

The Art of the Apology

By Lisa LeMaster

When the bad news was delivered to the families, "there was no apology. There was no nothing. It was immediately out the door," said the father of one of the miners who died. (Associated Press, January 4, 2006)

Everyone seems to want one---an apology, that is. Louisiana's governor demanded an apology from the Speaker of the House when he questioned the wisdom of rebuilding New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. The media eagerly anticipated a possible apology from President Bush for slow disaster response. Everyone asked FEMA to say it was "sorry" for its post-hurricane efforts. In a media reversal, Watergate journalist Bob Woodward apologized to his newspaper for withholding the name of a source. In the past year, the demands were issued to Pat Robertson, basketball's Kobe Bryant, baseball's Kenny Rogers, Senator Richard Durbin, and, of course, to the owners of the West Virginia mining company that lost 12 men in this month's accident. Now, even hospitals are studying apology strategies when faced with "bad outcomes."

Clearly, the medical ethicists, insurance companies, malpractice attorneys, corporate litigators and media professionals will spend much time debating the efficacy and appropriateness of apologies from hospitals. If, however, your institution faces a public call to apologize, be sure to do it the right way.

Hardly anyone wants to apologize initially. Unfortunately, the emotional platforms in crisis communications are akin to those of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross' description of the grief stages following the death of a significant other: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

With a "bad outcome," or a stupid remark, inappropriate reaction/response, lapse in judgment, usually, the perpetrator(s) tries to "explain away" what happened or didn't happen. Interestingly, it seems to take at least 7-8 days for most newsmakers to finally apologize.

For example, on June 14, 2005, Senator Durbin compared treatment of detainees at Guantanamo Bay to how prisoners in Nazi Germany were handled. His apology came eight days later, on June 22nd. Perhaps, he was following the example reflected by Newsweek when it erroneously reported that U.S. interrogators had flushed a copy of the Koran down a toilet to force inmates to talk. The initial report came on May 9, and it resulted in anti-American protests around the world. The retraction came one week and one day later on May 17, after the Bush administration brushed off a simple apology from the magazine.

From Major League Baseball, pitcher Kenny Rogers shoved a Fox cameraman prior to batting practice on June 29. Although his club, the Texas Rangers, apologized immediately to the fans for Rogers' behavior, the All-Star pitcher waited until July 6th to read a hand-written statement of "regret" to the media.

Each time, it took 7-8 days to apologize. Coincidence? I don't know, but we

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In This Issue

The Art of the Apology	Page 1
The 10 Best Practices for Advancing Women in Business: #5 - Delegating	Page 3
End Piece: Women on the Career Ladder	Page 4

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The Art of the Apology (Continued...)

can all learn to move our institutions quickly out of denial and into acceptance and problem-solving. In the debate over apology policies for hospitals, there is one certainty. Lack of communication will result in miscommunication.

Witness the example from West Virginia. When reports escaped from the command post that 12 miners had been found alive, every blogger, neighbor, comrade, industry expert, gossip, as well as the throng of journalists "reported" the news. The company waited three cruel hours before correcting a false report that had been distributed worldwide. I submit the executives were in denial ("This can't be happening!"), and therefore were paralyzed and unable to react the right way. As a result, the follow-up national media stories focused on the three hours when there was a communications lapse as opposed to the tragic loss of 12 men and the survival of one young miner.

Does this mean that hospitals should adopt apology policies in order to have an appearance of openness? That's probably way too simplistic an approach in a complicated, litigious world. There are differences between apologies, statements that accept responsibility, and admissions of guilt. It's all in the words, the attitude and the motive of the person who utters the words: I'm sorry.

Next time: The right way and the wrong way to apologize, especially when the camera is rolling.

Lisa LeMaster is the president of The LeMaster Group, a Dallas-based company specializing in crisis communications, perception management and media coaching. For more information, you can visit: www.lemastergroup.com.



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Presented by Dorothy E. Bellhouse, Kenagy & Associates &
Robert B. Harrington, Director, Cambridge Management Group

This workshop will provide a framework for assessing your organization's readiness to sustain change and grow.

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- your organization's ability to make sustained changes
- how to focus on the areas of greatest potential and,
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Presented by:

**Dorothy E. Bellhouse
& Robert B. Harrington**
Sunday, March 5, 2006
1:00 p.m. - 5:00 p.m.
Ritz-Carlton,
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