

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

BY BERNARD LUSKIN

Don't be caught in a flurry of denials and I don't recalls

As I write this column, the Pennsylvania Amish School Rampage story continues to develop. A truck driver gunman has accosted and killed children in a school in Pennsylvania, and it is the third school shooting this week.

Meanwhile, the mass media is chock full of commentary about Florida Congressman Mark Foley whose sexually inappropriate behavior with Congressional staffers disturbs me particularly because my son, Ryan, served as a Senate Page.

During the same week, Columbia University president Lee Bollinger had the good judgment to cancel Iranian president Ahmadinejad's appearance on campus. Bollinger was clear and candid in labeling Ahmadinejad's remarks as "repugnant," which wisely took the heat off Columbia for the booking and eliminated a volatile situation.

A growing diversity of incidents are occurring and being reported daily now. Campus administrators are

becoming aware that they must be prepared to face an incident of major proportions. The ability to deliver a proper media response is more important than ever.

Live—and on location

Higher education professionals in leadership positions need training regarding how to handle media responses. In recent months, I've received advice on the topic from William Cohen, the former Secretary of Defense, Captain Gregory Walsh of the New York State Police, Intel Executive Rick Reed, Yoram Neuman, CEO of Touro University International, Paul Jhin, Director of Planning and Policy at the Peace Corps, and George Boggs, President of the American Association of Community Colleges.

Mass media today includes newspapers, television, radio and blogs on the worldwide web. The heat of the mass media now comes live from the location of incidents. Responses often

must be immediate with little time for preparation.

"When Blowhards Blow: How do we respond?" asked CBS columnist Bob Schieffer on "Face the Nation," Sunday, October 1, 2006, in a reference to coverage surrounding Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Venezuela's Hugo Chavez.

“ Whatever you focus on expands. Good matters expand; bad matters expand, and bad comments have 'legs.' ”

Author/educator Steadman Graham could offer Schieffer some help. When offering a response, Graham says, "Whatever you focus on expands. Good matters expand; bad matters expand, and bad comments have 'legs.'"

One teaching method used to build media response skill is the "in-basket technique." Random incidents are pulled out one at a time, and a response is formulated on the spot. Case studies are also helpful ways to learn from the mistakes and successes of others.

Responding to the media is a specialty area of study in the emerging field of Media Psychology, in which I ply my academic trade. ■

Media response tips

- Always breathe deeply, slowly in, slowly out. It helps maintain calm.
- "No comment" is a terrible comment. "The phrase will never pass my lips," attorney Robert Shapiro of O.J. fame told me. "It makes you seem like you are trying to hide something," says Shapiro. "It is better to respond in the best possible way you can."
- You cannot take back your words once spoken. Think before you speak, and only give accurate information.
- Don't be afraid to repeat yourself. "Whatever you focus on expands," repeats Graham.
- "I don't remember" is an unacceptable response. "It sounds fishy," says Larry King. "It's better to say, I do or I don't."
- Be polite and helpful, even when you don't feel like it.
- Body language makes a difference.
- Don't appear hostile.



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