

THE GLOBE AND MAIL



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6 life lessons from the man paid to do damage control for the stars

COURTNEY SHEA

Mar. 11, 2013

Lanny Davis is one of the more influential people you may have never heard of – most of his work happens behind the scenes. As a crisis manager, Davis's objective is to avoid headlines for Bill Clinton, Martha Stewart and other public figures who have been caught with their pants down (both figuratively and literally). Here, the author of the new book, *Crisis Tales* shares his secrets to success.

Be your own moral watchdog

The best advice I've ever gotten is something my dad told me when I was younger: He said, 'whatever you're going to do, just assume you're going to get caught.' Sometimes just imagining the negative consequence is enough to deter a potentially bad decision. I have passed down the same thing to my son.

Better a fool than a fiend

One of the stories that I write about in my book is the work I did for U.S. Congressman Charles Rangel. He was the chairman of a major tax-writing committee in the U.S. Congress and he had forgotten to pay taxes on a condo he owned in the Dominican Republic over a 20-year period. It wasn't a lot of money, it was a non-cash distribution and he didn't get the kind of notices that you would get from the IRS, so it was really a case of him being careless, but obviously an embarrassing one. We decided to release the information rather than wait for someone else to get the story. We found a *New York Times* reporter who wasn't on a deadline. We offered up all of the facts and ultimately the story that came out was balanced and the errors that Congressman Rangel made didn't appear sinister. He followed up with a press conference where he admitted to being careless and he apologized.

Feed the beast

Being half transparent is like being half pregnant. It's unbelievable the number of crisis managers who think they can get away with telling only the good facts and not the bad. People have this idea that if you don't volunteer bad facts they'll go away. They say, 'don't feed the beast, offer no comment, don't answer the reporters' calls because they're just out to hurt you.' If you know a reporter is writing something bad, you definitely want to talk to them. At least then you have a chance to improve the situation.

Make a negative a positive

I don't know who it was who decided that it was a good idea to have President Obama be seen playing golf with Tiger Woods during a time of economic distress, but trying to cover it up was a brain-dead decision. They barred the media from the first tee, which is the functional equivalent of saying, "Let's throw some kerosene on the fire to put it out." What was a non-story became a story. I would have advised the president to invite everybody in the press corps to come to the first tee, get some photos and quotes. and then let them go on their way. ... Yes, we're in a time of economic distress, but There isn't a single golfer in the world who wouldn't give their eye teeth to play golf with Tiger Woods. If President Obama had said, "Look everyone, I know we're in tough times, but if any of you out there are golfers, you understand how I just couldn't pass this up." You would have had 200 million people nodding their heads in agreement.

Just the facts

We have a penalty in my office, a \$10 fine for any time somebody uses an adjective or an adverb. When we write messages we don't want to write characterizing words, we want to write facts. For example, we would never say a person was "grossly negligent." Grossly is a double fine because gross is an adjective and grossly is an adverb. Negligence is a characterization, not a fact. Rather than saying someone is negligent, I will say Charles Rangel didn't review his tax returns over a twenty-year period – fact. Because there was a distribution of proceeds that was not cash, it was a reduction of his mortgage – fact. The facts will then determine the characterization.

Remember what matters

My regular ritual is to remind myself how lucky I am to have the family that I have. That is my grounding and it's what I think about when I'm having a bad day.

Lanny Davis's new book Crisis Tales: Five Rules for Coping With Crises in Business, Politics and Life was published this month.