

The Five Stages of PR Grief

By Marj Halperin

When reeling from the death of a loved one, psychiatrist and author Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's theory of the five stages of grief are a helpful guide to recovery. But what if you're managing PR grief stemming from a bad hire, a decision made on the fly or taking a risk and coming up short? Maybe your PR crisis is the result of your own actions, or maybe it has been caused by someone else, and totally blindsides you. Regardless of the origin, you have a problem that must be solved quickly, with little time to waste on emotional responses.

According to Kübler-Ross, people don't necessarily experience the five stages of grief in order, nor does everyone experience all five stages. However, most will experience at least two of the stages.

Regardless of the particular way you experience these stages, acknowledging the common emotional responses to grief helps you get through them more productively, accelerating your journey to the final stage, which is acceptance. In terms of PR grief, understanding these emotional responses can help you take on a leadership role, and demonstrate a response that satisfies your customers, board and other key stakeholders.

Understanding these stages will also help you move past them more quickly. Kübler-Ross began working with terminally ill patients, but later applied these stages to people facing many other kinds of grief.

PR Grief: Time is of The Essence

Whether your flagship product is undergoing a

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major recall, your company managers are accused of harassment, or it was just revealed that a star executive lied on her resume, you have a problem that needs immediate attention. We find the stages a client experiences to manage these problems remarkably similar to the Kübler-Ross stages, with a few notable exceptions, which we'll get to soon.

In one important way, PR grief can be much harsher than other types of grief. When under the magnifying glass of media attention, you don't often have the luxury of time to move as slowly as needed through the stages. You certainly don't have time to whipsaw through them and revisit those that prevent you from a quick resolution of your PR problem.

Anyone caught in the spotlight of a PR crisis needs to move quickly if he is going to reach a dignified conclusion in the face of potential lawsuits, plummeting stock prices, job losses, and a tarnished image. Your best shot at mitigating these situations is to recognize and conquer the five stages of PR grief. This way, you can make a cool-headed assessment of your options and move as quickly as possible to a strong resolution.

Let's take a look at the stages of grief, applying them to PR:

DENIAL: Kübler-Ross defines denial with such phrases as, "I feel fine. This can't be happening, not to me." I'd add a few more, including, "This

isn't really a big deal. It'll all blow over quickly." Corporate and political leaders often make these kinds of statements when facing the prospect of having to apologize or retreat from a bad decision.

While denial is generally a temporary feeling when coping with life or death issues, in the PR grief world, it's tempting to get stuck in it. For example, I don't think former Senator Larry Craig, in responding to accusations that he was trying to pick up men in a Minneapolis-St. Paul airport bathroom in 2007, fooled anyone but himself by elaborating on his "wide stance." Trying to explain why he pled guilty to disorderly conduct charges related to the incident, he stated, somewhat cryptically, that the entire situation was an "overreaction."

Similarly, when **Netflix** instituted a 60% price increase requiring customers to pay separately for its DVD-by-mail and online streaming services, the retailer reacted to the outrage generated by its decision with denial. Despite the company's stock dropping by 14%, the popular **Starz** network announcing it would not renew its contract with Netflix and the company being forced to prepare investors for an expected loss of one million customers, Netflix issued a statement with the line, "We remain convinced that the splitting of our services was the right long-term strategic choice." Three weeks later, Netflix execs were no longer convinced, and dropped the new pricing plan.

It's easy to understand the desire to stay in the comfort of denial, but you have work to do. When faced with a PR crisis, you need to pull yourself past this emotion as quickly as possible in order to start planning the constructive response that will actually matter to your stakeholders, whether they are consumers, voters, shareholders, donors or an angry board of directors.

ANGER/BLAME: When you wake up from the dreamy state of denial, you'll find yourself on mile two of the Kübler-Ross journey, anger. "Why me? It's not fair! How can this happen to me? Who is to blame?" That last one is a big player in the PR grief cycle. Most people in this stage point their anger at someone else; if they didn't, we'd have to change

the name to "taking responsibility." That doesn't come until the final stage.

