

# Authenticity In The Face Of Crisis: Business Communication Skills

## Management Communication

In the event of a crisis or a disaster, and if you happen to be the manager of a company facing that crisis or disaster, it's best to be mentally prepared. Crises can happen any time. Just like they can in our personal lives. And like our own individual preparedness for disaster, a good manager should be prepared to handle an internal or external crisis effectively. To help counter the bad taste a mistake or disaster may leave in the mouths of clients, the best approach for dealing with the situation is to explain things calmly and with authenticity.

When a mine owned by Murray Energy Corporation collapsed, CEO Robert Murray rushed to a private jet to the scene as soon as he heard of the collapse, appearing at the disaster within hours. He took command of the rescue operation. He provided the media with constant updates. He responded to the crisis with excellent textbook public relations. The presence of the concerned CEO at the scene has been crucial ever since the Valdez, Alaska oil spill in 1989 – one of history's worst environmental disasters -- when Exxon's CEO took far too long to appear on the scene, thereby intensifying public anger at the company.

So Murray was ahead of the game and ready for the next step when he appeared at the site of the mine collapse. But soon after, his crisis communication broke down. He denounced the media and blamed union organizers for suggesting that the dangerous practice of "retreat mining" had led to the collapse. He erroneously blamed an earthquake (tremors actually caused by the mine collapse) and blasted environmentalists for their crusade against global warming, calling it an affront to the coal industry and to the American economy. Suddenly, although he was physically there, he didn't appear "there" for the trapped miners or their families. Then, after three rescuers were killed in a cave-in, he seemingly disappeared from the scene altogether.

Despite all these negatives, Murray's actions were noted in a positive vein by one writer who described his candor and refreshing authenticity. In *Shades of Gray*, a public relations blog by David Murray (no relation), he writes that "Despite [Murray's] occasional moments of near-insanity, I suspect he's better liked by the general public than he would be if he'd gone by the crisis communication book." Because of his authentic approach.

The Murray example shows that, in times of crisis, spokespeople (especially CEOs) should trust in the redeeming power of honesty and authenticity in the actions they take. The public will immediately empathize with the leader who bravely steps up and takes charge at the scene of a disaster. Those waiting for action and a solution will feel cared for and relieved. Forgiveness for the leader's other faults will come naturally and readily toward that person as long as they feel the spokesperson is being truthful.

Mistakes can be made, but can also be recovered from, especially if they're honest ones. But once credibility comes into question, once authority is compromised, there's a steep climb uphill before we're able to regain people's trust. Stumble and fall but be real. Tell the truth, at least the way you see it. Even if you're wrong, at least it's your opinion, and people will be able to feel your authenticity and understand your good intentions. Truly confident people (who know themselves and are willing to be seen as vulnerable and imperfect) project a rock-solid belief in themselves. "Yes, I made a mistake in this case but I still believe in myself." So then others will believe in you, too.

You can't force authenticity, especially in the corporate world, according to Don Tapscott, author of *The Naked Corporation*, a book about corporate transparency. Given the public's distrust of corporations today, it's more important than ever for CEOs in particular to operate authentically when facing a crisis. It's pretty easy to see through a flimflam spokesperson – one with the gift of gab but lacking sincerity. Tapscott explains through several examples how corporate flimflam is not the way to go: Diebold, for one, insisting its voting machines were unhackable until someone posted a video of himself rigging a mock election on them; Microsoft, for another, offering to pay people to improve on the company's Wikipedia entry. And more.

In today's electronic age, it's more of a challenge for corporations or for anyone to get away with something. Don't even try. Be authentic. Authenticity is the only way to operate in today's world, particularly in a critical situation. Face a crisis or a disaster by revealing yourself through both confidence and vulnerability. The willingness to be up-front, to be vulnerable, to show your warts can go a long way toward showing that you mean it – that you're facing the situation in an authentic way, and ultimately inspiring trust.

## About the Author

Terry Gault trains and coaches business professionals in the art of communication and presentation through our experiential methodology. Since 1990, The Henderson Group has helped Fortune 500 companies worldwide improve employee productivity and business results through the development of communication skills. You can find us online at [SpeakFearlessly.net](http://SpeakFearlessly.net) and [HendersonGroup.com](http://HendersonGroup.com)

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