

when a crisis does occur, they won't call you, and they will invent their own solutions, whatever the cost, whatever the damage.

4.7 When You Need to Obtain Public Forgiveness

When you are planning, take into account that some damaging event or situation could occur to cause harm to organizational reputation and public confidence. Be prepared with a recognizable sequence of actions and remedial steps that will help alleviate the victim pain and rebuild relationships and community trust. The survival of your company, your reputation, your career and livelihood may be at stake here. This is the pathway forward. Do every step or your problems will persist.

Step 1: Candor. Promptly verbalize public acknowledgment that people or groups of people, the environment, or the public trust are affected; and that something will be done to remediate the situation.

Step 2: Extreme Empathy/Apology. Deliver a verbalized or written statement of personal regret, remorse, and sorry, acknowledging personal responsibility for having injured, insulted, failed, or wronged another, humbly asking for forgiveness in exchange for more appropriate future behavior and to make amends in return.

Step 3: Explanation. No matter how silly, stupid, or embarrassing the problem-causing error was, explain promptly and briefly why the problem occurred and the known underlying reasons or behaviors that led to the situation.

Step 4: Affirmation. Talk about what you've learned from the situation and how it will influence your future behavior. Unconditionally commit to regularly report additional information until it is all out or until no public interest remains.

Step 5: Declaration. Conduct a public commitment and discussion of specific, positive steps to be taken to conclusively address the issues and resolve the situation.

Step 6: Contrition. Continue to verbalize your regret, empathy, sympathy, and even embarrassment. Take appropriate responsibility for having allowed the situation to occur in the first place, whether by omission, commission, accident, or negligence.

Step 7: Consultation. Promptly ask for help and counsel from "victims," government, and the community of origin affected – even from your opponents. Directly involve and request the participation of those affected most directly to help develop more permanent solutions, more acceptable behaviors, and to design principles and approaches that will preclude similar problems from re-occurring.

- Step 8: Commitment.** Publicly set your goals at zero. Zero errors, zero defects, zero dumb decisions, and zero problems. Promise publicly that to the best of your ability situations like this will be prevented from occurring again. To the best of your ability, situations like this will never occur again.
- Step 9: Restitution.** Find a way to quickly pay the price. Make or require restitution. Go beyond community and victim expectations and what would be required under normal circumstances to remediate the problem.

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In most adverse reputational situations, the troubled company will be forced to take each of these steps eventually – often very publicly and with great humiliation. Experience demonstrates that extraordinary reputational damage is within the controlling power of the troubled organization, but only if the leadership of that organization chooses to behave and speak appropriately and promptly. The crucial issue is the desire of the organization to take conclusive action quickly, taking advantage of the golden hour.

Chapter 4 – Questions for Study and Discussion

1. Why do CEOs and upper management avoid participating in drills and exercises? What steps would you take to make sure they willingly participated in scenarios and provided valuable input into all phases of the planning process?
2. What are the advantages of a tabletop exercise? Why is it useful to conduct a tabletop exercise before initiating a full-blown crisis simulation exercise?
3. Explain how the web can be useful to you in crisis communication. How would you explain the value of a “dark site” to the executive who will be approving the budget for its construction?
4. What is the greatest single weakness in most crisis plans? What can be built into a plan to strengthen this area?