Understanding how to navigate the five stages of grief can help you address a publicity problem — of any size — quickly and with a clear head.

THE URGENCY OF TIME

There is one notable exception to this analogy, however: time. Under the magnifying glass of media attention, we don’t have the luxury of moving as slowly as we might need to sort through our emotional responses. In this world of 24- to 48-hour news cycles, anyone who is caught in the spotlight of a PR crisis needs to move quickly if there is to be any hope of reaching a dignified conclusion in the face of political pressure, potential lawsuits, job losses, and tarnished images. Your best shot at mitigating a publicity problem is to make a cool-headed assessment of your options, recognizing and promptly conquering the five stages of PR grief.

Failing to move decisively from one stage to the next means you’re not only wasting valuable time within a news cycle — you’re inviting others to define your situation. And those who jump to fill the vacuum aren’t generally your friends. A prime example is the recent IRS storm around disclosure of keywords used to target non-profits thought to be hiding political activity under a tax-exempt veil. Initially, the Obama administration issued neither a flat denial nor a clear-cut apology. Acceptance remained elusive. Critics did their best to define the early phase and make it last as long as possible.

RECOGNIZING AND CONQUERING EACH STAGE

1. Denial. Kübler-Ross describes this stage as being marked by phrases like “I feel fine” or “This can’t be happening to me.” Here are two more: “This isn’t really a big deal” and “It’ll all blow over quickly.” This is what people say to themselves when faced with the prospect of having to apologize, explain, or retreat from a bad decision. Denial is generally a temporary feeling when coping with life and death matters. During a personal medical crisis, it’s hard to stay here long — test results, scans, and x-rays demonstrate the grim truth, and the facts help most people move along fairly quickly. In the PR grief world, however, it’s tempting to get stuck in the denial phase. Leaders do so at great risk, however, whether trying to maintain political footing or protecting loyalty to the organization.

An example from the private sector illustrates this point. Denial was costly for Netflix in fall 2011, when the
company instituted a 60 percent price increase by requiring customers to pay separately for movies received by mail and via online streaming. Within 24 hours, Netflix stock had dropped 14 percent, the popular Starz network announced it would not renew its contract with Netflix, and the company was forced to prepare investors for an expected loss of 1 million customers. The announcement about the price increase included the phrase “we remain convinced that the splitting of our services was the right long-term strategic choice.” Three weeks later, Netflix executives were no longer convinced, and they dropped the new pricing plan.²

And who could forget the implosion of celebrity chef Paula Deen following reports that she had routinely used a racial slur? Deen stayed in denial through three different apologies, issued in rapid succession. The first apology, as she blamed her Southern heritage for her offensive language.

It’s easy to understand an intense desire to stay in the comfort of denial, but that’s a self-indulgent luxury you can’t afford in the midst of a PR crisis. You need to pull yourself past denial as quickly as possible to start planning the honest, constructive response that will actually matter to your stakeholders — whether they are consumers, voters, elected officials, or an angry board.

2. Anger. When you wake up from the dreamy state of denial, you’ll find yourself in 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 question 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 change the name to “taking responsibility” (which doesn’t come until the final stage of the grief cycle). So, to be most accurate, let’s rename this stage: blame.

Searching for a scapegoat can waste a lot of energy and valuable time. Internally, fingers will point at board members and staff. Whoever leaked the item becomes a prime target, the old “blame the messenger” strategy. Another popular target is often a reporter accused of having an axe to grind.

During the Susan B. Komen Foundation/Planned Parenthood scandal, the Komen Foundation foundered between denial and blame, to the deep detriment of the organization. While wallowing in phases of denial and blame, Komen was forced to defend itself on several new fronts, including charges that negative comments were scrubbed from the organization’s Facebook page. Because it took Komen too long to get to its inevitable apology, the damaging story dragged out for months.⁶

Psychologists find that once we reach this second stage, we recognize that denial cannot continue. In this new angry, blame-laden state, medical patients are very difficult to care for because of their misplaced feelings of rage and envy. Crisis communications clients are similarly difficult to work with, often lashing out at the PR doctor delivering the bitter pill of truth. 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.

