



RESPONDING TO ALLEGATIONS OF FAILURE OR MISCONDUCT

If you are in the public arena, no matter how careful or conscientious you are, the day may come when you'll be forced to confront charges of some failure or wrongdoing. Sitting on the proverbial hot seat seems to come, sooner or later, with the territory. Everything depends, at trying times like these, on your personal credibility. This is trust-building at its most intense.

I have tested “allegation” situations in the laboratory of the classroom for many years and feel confident that I can make this promise: if you follow a few basic rules, you can not only minimize the potential damage, but elicit some genuine empathy from your audience while maintaining your leadership role. The key, of course, is up-front honesty, apology if appropriate, and—equally important—re-assertion of your dedication to your mission. Even the most cynical audience is capable of identifying with imperfection. The right words, combined with the right attitude, can give you the opportunity to remind your listeners why they trusted you in the first place.

Here are some ways to build trust in these difficult situations:

- *Admit the failure or wrongdoing early on, but qualify if appropriate, or correct any public misconceptions*
- *Describe the context to better explain how the problem occurred*
- *Accept full responsibility, if appropriate, and avoid blaming anyone else unless proof is incontestable*
- *Express your sorrow or contrition, ask for forgiveness, but then move on quickly to what you'll do to earn it*
- *Make assurances that the situation will be rectified, by whatever means, including, if necessary, your resignation*
- *Consider pledging that this failure/wrongdoing will be the occasion for positive change in the future*
- *Describe in detail how the problem will be dealt with to ensure minimal damage*
- *Remind your audience of your goals, values, and past achievements*
- *Ask for their ongoing support either for you or your successor*