

April/May/June 1999

TO: Executive Addressed

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

RE: The Eighth Dimension of Crisis Communication Management: Overcoming Codes of Silence

In many situations where reputations are at stake, where serious damage is threatened or has already occurred, there is a human tendency or institutional expectation that silence will be maintained. Ironically, codes of silence become obvious quickly and fuel relentless attacks by outside forces to pierce the veil of secrecy and bring down those responsible. Codes of silence are institutional hiding places.

There are at least four environments where codes of silence are often the first response to trouble, disaster, embarrassment, or threat of uncomfortable disclosures:

1. ***The Blue Wall:*** Shortly before this *Executive Action* was written, four New York City police officers fired 41 bullets at an unarmed and innocent black man in the Bronx. Weeks passed before there was any news about what was going to happen to the officers and Mayor Rudolph Giuliani steadfastly defended the police chief and the officers in the face of ever increasing public demonstrations. This could indeed be a career-defining moment for both the Mayor's political aspirations and for the City's police chief. The blue wall of police silence only crumbles with enormous public pressure.
2. ***The White Wall:*** When physicians and medical personnel make mistakes, the medical community's first reaction is to rally around each other and protect against an uninformed public and a sensationalizing media. Medical professionals have enormous power to control information and to put up a wall of silence when the public or the victim's interest may need and demand disclosure.
3. ***The Green Wall:*** This is the code of silence among military professionals. These are individuals whose chosen profession is, when necessary and without reservation, to lay down their lives for the protection of our country and the deterrence of hostile forces. The tendency is to look at civilians as unworthy of respect and unwelcome intruders since they have not submitted themselves to the tests of war. The military has its own rules, the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ), and its own court system.
4. ***The Stone Wall:*** The corporate practice to initially deny events and consequences, even when both are readily evident. Then, when forced to confess, to say little or nothing.
5. ***The Editorial Wall:*** This is the news media's tendency to take offense and lash out at any criticism. Without credible independent oversight, this institution has the most powerful code of silence in our society. If the media don't talk about it, it does not exist.

Codes of silence get broken along with careers and reputations. Codes of silence create unnecessary victims who irritate, retaliate, then litigate until the perpetrator is crushed. Overcoming codes of silence is often the critical element in achieving successful crisis communication management.

Also see the following *Executive Action* newsletters: *Obtaining Public Forgiveness*; *Profiles in Jell-O*; and *Why Community Relations Programs Fail*. For other useful ideas, please visit our Web site at www.e911.com.

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