3. Bargaining. Someone who is hoping to postpone death, save their job, or avoid some other personal tragedy now says, “I’ll do anything for a few more years.” Psychologically, this translates to: “I understand the reality I face, but if I could just do something to buy more time...” Crisis management consultants are often brought in at this stage. Damaging words have been spoken and poor decisions made because of denial and blame. But the cause of the PR grief remains. More news stories, in additional outlets, have been reported, and social media might have added fuel to the fire. Clients consult with PR professionals, trying 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. He faced corruption charges stemming from an FBI investigation into allegations that unqualified truckers secured driver’s licenses in exchange for kickbacks.
paid to his campaign fund. The bargain? Ryan suspended the Illinois death penalty and became an internationally recognized leader of the anti-death penalty movement. This work even led to a nomination for the Nobel Peace prize. But, he never apologized for the corruption or for the lives lost because of dangerously unqualified truck drivers his campaign financing scam put on the roads. He didn’t get the prize, but he did get a seven-year jail term.

4. Depression. This bargaining phase feeds back into denial, and that backsliding can be pretty discouraging. That’s why it leads to the next stage, depression. In the midst of PR grief, someone might say, “What’s the point? My career is already ruined.” If the crisis deepens, this might escalate into “This business is destroyed, there’s no point in apologizing now” (that one includes bargaining, denial, and depression).

Generally, those who are in the arc of PR grief don’t spend much, if any, time in the depression phrase. It’s replaced with something far more dangerous: pride — the thing that goeth before the fall. John Edwards spent a lot of time here, attempting to bluster his way through the news that he covered up fathering a child with a campaign aide while his wife battled terminal cancer. His denials didn’t stop the episode from ending his presidential race and political career.

We’re heading toward dignity and acceptance as we work through these phases, so this one is nothing but trouble. It’s the last stop before the final goal, and one we need to get through as soon as possible. People in this stage — like Kübler-Ross’ patients — understand that resolution is near, although it’s not the resolution they hoped for. It’s the one they were trying so hard to avoid during the denial, anger, bargaining, and blame phases. Now, only pride stands in the way of accepting responsibility, admitting mistakes, issuing the apology, and taking the corrective action stakeholders are waiting (now impatiently) for. This is the most crucial phase in the arc of PR grief.

Sadly, however, many people do not emerge from this ego-driven phase. And they pay the highest PR price. Executives and board members who get stuck here lose their jobs. Politicians are iced out by colleagues and voted out by constituents.

Wasting valuable time within a news cycle invites others to define your situation.

5. Acceptance. “It’s going to be okay.” “I can’t fight it, I might as well prepare for it.” This is when those in the arc of PR grief accept responsibility. They apologize to people they wronged, they resign, they offer retribution, or they come clean. And the sooner they do so, the better their chances of salvaging their reputation, their job, their career, or their company.

A quick and sincere apology will not erase a serious mistake. The punishment will almost always match the crime. The goal here is to avoid upping the ante with bad decisions, cover-ups, and abuse of trust that can further damage your brand. Jumping quickly to acceptance will give you and your agency the best shot at redemption with minimal bloodshed.

Who would have thought that Elliot Spitzer would have career options after the death blow that was his prostitution scandal? Yes, he was forced to resign as Governor of New York, but he did so in less than a 48-hour news cycle, 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 showed decisively that he was willing to end his political career as penance. Spitzer demonstrated the value of being quick with an apology—and also the value of being sincere. As a result of this decisive action, just a few years later he had a new career as a popular voice on the public speaking circuit and in the media.

CONCLUSIONS

Not every instance of PR grief will be as dramatic or as high-profile as the examples cited here. You might have a small consumer kerfuffle that risks going viral via your agency’s Facebook page, or an internal crisis that threatens agency morale. Even if the water in your leaky boat doesn’t seem enough to sink the ship, it’s still a potential disaster that you need to resolve quickly. No matter the context, your PR grief won’t be mitigated by denial, blame, bargaining, or pride. The sooner you move to acceptance with a graceful, honest resolution, the more likely you will salvage the goodwill of your constituents, staff, media, and other key stakeholders, and get back to business.
A well prepared capital budget is necessary for successfully planning, funding, and implementing capital projects, but the process of recognizing capital needs and the creation of a capital plan occurs long before the development of the annual budget. Finance officers have an opportunity to contribute valuable insight at all stages in the capital planning process and help local governments make capital project investments that align with long-term service goals, objectives, and strategies.

With *Capital Project Planning and Evaluation: Expanding the Role of the Finance Officer*, the GFOA takes a practical approach to capital project planning. Focusing on common essential projects for small and mid-size local governments, this eighth volume of the GFOA Budgeting Series provides finance officers enough information to become “educated consumers” of capital projects and to become active participants in the capital planning and evaluation process, including needs assessment, project planning, project evaluation, and project implementation.

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**Notes**


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