

October/November/December 1999

TO: Executive Addressed

FR: James E. Lukaszewski, APR, Fellow PRSA Chairman

RE: The Five Counterintuitive Effects of Explosive Visibility

Whenever a business interest, product, or person is suddenly forced into the limelight, a predictable set of counter-intuitive effects occurs. These effects can be prepared for, often pre-empted or mitigated. It doesn't matter whether the limelight or public visibility is caused by positive or negative events. Managing sensational visibility depends on anticipation, planning, and counteraction:

Effect 1. *Inverse Credibility* - Opinions of the lowest employee, neighbor, public official, or competitor will outrank the facts supplied by scientists, CEOs, acknowledged experts, sometimes even Nobel Prize winners.

Victim values define who is credible in adverse situations.

Effect 2: *Inverse Intellectual Content* - Complex, difficult to understand issues and nuances are reduced to abject simplicity.

The rule of the thirteen-year-old applies. If it can't be explained so that your mother, brother, sister, aunt, uncle, or an average thirteen-year-old can easily understand it, it will be misunderstood, misinterpreted, all of which will be your fault.

Effect 3: *Inverse Relationships* - Those most negatively affected by your actions will have more power than common sense or the greatest-positive majority. People you don't respect will have great power over you and your decisions.

To paraphrase what Margaret Mead said early in this century, "Never underestimate the power of a handful of dedicated individuals (or victims) to change everyone else's life." Believe it.

Effect 4: *Inverse Compatibility* - Getting to and staying at a table - no matter what - is crucial to controlling outcomes. Overcome your discontent, your distrust, and your disrespect for your opposition. Compatibility isn't necessarily essential to winning. What's essential is engagement with trust. Be in the discussion, in the fight, in the dispute, in the debate - positively - until the situation is resolved.

Effect 5: *Time vs. Healing* - In high-profile disputes, discussions, and problems, time lags, delays, and unresponsiveness are always counterproductive. Delay is perceived as arrogance or incompetence; postponement is perceived as collusive; and a non-response is admission of guilt. Do it now; say it now; decide it now; ask it now. Act decisively; decide; control; survive; sometimes even win.

The lesson: Explosive visibility remains sensational as long as you allow it to.

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