

# Fast politicians, cowed cricketers, busy apples and Indiana Jones

 By [William Smook](#)

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Cricketers, politicians and media magnates share the need to manage their reputations and to deal with setbacks. The details of how they do so may differ, but the fundamentals are constant. Don't wait for a crisis to build your brand's reputation, or try to defend the indefensible. If you're concerned about how your brand manages threats, it's worth examining three such incidents in the past few days.

## Blue-lights and the moral high ground

First, there was the [reaction of Gauteng premier Nomvula Mokonyane](#) after 18-year-old Thomas Ferreira was knocked off his motorbike and critically injured by the luxury official car of Mokonyane's MEC for local government and housing, Humphrey Mmemezi.

Mokonyane's attempt at damage-control started well enough when she and her substantial and apparently indispensable retinue went to visit the injured boy's parents. But two lapses negated - or at least diluted - the success of that effort:

- First was the refusal to acknowledge that the impunity of the blue-light convoys may require revision, despite far too many similar incidents to the one involving the Mmemezi's car.
- Secondly, the [now much-replayed interview](#) with Eyewitness News's Stephen Grootes ([@StephenGrootes](#)), during which Mokonyane refused to say whether she and her coterie were breaking the speed-limit, while her convoy's sirens pealed in the background.

Whatever happens with the blue-light issue now, the VIP protection boy-racers can't hope to regain any moral high ground. They'll be seen as being dragged, heels kicking, into civility and self-restraint by an outraged public.

Unkind observers might see this as a confirmation of the some-pigs-are-more-equal-than-others, let-them-eat-cake mindset that afflicts many who assume higher office, from now-deposed Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi to sacked co-operative governance minister Sicelo Shiceka.

## All-you-can-eat helping of humble pie

The second example of damage control was the all-you-can-eat helping of humble pie by Australian cricket captain Michael Clarke, following his team's drubbing by the Proteas.

Who'd want to be in Clarke's shoes at the post-match press conference? He'd led from the front, scoring 151 not out, before seeing his team reduced to a historic 21/9, narrowly avoiding an ignominious world record for the lowest score in a Test. The Aussies eventually lost by eight wickets.

To his credit, Clarke made no attempt to blame the pitch, the weather, the umpires or the cricketing equivalent of "the wrong kind of snow". He accepted that the defeat had happened on his watch. Clarke deserves some credit, anyway, for taking full responsibility.

### **Hands-off managing style**

The same can't be said for James Murdoch, heir to his father's media empire and the man questioned by a UK parliamentary select committee about how much he knew about his company's journalists illegally hacking people's phones.

Murdoch acknowledged that egregious lapses took place but said that his management style was so hands-off that he wouldn't have known they were going on and thus couldn't be held responsible.

Murdoch may have felt little need to admit any culpability because the select committee has no real legal power. He may also be hoping against hope that News Corporation's twin defences will suffice: the hacking was carried out by a bad apple or two and the company's culture is changing to outlaw these apples in future.

This might not go far enough. Scotland Yard estimates there may be around 5700 victims - if it were just a case of one or two bad apples, then they were very busy apples indeed. Murdoch has been dubbed the most forgetful, hands-off manager in the world by the *Guardian*; News Corporation's investors might not be convinced of his capacity to head the corporation, following his defence that, in essence, he had better things to do than ensure the company behaved ethically.

### **Best practice**

Of these three disparate examples, only Clarke grasped the nettle and followed the best practice of reacting to the indefensible:

- express regret and apologise
- say you understand why people are disappointed in your brand
- explain what you'll do to make sure it won't happen again, and
- provide some timeline of when an improvement or redress could be evident.

Those basic steps can be applied to most situations where you are being called to account and where there is reputational risk.

A colleague who runs the communications for a major airline recounts how a cat being transported by that airline a few years ago went missing in transit. It was never found. While the cat may have been let out of its container while technically in the care of baggage-handlers, the airline would merely have aggravated the cat's owners by blaming the baggage-handling company. The owners had handed the cat, and some good money, to the airline, and placed their beloved pet in its care.

Instead, the airline launched a major investigation into how the cat had escaped and this led to more stringent requirements for the containers in which animals are transported. Apart from the classic crisis-communications reaction as outlined above, the airline was seen to deal with the issue at a senior level and kept the cat's owners updated on their efforts.

In short, there are occasions when the best response for communications professionals is to take the reaction on the chin, simply put, to "neither make, nor accept, any excuses". But the extent to which that is effective depends entirely on whether your brand has had structured, strategic communications before the madden hit the windmill.

## Good media profiles need steady building

To return to the cricketing example: you can't build a good media profile - or undo a reputational disaster - in the business equivalent of a few overs. It needs to be built steadily, while leaving yourself a little room to capitalise on opportunity - the communications equivalent of a short and wide ball that can be belted for six.

There are many ways to build your reputation before you're likely to take a hiding in the media, and a few ways not to. Arguably the most expensive and least effective way to do so is the model adopted by a number of government departments: buy space in a paper and fill it with a pic of the relevant MEC, minister or DG, along with the logo and a wordy announcement. It costs a fortune and is ineffective, compared to strategically planned and largely below-the-line communication.

But perhaps the best analogy of communications effectiveness is not in cricket but in the movie, Raiders of the Lost Ark, where Indiana Jones uses his revolver to explain to a sword-wielding warrior the folly of bringing a knife to a gunfight...

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