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# STRATEGIC ADVISING

**AN INTERVIEW WITH JIM LUKASZEWSKI  
AUTHOR OF WHY SHOULD THE BOSS LISTEN TO YOU?**



Photo Credit: Harry Turner

**BOB CONRAD, MA, APR**

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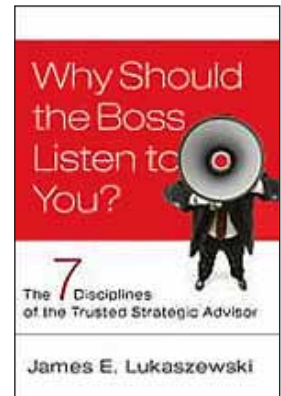
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**JIM LUKASZEWSKI HAS BEEN A CRISIS MANAGEMENT STRATEGIST** and strategic advisor for nearly 30 years. He runs the Lukaszewski Group and has been called one of the “28 experts to call when all hell breaks loose.” Jim’s latest book, *Why Should the Boss Listen to You: The Seven Disciplines of the Trusted Strategic Advisor*, is published by Jossey Bass.

Jim was interviewed by Bob Conrad exclusively for the public relations blog, The Good, The Bad, The Spin ([www.thegoodthebadthespin.com](http://www.thegoodthebadthespin.com)).



## BECOMING A NUMBER-ONE NUMBER TWO

What can you tell me about your book?

**Jim Lukaszewski:** The book is called *Why Should the Boss Listen to You: The Seven Disciplines of the Trusted Strategic Advisor*. In a nutshell, it’s really about how to be a number-one number two. It’s kind of a different book in that, typically, this is what good leaders would be interested in, but it’s more about the people who work with leaders and managers to help them do a better job.

It’s often talked about as if most organizations usually are divided into two parts—the operations part and the staff part, and the staff part’s job is to help those who actually run the company, business or organization do their jobs better. So this is a book for staff people, for people in communications, human resources, IT, security, strategic planning, finance—all those staff functions whose job it is to help those who actually run the place, do a better job.

**So it’s not a public relations book?**

**JL:** It is a business book in the sense that anybody in any staff function, any staff position, will benefit from this book. It’s very much a public relations book because it’s about what both of us think we do, and that is to assist people that run things do a better job.

I wanted to structure the book so it applied to all of those people who had

staff responsibilities, because fundamentally, this is what this is about. When talking to some public relations audiences about it, I think this is one of the revelations in the book. It is that the book has really two major propositions.

The first one is that every management problem or question is a management problem, issue or question before it's any other kind of problem. Most staff functions look at every management situation through their own lens—through the lens of human resources or communications—so, by golly, everything that's happening is a human resources or communications problem.

That's one of the reasons why we have great difficulty becoming trusted advisors. It's like the old deal if you're a carpenter and all you've got is a hammer, then everybody looks like a nail.

There are other aspects of this. The book actually begins by talking about how managers think and what they do. It's how leaders think, how they operate, the pressures they're under and the obstacles they face.

What I find is this is a revelation to people. You would think that if you want to be a trusted advisor, you'd want to know something about what managers do every day. One of the main lessons of the book is you need to put yourself in their shoes first and look at the world from their perspective before you begin prescribing things for them to do to solve problems.

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One thing about communications is, for example, and I don't know what your background is, but if you've been in any kind of a business, what you learn quite frequently is that the moment somebody becomes a manager or supervisor, they tend to think they're a pretty good communicator.

The higher they go in the organization, the better they think they are. If all you have to offer is communications advice, then that's why they call you at the last minute and tell you what to say because they think they know how to do it (already).

The thing I'm pointing out is that you have to approach this business of advising people from a much broader perspective than just communications or, they're not going to call you until they think they know what they're going to say—then they call you and tell you how to do it and in effect what to do.

The first part of the book really has to do with three things: how leaders can operate under pressure and the environment they're in; secondly, what they expect from those who advise them; and third, how to really achieve maximum impact.

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## **YOU ARE THE TABLE**

**What happens if, as a public relations professional, you see communications disconnects in your senior leadership? For example, maybe your CEO is not a good communicator or is somebody who goes around and shoots him or herself in the foot all the time.**

**Jim Lukaszewski:** The rest of the book, the discipline, has to do with the question: What do you have to know how to do to have the influence you want to have? The questions the book answers are: How do I get to the table? How do I get to the inner circle? How do I get next to the person to heed the advice I think I have to offer? What is the secret to doing that?