So, to be most accurate, let's rename this stage the blame phase.

You can waste a lot of energy and time looking for a scapegoat. Internally, fingers may point at board members and staff. In a crisis involving leaked information, a prime target is often whoever leaked the item—the old "blame the messenger" strategy. A related target is a reporter charged with having an axe to grind. "Call the editor! They must print a correction!"

During the **Susan G. Komen for the Cure/Planned Parenthood** scandal, to the deep detriment of the organization, and at cross-purposes with the goal of putting the PR crisis behind it, Komen floundered between denial and blame. While wallowing in these stages, the organization was forced to defend itself on several new fronts, including charges that it scrubbed negative comments from its Facebook page. Because it took Komen too long to issue its inevitable apology, the damaging story continues to drag out in the media.

Psychologists find that once we get to the anger stage of grief, we recognize that denial cannot continue. In the anger/blame stage, medical patients are very difficult to care for, due to misplaced feelings of rage and envy. Crisis communications clients are also difficult to work with, as blame is a major barrier to reaching the ideal end result: A dignified resolution. Ready to move on? Watch your step, as this next one is also a quagmire.

BARGAINING: "I'll do anything for a few more years. I will give my life savings for an experimental treatment." Those are the phrases we hear from someone hoping to somehow postpone or delay death, save a job about to be cut or avoid some other personal tragedy. Psychologically, the individual is saying, "I understand the reality I face, but if I could just do something to buy more time..."

This is often the stage where we come in as crisis management consultants. Lots of damaging words

have already been said and bad decisions have been made in the name of denial and blame. But the cause of the PR grief remains. There have been new stories about the crisis, in more outlets. Social media might have added more fuel to the fire. So clients consult with PR professionals and try to strike a deal that saves them from paying a higher price.

In the case of former Illinois Governor George Ryan, the bargain was aimed at mitigating a 2003 indictment on corruption charges. This stemmed from an FBI investigation into allegations that unqualified truck drivers could secure driver licenses in exchange for a bribe.

The bargain? Ryan suspended the Illinois death penalty and became an internationally recognized leader of the anti-death-penalty movement. This work even led his nomination for a Nobel Peace Prize. He didn't get it. And he never apologized for the corruption—or for the lives lost because of mistakes made by the unqualified truck drivers. But he did get a seven-year jail term.

The bargaining phase feeds back into denial, and leads to the next stage of PR grief, which is depression.

DEPRESSION/PRIDE: "I'm so sad, why bother with anything? I'm going to die soon, so what's the point?" These are common phrases uttered by terminally ill patients. In the midst of PR grief, a client might say, "What's the point?" or even, "My career is ruined." That might morph into, "This business is destroyed, there's no point in apologizing now." Generally, clients experiencing PR grief don't spend much if any time in the depression phase, usually moving on to the far more dangerous phase of pride.

John Edwards spent a lot of time in the pride phase of PR grief, attempting to bluster his way through the bombshell that he covered up fathering a child with a campaign aide while his wife battled terminal cancer. It didn't stop the episode from ending his political career.

Remember, our goals are dignity and acceptance, so the pride phase is nothing but trouble. It's the last stop before the final goal; one we need

to get through ASAP. At this stage, our clients, as with Kübler-Ross's patients, understand that a resolution to their predicament is near, but not the resolution for which they hoped. They've been using denial, anger, bargaining and blame to avoid this resolution. Now, only pride stands in the way of accepting responsibility, admitting mistakes, issuing an apology and taking the corrective action for which stakeholders are (now impatiently) waiting. This is the most crucial phase in the arc of PR grief.

Sadly many fail to emerge from the ego-driven pride phase.

Politicians get iced out by their colleagues and voted out by their constituents. CEOs and board members who get stuck here lose their jobs.

