For a senior politician, not being able to speak with a senior member of the company is insulting. For a key customer, being transferred from department to department causes aggravation. For a journalist, having to wait for an extra half an hour due to consultation needing to take place with a parent company (which leads to a missed deadline) causes frustration. And for the company, all this is extremely damaging to reputation.

Preparation and testing before the crisis occurs is crucial. Are all your links functioning properly? Is information passed through the appropriate channels without the facts being distorted? The crisis team needs to routinely test all networks to ensure that external communication channels are operating effectively, as during a crisis, they must do so.

The politicians

Most large companies have a public affairs department, often supported by consultants, whose role is to provide advice on regulations which may affect the company, lobby on behalf of the company and keep the organisation informed of legislative or other changes which may affect its wellbeing.

As noted in Section B, politicians hate to be blind-sided – especially when approached by media – so it is important that they be contacted proactively rather than reactively.

As always, preparation is key and the crisis management handbook – or a section of it, depending on the sensitivity of the information – should be reserved for key public representatives. It may be that certain phone numbers are reserved for the head of public affairs and his deputy: one does not want the home telephone number of the environment minister in everyone’s hands.
Communications at the highest government level

Prior to the crisis, the public affairs department should be delegated the responsibility of pulling together all this information. It should also be its role to delegate to managers within the company who should contact which politicians. In football terms, who’s marking whom?

So, for example, the company’s president or chief operating officer may be delegated to contact either the prime minister, president or the secretary of state for the relevant department. The chief financial officer may be in touch with the treasury or the finance department of the government. The operations director may be in touch with the environment agency or other key government departments which have a responsibility for the operations of the company.

Communications at the regional level

This again needs to be decided in advance and can be delegated to the facility which is based in that particular region. For example, the general manager of a factory may be delegated to be in touch with the leader of the regional assembly. It is important that this manager, who may not have much public affairs experience, be fully briefed. Ideally, if he or she is a wise and far-seeing manager, he or she will have joined local organisations such as the chamber of commerce, which will allow him or her to ‘rub shoulders’ with these key people. In addition, he or she will put together a formal procedure, as outlined above, so that he or she has access at the highest levels when it is needed.

Communications at the community level

Again, this becomes the responsibility of the regional manager, with advice from the crisis management team and the public affairs department. A localised diagnostic (Chapter 11) would have been completed so that the key movers and shakers in the community are known and methodologies for contacting them are well understood and rehearsed. Again, good networking should ensure that there are personal contacts in place, so that in a crisis people can contact those who are affected and those who are affected have easy access to those who are managing the crisis.