The first premise of the book is that every problem is a management problem before it's anything else. The second premise of the book is that you are the table. If you want to have this role, then you need to learn how to do this to get there. There are things you need to know how to do to be able to get there to give the advice that's necessary to change how managers manage and how leaders lead.

Your question was, "What if you've got a guy who is a bad communicator?" Sure, you're going to walk in the door and say, "You're a bad a communicator and here's how you'd fix it," but why would they listen to you? What good role do you have, or play, to be listened to by these people? Obviously, there's going to be something you need to know more to have the impact you want to have.

The second part of the book is about the seven disciplines that are really the answer to the question you just asked. How do you have the effect on these people to make a poor communicator a better communicator? Each of these seven disciplines has to do with how you, in essence, rebuild yourself to be able to have the clout and have the impact that gets people to listen to you. For example, when you say your boss is a bad communicator, to me, what is the purpose of the communication? What is bad about what the person is doing?

I'll tell you a quick story: Many years ago, I was working with a large telecommunications company and they had a chairman who was from Texas. Now, the company was based in Connecticut and the communicators in Connecticut are all very accomplished people.

This guy was kind of a hayseed because he was from Texas. His name was Rocky. He was in charge of a \$7-billion-dollar company. They were going to do a week's worth of broadcasts on this guy's life and they were very concerned about this, so they hired me to coach Rocky to put him through media training and all this other stuff.

He was a very busy guy. The most I could get for time from him was two-and-a-half-hour to three-hour blocks of time. The first one was up

in where the company's headquarters was, and I was there ready to go. Rocky didn't show. The next possible time to do this was in San Francisco on his schedule.

So I went to San Francisco a couple of weeks later, also to do this, and Rocky doesn't show. The next time was in Plano, Texas. I went to Plano

and got set up, ready to go and Rocky didn't show. The final time is Friday before the Monday they're going to start taping the program. It's the last time I can work with Rocky.

I'm set up for three hours on a Friday afternoon and two hours and 45 minutes into this time period, he shows up. I know who he is and he knows who I am. He walks up and says,

*I looked at one tape, took a quick glance at another tape and I called them and said, "Listen, I'm not writing any report. This guy is terrific. The minute he opens his mouth, they believe him."*

"Hey, James. I suppose you figured out that I've been ducking these sessions." I said, "Rocky, I kind of get the picture."

I said, "Just to tell you, I have a lot of your money for doing no work, frankly." He says, "I know that, Jim, but I have to tell you, I've been married to my wife for 49 years and when I told her that I was coming to work with you and that you were going to give me some training, she says, 'Hell, Rocky, I've been married to you for damn near 50 years and

I haven't been able to train you to do anything. What can one guy you hardly know do in three hours?"

I said, "Rocky, what I had in mind was to do a little coaching for the broadcast." Rocky says, "Coaching? Gee, I can always use a little coaching." We spent 15 minutes together, really, that's all the time we had, and the guy did the broadcast. They sent me the tapes of the broadcast and said, "I want you to do a written analysis of the tapes so we can talk to Rocky about how he needs to improve as a spokesperson for the company."

I looked at one tape, took a quick glance at another tape and I called them and said, "Listen, I'm not writing any report. This guy is terrific. The minute he opens his mouth, they believe him. This is why he's so trusted on the street. They don't care if he wears cowboy boots and talks like a guy from south Texas.

"This guy makes promises he delivers on. He tells the truth every single time. He's more truthful than you guys are. You want a report? You're going to have to ask somebody else to write it because, I'm telling you, you can learn from this guy so pay attention to him."

One of the issues in giving advice to people who have "communication problems" is, are they really bad communicators? In the context of where Rocky's working, this guy is sensational. Now, the people who are working with him are very good at this, but they fail to recognize, really, what this guy knows he needs to do to have trust from the street. There's a big difference between someone being a bad communicator in a communicator's view and in the view of the world this guy works in.

