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EXXON VALDEZ: THE GREAT CRISIS MANAGEMENT PARADOX[©]

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ABSTRACT

Exxon and *Valdez* have become the *sine qua non* for the mishandling of both an environmental disaster response and the corporate communications surrounding it. The events of the first few hours of Friday, March 24, 1989 in the pristine, icy waters of Alaska have dramatically changed how many companies plan for emergencies and disasters. *Valdez* crystallized world environmental sensitivity on a scale and with a depth of emotion never before seen.

Nightmare is the perfect metaphor, except, of course, that the spilling of 10 million gallons of oil really did happen. Like a nightmare, it recurs, is recollected and is relived in similar but slightly different ways. Yet, Exxon can never wake up to find this problem has disappeared with the night.

The reputational effects of *Valdez* have become a negative legend, even as other disasters of greater consequence to public interest occurred. Some effects may indeed be permanent. The incident galvanized public attention and opened wallets to increase funding for dozens of environmental groups.

For the U.S., the magnitude of *Valdez* has managed to eclipse the twentieth century's other giant, nonwar, nonnaturally caused environmental disaster, Union Carbide's deadly explosion in Bhopal, India, where more than 5,000 people died. Public reaction to the *Valdez*'s massive environmental damage and destruction of wildlife clearly overshadowed the fact that there were no human deaths from either the tanker's spill, the effects of the spill, or the clean-up operations, which lasted nearly two years. Analysis of what actually happened as compared with perception of what was done shows that many permanent negative myths exist about Exxon's actual performance versus the public perception of its behavior.

On the other hand . . .

Exxon's ability to weather the *Valdez* spill has created an important set of powerful questions used by senior executives to challenge extensive efforts to prepare for emergency management beyond operational imperatives. These questions, in a sense, aren't new to those interested in crisis prevention and mitigation, but they have new force and power based on the Exxon experience.

1. How much effort really needs to go into a crisis disaster response/business recovery development process? Once government and health and safety regulations have been met, why gear up beyond that level of preparation?
2. Does an organization really pay a permanent price if it doesn't prepare and, therefore, responds "poorly" – either from the public's or some other interested audience's point of view?
3. If Exxon can survive . . . with the visibility and size of the *Valdez* spill . . . just how does an organization gauge how much preparation is necessary? What is the justification from an operating standpoint for significant organizational commitment to crisis preparation?

This monograph explores the powerful lessons these paradoxes teach.



If this Abstract has been helpful and you wish to acquire the entire text, please visit www.Amazon.com.

PRODUCT DETAILS

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James E. Lukaszewski (loo-ka-SHEV-skee) advises, coaches, and counsels the men and women who run very large corporations and organizations. He is an expert in managing and counteracting tough, touchy, sensitive corporate communications issues. The fastest growing portion of his practice involves civil and criminal litigation. He is one of the few who can and truly does coach CEOs.

He is a prolific author (several books, hundreds of articles), lecturer (corporate, college and university), coach, and counselor. He is quoted in publications such as *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Miami Herald*, the *Harvard Business Review*, and industry trade journals. He is a columnist, advisor, or editor for almost every major public relations periodical. His 1992 book, *Influencing Public Attitudes: Strategies that Reduce the Media's Power*, remains a classic work in the field of direct communication. He is the author of the four-volume *Executive Action® Crisis Communication Management System* and has published 26 unabridged monographs on critical communication subjects since 1994. His newest book, *Why Should the Boss Listen to You?*, was published by Jossey-Bass in 2008.

He is an internationally recognized speaker on crisis management, ethics, media relations, public affairs, and reputation preservation and restoration. Visiting his Web site, www.e911.com, is like attending the University of Crisis Management.

An accredited member of the International Association of Business Communicators (ABC) and the Public Relations Society of America (APR), Mr. Lukaszewski is a member of the PRSA's College of Fellows (Fellow PRSA) and Board of Ethics & Professional Standards. He served as a crisis communications advisor to the International Disaster Advisory Committee, Agency for International Development, Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance from 1989 to 1992, and is a civilian advisor to several other federal agencies. He lectures annually at the U.S. Marine Corp's East Coast Commander's Media Training Symposium and was the second recipient of its Drew Middleton Award. He is the recipient of both Ball State University's 2004 National Public Relations Achievement Award and the 2004 Patrick Jackson Award for Distinguished Service to PRSA, and is among the winners of the 2005 *PR News* Lifetime Achievement Award. His name appeared in *Corporate Legal Times* as one of "28 Experts to Call When All Hell Breaks Loose," and in *PR Week* as one of 22 "crunch-time counselors who should be on the speed dial in a crisis."