

Exercise 5: Late-Season Flu-Like Illness Case Study

Marilyn Dunn had lived in Atlanta for 18 years, but family circumstances brought her back to Louisiana. To look after Marilyn's mother, the Dunn family moved to Shreveport, a city of 198,000. Dunn became involved in local politics, and a year after returning home, the candidate she helped become mayor asked her to join his staff as spokesperson and communications director. Her extensive experience as a communications consultant was key to the mayor being able to get his message out, he told her, and would be invaluable to the city.

Back in Atlanta, as a media relations consultant to the B-M firm, Dunn often wondered about the sophistication of urban markets. Having grown up in Shreveport and other places in Caddo Parish, LA, she was used to doing things the small town way, at least compared to Atlanta. "In Shreveport," she would tell her staff, "people pull together, they know each other, and it's not so cutthroat. People cooperate."

Dunn was going back to Louisiana for family reasons, but she was happy to return home. While others might chafe at the prospect of living where the temperature is above 90 degrees for more than 80 days a year or that big city culture is hours away, Dunn loved it. Though she thought it was exciting to be in Atlanta, Shreveport seemed smaller and more manageable. Given her mother's health, Dunn had thought about bringing her to Atlanta, where terrific health care facilities existed. But in the end, Dunn was confident that her mother's care could be managed back home, with three teaching hospitals and more than a dozen other hospitals across the parish.



History, Opportunity, and the Challenge of Working Together

In her role as spokesperson and communications director for the mayor, Dunn frequently found herself curious about why Caddo Parish insisted on certain processes. When there was a prison break at Angola shortly after she started working for the mayor, Dunn worked hard at coordinating public comments from the mayor's office with those of the office of the parish CEO.

In Shreveport, it seemed easy to speak with one voice. The mayor met with his staff, received advice, and, when necessary, authorized Dunn to speak on his behalf. When Dunn tried to obtain the assistance of the Caddo Parish Commission, however, she found that they often spoke with not one but twelve voices! Each parish commissioner, it seemed, had something to say and was going to say it. When Dunn approached some of the commissioners with her concern that public safety would be best protected if only the mayor of Shreveport and the CEO of the Caddo Parish Commission spoke, several commissioners recoiled. Residents in their districts, they asserted, were more at risk of coming face to face with escaped convicts from Angola Prison than were residents of Shreveport or for that matter residents of some of the other districts, and they had a greater responsibility to their home districts than to the whole of the parish. They were going to say what they were going to say.

Within days of the prison break, Texas authorities apprehended all of the convicts just over the state line. And for nearly everyone involved in managing the crisis, the collective sigh of relief far outweighed any lingering sense of frustration with how well or poorly parish and city officials collaborated.

Marilyn Dunn, however, was somewhat jaded by the event. Severely irritated by the lack of cooperation that she had received, Dunn rarely went to events sponsored by the parish Chamber of Commerce or local governments. Over time though, her irritation waned, and for the most part the now infamous Angola State Prison break was an event of the past. Even her annoyance with parish officials faded, and soon, events and life went back to normal.

Questions To Ask Yourself as You Read the Case Study

1. What is Dunn doing well? Why?
2. What is she not doing well? Why?
3. What should she be doing but is not? What kind of questions should she be asking herself?
4. What could/should have been happening?
5. What steps were available to her before the crisis?
6. What were the early clues that a crisis was starting to unfold?
7. What additional information should Dunn have been seeking?
8. What are the missed opportunities?

“Flu-Like” Symptoms

Thursday, May 1 (Day 1)

On her way home from taking her mother for a checkup at the Louisiana State University (LSU) Health Sciences Center on Kings Highway, Dunn and her mother talked about the long wait and the many people waiting with flu symptoms. Indeed, her mother had had a fever for the past 2 days, so Marilyn had left work early to have her checked. The doctor had assured her that it was probably a virus of some sort and that she should not get overly worried, because some kind of flu was going around.

That night during dinner, the Dunn family watched the CBS news, and everyone looked up when the local affiliate WLSA reported, between other stories, that the area seemed to be experiencing a surge of late-season flu cases. Interesting, Marilyn thought. In fact, just an hour earlier on the way home from the grocery store, Marilyn and her mother were listening to DAQ, the local NPR station, and heard a similar story. People were feeling feverish, achy, and tired but did not have the runny nose or cough often seen with the flu or other upper respiratory illnesses. Hearing this twice in the past few hours slightly alarmed Dunn, but it also irritated her. She hadn't received any calls from Judy Smith, her contact at WLSA, or Peter at the radio station. Dunn changed channels; FOX was reporting more or less the same thing, but FOX was quoting Caddo Parish public health officials, who were admitting that they didn't know what it was, but were confident that it wasn't anthrax, and were downplaying the possibility of bioterrorism, saying, “It may just be flu or some similar virus.” As Dunn began to grow more frustrated by not having heard from her contacts, much less the mayor, especially now that parish officials were being quoted, the phone rang.

Dunn grabbed her purse thinking that it was her cell phone, which was not ringing because it was turned off. Then it hit her—she had turned off her pager and cell phone while in the hospital and had forgotten to turn them back on. As she fumbled with the cell phone, the main phone in the house continued to ring. Her husband answered it and told her that it was the mayor. As she reached for the phone, she looked at her cell phone and saw that there were 21 messages. Somewhat relieved that, indeed, people had been trying to contact her and concerned about the fuss about the flu, Dunn answered the phone as the reporter on the TV news stated that unnamed parish officials had added that “most of the people affected seem to do well with bed rest at home, fluids, and drugs like Tylenol. The advice we are receiving from officials is that no precautionary measures are recommended at this time, other than to see their doctor if they're not feeling well.”

The mayor asked Dunn where she had been and told her that his phone had been ringing all afternoon. Apparently, a reporter from one of the local affiliates had wanted a comment from city hall about the higher-than-normal occurrences of the flu, especially this late in the season; unable to reach the mayor (who was at a ground breaking) or his spokesperson, this reporter had contacted one of the district commissioners from Caddo Parish, who herself offered a few comments.

Calmed by speaking to the mayor and reassured that there was nothing going on except a squirrely reporter asking valid questions about late-season flu cases, Dunn said that she'd be in early the next morning and that she and the mayor could caucus then on whether or not they would have something to say on the matter. Dunn wanted to say something about the loose-lipped commissioner, but thought better of it, and filed it away as something to bring up later.