What I'm talking about in this book is, really, you have to recognize the context of the communication before you can just indict somebody who's being a bad communicator. There's just a lot more to it than just walking in off the street and shooting from the hip, saying, "Hey, you can be better."

We can all be better. These guys hired me to do training and I knew this

from the start. When you coach at this level, when you want to coach in the big times, so to speak, in the big show, it's coaching—it's not training.

They should never need training anymore. They've already been there. They're making more money than you ever will. They have more responsibility than you'll ever have. They affect more lives than you ever will as a communicator. There's a lot here in this story about the example you gave of a supposedly bad communicator.

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## DOING THE DOABLE

**Jim Lukaszewski:** The other question I get quite often is, "If I can only get to this guy, I could really help him but my boss is in the way." My response is, "Here's what I suggest you do: Teach your boss the things you know how to do, and teach your boss how to teach his boss how to do it."

I think the real risky strategy is going around your boss and trying to somehow intervene in this other person's environment. That's a suicide strategy. If you can work for a boss that won't let you get to the big guy, and won't do what you're talking about, the answer's pretty simple—you better make another career choice real soon.

Another question I get asked is this: "I know what this person should be doing. I know in my heart what he should be doing, I know in reality what he should be doing, but he simply will not do it. What can I do? What can you tell me Mr. Magician Lukaszewski, Mr. Guru Lukaszewski, to make him do what I want him to do?"

My advice is: Change the subject. It's his bus. He's the driver. If he doesn't want to do something you're telling him to do, then move onto something else he will do. If I were him, I'd fire you and find somebody else. What's the point of pushing on something that he who owns the gold doesn't care to spend it on? You may not be wrong, you could possibly be right, but

it's his bus, it's his ship, it's his command.

It's better to help him do the things he wants to do than to keep whacking on something he is not of a mind to do. If he won't do what you want and you really believe in it, here again, you have a choice to make. The choice is to do something else or go somewhere else.

One of the disciplines of an advisor is pragmatism. It's doing the doable, knowing the knowable, getting the gettable, achieving the achievable. That's what it's about. Changing these people is very hard. Changing anybody after about age 14 is darn near impossible anyway. As they get older, it gets even harder.

The issue really is to find those things where your greatest value is to this individual and make those things work well. If you're doing what I'm telling in the beginning, which is putting yourself in their shoes and looking at the world from their perspective, you're broadening your own. I think you'll find things you could help with that may, in reality, be something other than communications. It's a very powerful platform, a very powerful thing. It does change people's perspectives.

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## **DEALING IN REAL-TIME**

**I've attended a few of your seminars, and one thing that you've recommended is that people read Jack Welch's book.**

**Jim Lukaszewski:** Absolutely. In the book, I list 13 or 14 different management literature (sources) people should be reading. Welch's book is important because it is the diary of someone, pretty much in current time, who is a business CEO. It is how he got the job, what he went through, what he thought about.

He spent the first 10 years firing 200,000 people. They called him Neutron

Jack. In the last 10 years he rebuilt the company. There are marvelous management lessons in this book, which is why so much is still written about him. There's a new book about him every year written by other people.

My point is, really the larger point is, if you want to advise leaders, you have to study leadership and you have to study leaders. I advise people to read about military leaders. Most of the biographies we have are in politics or of military leaders. There are wonderful lessons about how these people think, how they make decisions, what bothers them, where they fail and where they succeed. You have to become a student of leadership to be an effective coach for leadership.

Again, if all you have to offer is what reporters are going to do with something the guy says, he knows that already. He doesn't need you to tell him that. You need to do a few things with these people. One is you have to tell them things they don't already know. They know a lot. That's why they're driving a bus and you're not. The second thing is you have to help them with what to do next because the greatest challenge of leadership is there's nobody to tell them where to go—that's their challenge and their job.

Any way you can help them determine what the next steps are, or what the next ingredients are, or what the next elements are, and what they're supposed to be doing, this is valuable. It may be a communications component and it may not. More than likely, it is. Communication is one thing that pervades every level of management. Again, if that's all you have to bring to the table, they feel they know this stuff and they won't listen to you.

One of the greatest deficiencies we have as staff advisors is we lack so much knowledge. We normally ask questions, and we have to learn on

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somebody else's nickel what this is all about. Then we go away for a while and think these things through, write a memo, write a note, do something, do a plan or something, and then we come back a little while later and offer our wisdom, as it were. The problem is that managers work in real time.

