

## **PROFILES IN JELL-O®: COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES GUARANTEED TO PERPETUATE TROUBLE**

When bad things happen there are seven corrosive behaviors organizations in trouble must plan against. Otherwise, they will quickly multitask themselves into long-term difficulty.

1. Denial: Refusal to accept that something bad has happened, that there may be victims or other direct effects that require prompt public acknowledgement. There is denial that it's really serious; denial that the media or public have any real stake or interest in whatever the problem happens to be; denial that it should take anyone's time in the organization except those in top management specifically tasked to deal with it; denial that the problem is of any particular consequence to the organization provided no one talks about it except those directly involved. "Let's not over-react." "Let's keep it to ourselves." "We don't need to tell the people in public affairs and public relations just yet. They'll just blab it all over." "If we don't talk, no one will know."

2. Victim Confusion: Irritable reaction to reporters, employees, angry neighbors, and victims' families when they call asking for help, information, explanation, or apology. "Hey! We're victims too."

Symptoms include time-wasting explanations of how we've been such a good corporate citizen, how we've contributed to the opera, the little league, the shelter program. "We don't deserve to be treated this badly." "Mistakes can happen, even to the best of companies." "We're only human."

When these behaviors don't pass the community, media, or victim straight face test, or are criticized or laughed at, a stream of defensive threats follows:

- "If the government enforces this regulation, it will destroy our competitiveness."
- "If we have to close this plant, it's their fault." "It's the only decision we can make."
- "If this decision stands, many will suffer needlessly."
- "If we didn't do this, someone else would."

3. Testosterosis: Look for ways to hit back rather than to deal with the problem. Refuse to give in; refuse to respect those who may have a difference of opinion or a legitimate issue.

There is extraordinary negative energy inside the executive circle. That's what testosterosis really is . . . an attack of adrenaline. Another definitive indicator, the use of military terminology – tactics, strategy, enemy, beachhead, attack, retreat and truce – builds a macho atmosphere. This command and control mentality sets the stage for predictable errors, omissions, and mistakes.

4. Arrogance: Reluctance to apologize, express concern or empathy, or to take appropriate responsibility because, "If we do that, we'll be liable," or, "We'll look like sissies," or, "We'll set bad precedents," or, "There'll be copycats," or, "We'll legitimize bad actions or people." It's contempt for adversaries, sometimes even for victims, and almost always for the news media.

5. Search for the Guilty: Dig into the organization to look for traitors, turncoats, troublemakers, those who push back, and the unconvinced to shift the blame to them.

6. Fear of the Exposure: As it becomes clear that the problem is at least partly real, the media and the victims begin asking, "What did you know, and when did you know it?" "What have you done, and when did you do it?", along with other humiliating, embarrassing, and damaging questions.

7. Management by Whining Around: When the decision is made to finally move forward, the organization talks only about its own pain, which makes victims, employees, neighbors, government, and the media even angrier.

Use these approaches in any order or quantity, and trouble, serious reputation problems, and brand damage will continue to occur. By the time you recover – if you do – there will be career-defining moments and perhaps a new team to replace you and yours.