I was told we want our top brains actually here at the strategic level but get us a really good crack team. I got on the blower to two of my colleagues, one who was head of the New Zealand Transport Agency and the other one who was in charge of the health ministry.

Well, the health ministry guy said, "I'm actually driving in the south island on my way back up the island because I've just come away from a fishing trip." So he said, "I can actually drive straight to Christchurch to their headquarters." And the other guy said, "Yep, I'll spell him whenever you need me to get down there as well." So they actually teamed it along with the National Controller of Civil Offence, who was sent from Wellington. And there again, my job was to round up a good team to get down there and support them along with the local people. The mayor of the time, Bob Parker, was quite an interesting guy, and there was a bit of tension between the National Controller team and the local authority people and the mayor.

But my two peers were instrumental in making sure that the teams meshed. And they had gone on to a twice-a-day media conference, briefing session, and the district commanders who had led the communications in the latter part of the Pike River experience also stood up, and they'd been battle-hardened by working together. So they actually, and if you look back at the footage of the Christchurch experience, police certainly were, along with the mayor, were the dominant spokespeople giving advice both on rescue but also on recovery to the Christchurch people. And that was a great learning.

So putting the emphasis on the welfare and arrangements for how people could not only get home but also get services, and even things like they distributed portable toilets at one stage because the sewage system, et cetera, wasn't working. So the guy that I sent down there, the second person, he actually spent six weeks on the ground in Christchurch. Ironically, I mean, New Zealand is shaky aisles. And in 2013, some three years after the Christchurch quakes, Wellington here was shaken in the middle of the day by a quake, which did quite a bit of damage as well. And I, by that stage, had left police and was working at the Accident Compensation Corporation, and we were in a tower block.

As I was saying earlier, this series of disasters that New Zealand had meant that we did have our crisis management plan. We had practiced it just two months before. We immediately got together as an executive team. We held people in the building because the worst thing you can do is get out on the streets if there's likely to be debris falling, et cetera, as happened in Christchurch. We helped people there until we were advised that the aftershocks had settled down to a point that people could exit and get home. We made sure that everybody had a plan, had transport in some form or other because you couldn't use the trains, et cetera. But they had plans, and we organised assistance to get them home, et cetera.

And we were told afterwards by the staff that was great communication. We weren't left in the dark. We didn't have to make our own decisions. We knew what the plan was, and it was executed well. And that was a very satisfactory experience for me as a communicator, having learned from a previous experience. And, of course, with the... up here in Wellington, there was no personal injuries at all. Then, there was another earthquake in 2016, so we have had our share. I don't want any more earthquakes in my... rest of my life. Thanks very much.

David Pembroke:

Well, let's see. Well, hopefully, your wish will be granted. And perhaps after this extraordinary career of yours, you might get what you wish for because a great career of service, a great vocation really, and to have applied your knowledge, your skills, your behaviour, and your attitude to strengthen the responses of important brands like New Zealand Police to improve their communication with the public and then to operate at central government to operate in and around the, well, the function, let's call it that, the trade of communication and to have dedicated your career to that. Fantastic. And it's just wonderful to hear so many great stories, and thank you so much for being so generous with the audience today to share your experience.

Michael Player:

Thank you, David. I really appreciate it. It's been a great conversation.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. Wonderful conversation there, audience, to spend some time with someone who really has lived a vocation in support of the community set about to dedicate his professional career. As he said, if his writing was a little bit better, he might've been a lawyer, but he wasn't. So was able to then go onto this great career and you could just hear the passion and the real pleasure and the joy of having this career, this no two days are the same life that communicators live in.

You move to where the need is greatest, and you apply your knowledge and your skills and your behaviour and your attitude to get a better outcome. And you really focus in on the people. You've got to be accessible. You have to be affable, and you have to have ability. But really very grateful to Michael Player for joining us from New Zealand today. And to you, the audience, grateful as ever for you to come back and listen to another great story from the world of government communications.

You can rate or review the program. It does help us to be found. So wherever you're listening to your podcast, if you do get the opportunity doesn't take long, but it does help the program to be found. But really a joy to speak to Michael today, and we look forward to bringing you another great story from the world of government communications in the next fortnight. But for the moment, my name is David Pembroke, and it's bye for now.

Voice Over:

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