



Partner Liaison Security
Operations [PLSO] Nigeria

Managing a Crisis: The Role of the Family Liaison Officer in Nigeria

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The humanitarian aid and development sector in Nigeria is unique as its very nature calls its members to often seek out and willingly head towards danger, including within areas struggling with kidnappings, military actions against armed opposition groups, criminal and pirate targeting, civil disorder events, arrest and detention risks, natural disasters, road traffic accidents, and the longstanding conflict between herder and pastoralist communities. This places Implementing Partner staff – both international and Nigerian – at risk.

Family liaison is found in many forms within the domain of crisis response, especially where the root cause of a crisis is associated with either a security or safety incident. And, while most managers bring both experience and competency in making knowledge and experienced-based decisions, or in effectively communicating and interacting with people, the complexity and highly emotive nature of family engagement during fast-burn, confused, and often high-stress situations can easily overwhelm even the best leadership team.

If a crisis situation is mismanaged, even by seemingly inconsequential judgement errors or miscommunications, then the family in question can be harmed and significant reputational and legal risks to the organization can result. The complexity of family liaison can also be exacerbated during incidents which involve multiple members of staff, or where international staff member families live abroad and the impact of time-zones, language barriers and distance undermines the management team's ability to communicate and take timely action.

The triggers for family engagement within the field of humanitarian aid and development are numerous: alarming reports in the news; where loved ones cannot be accounted for; where staff are arrested; where people are injured or sick; during pandemic outbreaks; within escalating civil disorder situations; in the aftermath of a natural disaster or industrial accident; where a kidnapping has been confirmed; during or following an active shooter event or terrorist attack; where a military action has taken place; or at its worst, when there is a confirmed death of a family member.

These triggers can impact large numbers of staff at the point of the crisis, and may require multiple international as well as Nigeria families to be concurrently engaged within a fast-moving and complex situation. To exacerbate the complexity of the response, crisis events often occur at a place remote from the in-country management team, and so are subject to disjointed communications which easily lead to increased confusion and frustration.

While family liaison is a critical part in the management of a crisis situation, it rarely forms the single primary focus of the Crisis Management Leadership Team within the home office, and this can cause conflict between the Nigeria based management team and their headquarters. Rather, it is most frequently a peripheral activity driven by the root cause and cascading implications that a crisis may present, as the effects of the core event (the cause) ripple outwards. While not all crisis events are the same in terms of severity or impact, common themes include risks to people (and by extension their families); donor expectations (or demands) and confidence; operational and program-based deliverables; the security of assets, facilities and information... and not to be dismissed, the hard-won reputation of the organization.

Each of these requirements is arguably as important as the next with regards to organizational survivability, and as such, all compete for attention. Focused energy on any one aspect must be prioritized against short, immediate and long-term needs; each of which is shaped by both individual and organizational constraints of reality and priority. Because every crisis is in itself unique, incidents



can quickly create extraordinary and ‘out of the box’ situations which can easily overwhelm the experience, knowledge and resources of a management team.

Looking after the interests of the staff member – and by extension their families – is clearly a top priority. However, implementers must also address the needs of their donor, partners, and subcontractors. At the same time, they must also be cognizant of the need to recover operations to meet the needs of the program beneficiaries. As such, family liaison is but one (albeit a critical) cog within a larger crisis management response.

Very obviously, the role of the Family Liaison Officer is complicated as not only is the appointee seeking to meet the needs of the family, but they are also concurrently striving to balance this with the wider needs of the organization. At times, these two goals can conflict as the Family Liaison Officer seeks to act as the bridge to communicate the needs, expectations and concerns from the family to the leadership team, while relating guidance and information from the leadership team to the family. To further complicate the role, the Family Liaison Officer is rarely the final decision-maker or expert in all areas addressing the family’s needs. Rather, the Family Liaison Officer commonly acts as a coordinator between organizational stakeholders and the family; addressing the current status of their loved one, the measures being taken to meet the needs of the situation, the benefits the family is entitled to, and what will – and critically – will not, be provided.

Where an international staff member is involved within an incident then the Nigeria based management team may be working with a Family Liaison Officer who is based abroad. Under these conditions understanding the role of the Family Liaison Officer will be critical in order to reduce the confusion and frustrations which often accompany a crisis situation.

The Family Liaison Officer is not typically a defined position within the organization, and indeed, it is often a tertiary role which may be undertaken by Human Resources staff. Furthermore, the role may be assumed by that manager who is in closest proximity to the family - whether from a geographic, situational, or relationship perspective. Given this role is highly nuanced, complex and stressful (and most importantly, not always the primary responsibility of those engaging with potentially frustrated, fearful, angry or frightened families) then clearly the response cannot be reliant on tacit knowledge gained from limited experience in crisis management. Rather, best practice needs to be determined and reflected within codified documents so as to minimize the potential for a serious misstep.

A distilled and transferable corpus of family liaison knowledge is needed to operationalize family management through training and exercising. Given the prominent place of family liaison within many forms of crisis this training should (ideally) be formalized and legitimized through recognized certifications or qualifications. This step would optimize both planning and response measures, as well as demonstrate to internal and external stakeholders the importance the management team (and their organization) places in caring for staff members and their families, while also building the confidence of those designated to perform the role.

The ability for an Implementing Partner management team in Nigeria to “do the right thing” while emerging from a crisis situation with its reputation intact, and its business interests protected, is based not only on taking the necessary steps to appropriately provide care for the family – but it is also in being seen to be taking those steps through a codified and formalized system. As such, it can be argued that family liaison is as much about being “seen” to do the right thing, as it is about actually doing the right thing!

How can the PLSO Team Help

The PLSO team is here to support the Implementing Partner community. Please leverage our free support in terms of:

- Chief of Party eLearning and instructor led programs
- Security Focal eLearning and instructor led programs
- Critical Event Planning workshops
- Risk assessments and studies
- Real-time threat reporting
- Resource and vendor data base information

Please contact the PLSO team for support.