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# **Bush provides lessons in crisis communications**

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Since Sept. 11, one national commentator after another has made note of President Bush's "emerging" leadership skills -- abilities that many Texans had long recognized.

In addition, the commentators might also give Mr. Bush, not generally lauded as a great orator, credit for the effective job he has done in communicating with the American people and the world through this crisis.

In fact, the President's words could serve as crisis-communication lessons, not only for heads of government and CEOs, but for any organization, large or small, that might be put into the media spotlight in a crisis. Here are a few of those lessons.

- Show that the organization is in control. That means communicating quickly, before you have all the facts. Within minutes of receiving the news of the attacks, the President went on television to pledge that the country would hunt down whomever perpetrated these awful acts.

Later, in announcing the beginning of air strikes against Afghanistan, he said, "We did not ask for this mission, but we will fulfill it."

In a business crisis, hearing commitment from the person at the top can do much to reassure employees, stockholders, customers and the community.

- Show some action. When there's a problem, we want to see somebody doing something about it.

Over the years, news clips of companies removing their potentially contaminated products -- Tylenol, Perrier and others -- from store shelves showed us their commitment. Seeing the pictures of the troops, ships and planes Mr. Bush deployed had a similar effect, far beyond words alone.

- Balance authority with humanity. In a crisis, we need to see concern. We need to see there's a human being -- as well as a leader -- in charge.

At one point, the President said, "I'm a loving guy, and I am also someone, however, who's got a job to do."

Far from undercutting one's credibility, such simple, direct "I" statements underline it.

- When the crisis involves people who are hurt, go to the scene. First at the Pentagon and then standing on the rubble in New York City, President Bush was there to put an arm around the rescuers and family members of victims.

In New York, when he said through a megaphone, "I hear you and the world hears you," these off-the-cuff words had more effect than anything his speechwriters could have concocted.

- Speak with one voice. Consistent messages are vital to any organization dealing with a crisis. Considering the number and breadth of spokespersons in the administration who are addressing the press daily, their messages have been remarkably consistent.
- Don't let criticism stop you. The President has been criticized for using the word "crusade" and for his "dead or alive" reference. This type of criticism can cause an organization to shy away from further communication.

To his credit, the President hasn't let criticism distract him from his focus on the big picture and the need to keep communicating.

With bombing continuing in Afghanistan, the threat of additional terrorist acts in this country, and anthrax-laden mail popping up around the country, the President will continue to be tested for some time to come.

However, the many civic and business leaders who are examining their own preparedness to deal with a crisis can find valuable examples of crisis communication in the recent statements of our nation's president.

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