When you're asked a question or you attend a meeting where they make a decision or are thinking things through, when you leave that meeting and go away for an hour, half a day, a day or a week, by the time you come back they've moved on, so your information is old and your advice is probably outdated.

Quite often what I see is staff people leave and what they bring back to the boss is a report of what they learned from the previous meeting, not the next steps. Who needs that stuff? Nobody. It's yesterday. We're already working for tomorrow.

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### **STRATEGY: MENTAL ENERGY VERBALLY INJECTED**

**Jim Lukaszewski:** Doing things in real time is really important because the boss has three fundamental goals as leader. The first thing they have to do is to find new places to go. They're the person that goes over the horizon to see where it is we have to be heading based on where we are today. Their job is then to come back and tell us about it. So the major role that any leader has is to be the chief strategist. Strategy is all about tomorrow--where we're headed. This person is head strategist in the organization.

The second thing these people have to do is once they've decided on new destinations, is to prime the people to get the job done. When you look at where the organizations fail on leadership, it is either they pick crummy destinations or they fail to influence the people to get the vision accomplished.

The third thing these people have to do is go into the organization—and this is communication—and teach and coach and reiterate and remind them of what the mission is, where we're headed, why we're going there, why people should be motivated and energized to get these things done.

The remaining roles of these leaders is to monitor, to tweak things, to identify where they have to change direction to modify what their findings were and that sort of thing. A lot of this is communication.

I define strategy as mental energy verbally injected in an organization through communication that helps the leader and the organization achieve its goals.

The first discipline of a strategic advisor is to have excellent verbal skills. Being able to give advice in real time on the spot requires excellent verbal skills. One of the questions I ask is: How are your verbal skills? Can you talk purposefully? Can you give advice in real time? Can you tell stories effectively? Can you do the things that help people absorb information?

All of this is really tied to what leaders do and how they do it in a very productive way that really goes beyond communication.

**Q: If I were to summarize what I'm hearing from you, it sounds like from a public relations perspective you're suggesting to think, not necessarily within the public relations realm, but more from the lens of the top leader of the organization.**

**JL:** Right, I'm saying, essentially, that communication skills and the things you know how to do are an incredibly important platform. Really, you need to step above that platform and do other things that go beyond public relations to be able to bring that into the equation of being a trusted strategic advisor.

## THE CHANGING NEWS MEDIA

**Jim Lukaszewski:** When I give this lecture, all the questions are media-related questions and I keep saying, “Hey, trying to get the message out is way beyond what the media does,” and in fact, is one of the difficulties for the communicator. In this book, I have a mixture of examples and stories from all these areas because I don’t want this to be just about communicators.

When the boss hears this impassioned defense of the news media, of reporters, when a PR guy leaves and I’m the room, the boss looks at me and says, “Who is he working for today? I know he’s getting a paycheck from me, but who’s he working for today. Is he working for the television station or is he working for me?”

This is part of the concept of being a trusted advisor. You have to sort out where your allegiances are. You have to sort out what you’re really about and what is in the best interest of this individual, and it’s well beyond what reporters are doing. In fact, news reporters, for example, are becoming less and less important to us every day.

Other mediums and other kinds of journalists like public citizens are becoming more important because not only do they have more clout, all the studies are demonstrating that people believe more of what’s on the Web than they believe coming from the local newspaper, television station or radio.

This is a seismic shift for the communicator to absorb and most communicators still—70 percent—come from journalism. This is really tough. I was in a conversation just the other day with a bunch of people saying we have to defend the journalism, they’re under assault, and I’m saying,

*I don’t see how we’re going to recover the credibility of newspapers. It’s collapsing.*

“Why do we have to do that? They own the ink barrel—they can defend themselves.”

The issue for us is how to serve our clients in ways that help them relate to society better, because society is changing in terms of what it believes and who it believes. I don't see how we're going to recover the credibility of newspapers. It's collapsing. The public believes that they make this stuff up, that they lie, that they actually are even unpatriotic, to be pleasant about it, and radio and television are not far behind.

