

# Presidential Crisis Management

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I think the American public is very forgiving. The admission that you were on the wrong track and you're changing works well in this country.

We've taken on companies when for one reason or another polls showed that regard for them wasn't very high. You have to change behavior and then communicate that change. The classic example is what Johnson & Johnson did in the Tylenol crisis. Six people in Chicago died after taking Tylenol that had been tampered with. The chief executive of Johnson & Johnson took charge of the crisis, and he followed a policy of being as transparent as he possibly could be to protect the public. He implemented a large-scale recall of Tylenol even though he wasn't forced to do it, because he thought it would give greater assurances to Tylenol consumers. The message: Johnson & Johnson is interested in your welfare and will do everything it can to protect you and the product it sells to you.

Another situation I worked on was when Coca-Cola changed its formula and introduced what's referred to now as "New Coke." The public just did not accept it. When the original Coke was reintroduced as Coca-Cola Classic, the president of the company went on television to apologize to the American people for his bad judgment, and Coca-Cola went on to post higher sales than before. It got a hole in one after the ball hit the tree.

The number one lesson for people in government and business: If something bad happens on your watch, the sooner and the more comprehensively you disclose it, the less likely you will be to suffer from it.

*Harold Burson,*

*founder and chairman of the public relations firm Burson Marsteller*

The president should prepare America to compassionately welcome all of our troops now in harm's way as they return home, and advocate a plan to help them reenter private life. Soldiers depart to bands playing and colors flying; they return to national silence. He also needs to find those three or four key areas where he can agree with the new Congress and push for legislation that unites the country. In both of these tasks, he must avoid business school solutions. Very few of the solutions our country needs are productively measurable or usefully countable. Besides, we are suffering through one of the worst eras in our history regarding business leadership and ethics. Could Bush even find an executive free of back-dated options? Business and government are very different, and must remain so.

*James E. Lukaszewski,*

*crisis management consultant*

What the president should be focusing on right now is saying, "I've had some wins, I've had some losses.

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What do I want to accomplish for the American people? I know I'm taking a risk in Iraq and Iran and Afghanistan. But here are two or three smaller initiatives that will help the American people." What better way than to get the first lady involved? Laura Bush is still incredibly popular in this country -- getting her more involved in domestic initiatives (such as health care) would be extremely important for his legacy.

*Mike Paul,*

*"The Reputation Doctor" blog*

The first two rules of crisis management are: 1) Think clearly; and 2) Take the pain. Think clearly means define the problem to be solved, and understand the consequences of doing nothing, doing something and doing something more. Take the pain means doing what has to be done when it can do you the most good, whether you like it or not.

George W. Bush's presidency risks being defined by his failure to think clearly or to take the pain. From Abu Ghraib (silence followed by dissembling, allowing adversaries to define us) to Hurricane Katrina (delay, denial and delusion) to Iraq (insisting things are fine when they're not), this president has allowed wishful thinking to define his reaction to crises. If he is to have any chance of turning his presidency around, he'll need to follow Winston Churchill's advice: You must look at the facts, for the facts are looking at you.

*Helio Fred Garcia,*

*crisis communications consultant*

It's surprising that in the face of the Iraq crisis, the president hasn't embraced time-tested strategies to better manage public expectations or to speak to the fears that attentive audiences are feeling. I think this president has a lingering problem from Hurricane Katrina -- that is, that he is seen as slow to take ownership of thorny problems. Let the American people know that he is absolutely, completely and totally responsible for the prosecution, effects and outcome of the war in Iraq. No question.

Restate the war's objectives and why it is still relevant to Americans and the war on terror. Let America know what victory will look like and what will allow the war to be brought to a close. Exhibit understanding and compassion for the human toll the war is taking on soldiers, their families and innocent civilians. There's an adage in crisis communications: They don't care that you know until they know that you care. I'm not sure the president's compassion is showing through, and it's hurting his stature and credibility.

*Larry Kamer,*

*public relations executive*

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