

Crisis Communication:

Acknowledgment, Blame, and Forgiveness (Page 1)

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Part I: Acknowledging errors, deficiencies, and misbehaviors:

1. *Acknowledge known or knowable negatives.* People are paying attention in a crisis. They are unlikely to miss the embarrassing news. So you want to be the one to tell them.
2. *Wallow in the bad news.* Don't just talk about it -- talk about it endlessly, until they're sick of hearing about it ... which is long after you are sick of talking about it.
3. *Get your acknowledgments in early.* Mid-crisis is the best time to acknowledge negatives. People are counting on you to protect them, so they don't want to dwell on your inadequacies. Your real-time acknowledgments will make the issue less newsworthy later, when the crisis is over and the recriminations begin.
4. *"Acknowledge" false accusations too.* Explain what the critics have said and why it is understandable that they feel that way before you argue that they are mistaken. "I know there are people who think that...."
5. *Think about revealing secrets.* Whether to acknowledge negatives that nobody knows and nobody is likely to find out -- to blow the whistle on yourself -- is a tougher call. But remember that most secrets do come out eventually, and then they do far more harm than if you'd revealed them yourself earlier.

Part II: The seesaw of blame:

1. *Make it clear that you're sorry.* You'll get no credit for acknowledging negatives if people can't tell you know they're negatives. You've got to sound sorry.
2. *Take your share of the blame.* Typically, there is a sense in which it's your fault and a sense in which it isn't. If you blame yourself more, we will blame you less. "If only I had realized...." is your line. "How could you have known?" is ours.
3. *Do not blame others.* Scapegoating backfires, even when there is some truth to it. The more you try to put the blame on someone else, the more we blame you. This is especially true when the "someone else" is the public itself. Instead, take the blame for the public's mistakes: "I wish I had found a way to convince people that...."

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4. *Give people the exculpatory information.* Give us the information that shows you did your best, you couldn't have helped it, it was really someone else's mistake, etc. But slip this information in without too much emphasis (put it in a subordinate clause, for example). Let us use it to conclude that you're being too hard on yourself.
5. *Think about legal repercussions.* You may need your attorney's help to find ways of taking your share of the (moral) blame without increasing your legal vulnerability more than the situation justifies. But don't let your attorney talk you out of taking any blame at all.
6. *Don't let others take you on a seesaw ride.* Beware the tendency to become defensive about a problem, simply because others are criticizing you for it. Before 9/11, most terrorism experts argued strenuously that the U.S. was inadequately prepared. After 9/11, critics took up the same argument -- and many experts found themselves insisting it wasn't so.

Part III: The dynamics of forgiveness:

When it's flat-out your fault, there is no seesaw, only repentance and forgiveness. You must go through all the following steps in the right order:

1. *Admit what you did.* There is no credit for hypothetical apologies: "Whatever I might have done that might have offended some people, I'm sorry."
2. *Be quiet while we berate you.* As all couples know, preemptive apologies don't work. We need to express our outrage before we're willing to hear your apology.
3. *Say you're sorry.* Being sorry has three elements: (a) Regret -- you wish it hadn't happened; (b) Sympathy -- you feel bad for the victims; and (c) Responsibility -- you know you had something to do with making it happen.
4. *Learn your lesson.* Explain what you have changed so it won't happen again -- or if that's too much to promise, so it will happen less often.
5. *Make us whole.* Compensation can't replace apology, or people feel bribed and all the more outraged. But part of forgiveness is doing something for the people who were damaged.

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6. *Do a penance.* The last stage of forgiveness is the penance. We need to see how bad you feel, how chastened or even humiliated you are. Only then are we ready to move on.