We're calling them legacy media—they're old. The new public is moving beyond these media, so as a profession, just looking at it from a professional standpoint, things are changing dramatically and it's the public that's forcing these changes. The big thing that's happening is that everybody gets to be a journalist these days. The definition of that has gone completely hazy.

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## GETTING TO THE TABLE

**Jim Lukaszewski:** I think the biggest message here is that people keep searching for this table. We keep that as the big question, and I think communicators are surprised to learn, as are HR people, as are attorneys, as are other staff functions, that this is the universal question. They all have this question on their minds, they all want to know—even lawyers.

I was with a group of lawyers a while ago. They're a group of lawyers who started a trade association. What all of these attorneys have in common is they are the litigation managers for the nation's thousand largest companies, and when they called me to come and speak at their opening of their inaugural meeting, I said, “Well, I'm happy to come but I'm not an attorney.”

They said, “We know that, but you talk about this business of getting to be at the table and we're concerned about that.”

I said, "Let me get this straight. You work for one of the Fortune top ten. You have a problem getting to the table? You're in charge of litigation, you're in charge of what, trillions of dollars probably?"

He said, "Yes, certainly many, many, many, many billions."

"And you're having trouble getting to the bosses?"

He said, "Absolutely."

So I came and spoke. The questions being asked of me, and these are all among the most accomplished attorneys on this planet, were the same as the PR people asked me: "How do I get there, how do I punch through, how do I make them listen to me? How do I make them take my advice?"

Here's the kicker: I spend most of my time working with operating people, and the CEO has this question for me: "Jim, where is this table all these people keep talking about? And if I find it, do I actually have to go there and listen to all these whiny staff people?"

The answer really is: The table is you. The table is the person walking in the room who can do those things I talked about, who can help them find the next steps, who can give them advice in real time, and who can do it right there in the moment, so to speak. By that definition, you are the table.

I always tell people, "If you ever find this place, you want to stay away from it because no CEO wants to go there."

That's my story. 🍷

## BIOGRAPHIES

### James E. Lukaszewski, ABC, APR, Fellow PRSA

James E. Lukaszewski (loo-ka-SHEV-skee) advises, coaches, and counsels the men and women who run very large corporations and organizations through extraordinary problems and critical high-profile circumstances. The bulk of his practice is in the Western Hemisphere, although he has clients from many parts of the world.

He is an expert in managing and reducing contention, counteracting tough, touchy, sensitive corporate communications issues. He counsels companies facing serious internal and external problems involving: activist counteraction; community conflict and grassroots campaigns; corporate relations failures; reputational threats; employee relationship building; ethics/integrity/compliance; litigation visibility; Web-based attacks; and threats to corporate survival. His broad-based experience ranges from media-initiated investigations to product recalls and plant closings, from criminal litigation to takeovers. He is frequently retained by senior management to directly intervene and manage the resolution of corporate problems and bad news. The situations he helps resolve often involve conflict, controversy, community action or activist opposition. Almost half of his practice involves civil and criminal litigation.

He is a prolific author (six books, hundreds of articles), lecturer (corporate, college and university), trainer, counselor, and public speaker. His 1992 book, *Influencing Public Attitudes: Strategies that Reduce the Media's Power*, remains a classic work in the field of direct communication. The Public Relations Society of America published the final volume of his four-volume *Executive Action® Crisis Communication Management System* in 2005: *War Stories and Crisis Communication Strategies, An Anthology*; *Crisis Communication Planning Strategies, A Workbook*; *Crisis Communication Plan Components and Models: Crisis Communication Management Readiness*; and *Media Relations During Emergencies, A Guide*. His newest book, *Why Should the Boss Listen to You?*, was published by Jossey-Bass in February 2008. He has published 25 monographs on critical communication subjects since 1994 and hundreds of articles throughout his career.

### Bob Conrad, MA, APR

Bob has degrees in journalism, counseling and educational psychology and has won numerous public relations awards. His experience spans floods, fires, whistleblowers, budget cuts, activist attacks, disease outbreaks, human-animal chimeras, media misinformation, biotechnology, natural resources, environmental issues, animal rights activists and a number of other public relations challenges. He works full time as the communications officer for the Nevada Department of Conservation of Natural Resources.

Bob is accredited in public relations and previously served as a director of marketing communications at the University of Nevada, where he is currently completing his doctoral degree.

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