

Crisis communications can't paper over a lack of values *As we see it...*

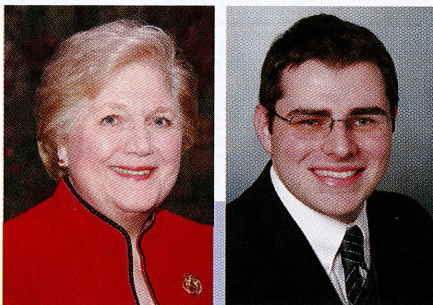
By Anne Sceia Klein
& Christopher J. Lukach

As we reflect on 2011 and the crises of this past year, we have to ask, "What have we learned that we can apply to our communications planning for 2012?" We know some of the major crises that occurred this past year could have been avoided. Some never should have happened. And some brands were irreparably harmed.

We know natural disasters, like the Japanese tsunami, the Joplin, Mo., tornado and the East Coast floods could not have been avoided. In each case, there was some degree of risk assessment and crisis planning, but the magnitude of these events was far beyond any normal measure of expectation. And while there is always room to criticize the response, no amount of planning could have prevented the events themselves.

But some *organizational* crises can be prevented or contained, regardless how high profile or visible the triggering incident may be. It is the organization's cultural landscape that influences whether the crisis even occurs, its response if it does, and how it will weather the storm.

In 30 years of counseling clients through crises, we've seen some organizations affected by major incidents recover quickly, while other organizations, with what at first appeared to be a minor headache, experience irreparably damaged reputations and battered bottom lines.



As examples, take the Penn State crisis and the recent collapse of MF Global. They both were brought to light because of major triggering incidents, but both ultimately arose because of breakdowns in each organization's ethical framework. The real crises they face came from within. And why did that happen? Because of a culture that allowed these sorts of behaviors to occur? Because of a culture in denial? Because of a culture that put winning and the profit motive above all else? Because some people were allowed to operate far outside the norm? Because their organizational culture made it okay to look the other way?

When an organization does not live by a sound and ethical set of values, no amount of public relations or crisis communications can make a situation right. We searched the Penn State website looking for a code of ethics. PSU's academic departments list their codes of conduct. Even the football team has a code of conduct. However, the closest thing we found to a code of ethics is the "Penn State Principles." But no one is required to uphold them. PSU says it does not *impose* these principles but rather hopes that the Penn State community observes them. In other words, the university's most basic set of values is *optional*.

It is ironic that MF Global had an extensive code of conduct that was updated as recently as May of this year. What happened? The MF Global code of conduct wasn't worth the paper it was written on and the web space it occupied. The code was an empty promise. Clearly, leadership was good at talking the talk but didn't internalize the codes or live them.

In cases like Penn State or MF Global, after-the-fact "crisis communications" can't and won't fix the problem.

So what do we recommend?

Take Penn State. We believe Penn State first needs to look inside itself, starting with the basics. What does the university stand for? What does it believe in? No amount of investigation or new rules adopted will mean anything unless the university takes a hard look at its mission and values.

Penn State and other organizations facing this sort of crisis need a culture change. And that culture change comes from within... from strong and ethical leadership. That would mean a president, board of directors, alumni and faculty who realize that an unfettered emphasis on sports (or revenues or whatever) to the exclusion of all else, just goes too far.

Rebuilding the Penn State reputation will take years, but it won't happen just because Penn State might align itself with an organization to prevent child abuse or adopts yet more optional, and therefore meaningless, rules. It will happen because leadership sets the example by adopting and living a code of ethics that is not optional; rather, it is culturally ingrained. Good leadership will focus on the student body and on the faculty and make sure that good behavior is encouraged and rewarded, while bad behavior is discouraged and appropriately punished. A culture change like that is a slow process but it can happen.

We are still incredulous that an organization like Penn State appeared to be in denial when the news broke. It knew in March of last year that the grand jury was handing up indictments. There had even been some stories in the press. The failure to address the situation and take action sooner is simply inexcusable.

Clearly, there was no crisis communications plan. True crisis communications planning involves identifying and analyzing vulnerabilities and applying the organization's values and ethics to come up with the appropriate course of conduct. In short, it means *doing the right thing*. Absent that ethical and moral foundation, any attempt at "crisis communications" is just spin.

Anne Sceia Klein, APR, Fellow PRSA, is founder and president and Christopher J. Lukach, APR, is senior vice president & chief operating officer at the Anne Klein Communications Group, LLC.
www.annekleincg.com