ACCEPTANCE: "It's going to be okay. I can't fight it, I might as well prepare for it." In this last stage, patients begin to come to terms with their mortality or that of a loved one, and accept an otherwise tragic event. This is where those in the arc of PR grief accept responsibility. They apologize to those they wronged, they resign, they offer retribution and/or they come clean. The sooner they reach this stage, the better their chances of salvaging their reputations and their companies.

To be clear, a quick and sincere apology won't erase a serious mistake. The goal here is to avoid the bad decisions, cover-ups and abuse of trust that can further damage your brand currency. Getting to the acceptance stage of PR grief will give you and your company the best shot at redemption with minimal bloodshed.

Who would have thought Elliot Spitzer would have a public life after the media discovered he favored young, high-end prostitutes? While he was forced to resign as governor of New York when this news broke in 2008, it took Spitzer less than a 48-hour news cycle to do so, and he provided a blunt and honest apology in the process, saying "I cannot allow for my private failings to disrupt the people's work."

He ended his political career, but is now popular on the public-speaking circuit and enjoys a high-profile media career as a columnist and a TV host

Five Stages of PR Grief— A Quick Look

1. **Denial:** Psychiatrist and author Elisabeth Kübler-Ross defines denial with such phrases as, "I feel fine. This can't be happening, not to me." Corporate and political leaders often make these kinds of statements when facing the prospect of having to apologize or retreat from a bad decision.
2. **Anger/Blame:** The anger stage of PR grief can be defined by the phrases, "This isn't really a big deal. It'll all blow over quickly." Corporate and political leaders often make these kinds of statements when facing the prospect of having to apologize or retreat from a bad decision.
3. **Bargaining:** "I'll do anything for a few more years. I will give my life savings for an experimental treatment." Those are the phrases we hear from someone hoping to somehow postpone or delay death, save a job about to be cut or avoid some other personal tragedy.
4. **Depression/Pride:** "I'm so sad, why bother with

anything? I'm going to die soon, so what's the point?" These are common phrases uttered by terminally ill patients. In the midst of PR grief, a client might say, "What's the point?" or even, "My career is ruined." That might morph into "This business is destroyed, there's no point in apologizing now." Generally, clients experiencing PR grief don't spend much if any time in the depression phase. They usually move on to the far more dangerous phase of pride.

5. **Acceptance:** "It's going to be okay. I can't fight it, I might as well prepare for it." In this last stage, patients begin to come to terms with their mortality or that of a loved one, and accept an otherwise tragic event. This is where those in the arc of PR grief accept responsibility. They apologize to those they wronged, they resign, they offer retribution and/or they come clean. The sooner they reach this stage, the better their chances of salvaging their reputation, their job, their career and their company.

on various cable networks. Do Spitzer's actions form the basis for a political comeback? While it would be difficult to do so because of the nature of his PR gaffe, if he continues to be honest about his actions, I wouldn't rule it out.

Less successful was the apology from Rush Limbaugh, as he tried to stop the stampede of advertisers disassociating themselves from his insulting remarks about a college student who focused on medical reasons for birth control when she testified at a Congressional hearing on healthcare coverage for contraception. "My choice of words was not the best, and in the attempt to be humorous, I created a national stir," said Limbaugh on March 3, 2012, in an apology laden with denial. He quickly lost two more advertisers.

Two days later, he apologized again. This time, he tried blame. "In fighting [liberals] on this issue, I became like them," he said. Until Limbaugh can make an unconditional apology for his PR

blunders, advertisers continue to question their association with his show.

Not every instance of PR grief will be as dramatic or high profile as the examples cited in this article. It might be as simple as a 'small consumer kerfuffle that risks going viral via your Facebook page, or an internal crisis that threatens company morale. No matter the context, you can't mitigate your PR grief with denial, blame, bargaining or pride. The sooner you move to acceptance of the situation with a graceful, honest resolution, the more likely you will salvage the goodwill of your customers, staff, board, the media and other key stakeholders.

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