

Profiles in Failure: Behavior Patterns That Precipitate and Perpetuate Trouble

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Sometimes the only way to help organizations avoid embarrassment, humiliating visibility, enormous litigation, and just plain stupidity is to illustrate dramatically the pattern of behaviors and attitudes that lead to catastrophic reputational trouble. I call this pattern “Profiles in Failure.” These behaviors can be easily recognized and their impact predicted. If you are looking for trouble, here’s the way to quickly multitask your way into long-term difficulty.

1. ***Silence:*** The most toxic strategy possible. Makes you look like a perpetrator, whether true or not. There is no credible way to explain silence in the face of crisis. Silence is the most frequent career-killer in crisis situations.
2. ***Stalling:*** Speed beats smart every time. Failure to act immediately, even incorrectly, is impossible to explain or apologize for. Doing nothing, even for what appear to be good reasons, is never explainable.
3. ***Denial:*** Refuse to accept the fact that something bad has happened and that there may be victims or other direct effects that require prompt public acknowledgement.
4. ***Victim Confusion:*** Irritable reaction to reporters, angry neighbors, and victims’ families when they call asking for help, information, explanation, or apology. “Hey! We’re victims too.”
5. ***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.
6. ***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 a precedent,” or, “There will be copycats.”
7. ***Search for the Guilty:*** Shift blame anywhere you can while digging into the organization, looking for traitors, turncoats, troublemakers, those who push back, and the unconvinced.
8. ***Fear of the Media:*** As it becomes more clear that the problem is at least partly real, the media begin asking, “What did you know, and when did you know it?”, “What have you done, and when did you do it?”, and other humiliating, embarrassing, and damaging questions for which there are no really good, truthful answers anymore because you have stalled so long.
9. ***Whining:*** Head down, finger in your navel, shuffling around, whining, and complaining about how bad your luck is, about being a victim of the media, zealous do-gooders, wacko-activists, or people don’t know anything; about how people you don’t respect have power; and, that you “don’t get credit” for whatever good you’ve already contributed.

Execute one, some or all of these behaviors in any order and I guarantee trouble, serious reputation problems, and brand damage. By the time you recover – if you do – look for some career-defining moments including involuntary departure, and a new team may replace you and yours.