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OPRAH DOES IT RIGHT

By Richard Nicolazzo

Most love her and some despise her, but no one can question Oprah Winfrey's crisis management skills.

Faced with an ugly abuse scandal at her school for disadvantaged South African girls, Winfrey stepped up in a major way and apologized to these young women on a world stage.

Only hours after an accused dormitory matron appeared in court near Johannesburg, South Africa, Winfrey spoke openly and from the heart in a video news conference aired by satellite and posted on the Internet.

Sounding more like an embattled chief executive officer than America's television talk-show sweetheart, Winfrey articulated all the right emotions by coming across as outraged, sensitive, caring and human.

Looking straight into the camera, the diva said, "She wept for half an hour when she heard about the abuse. A horrible situation has been uncovered and rooted out. The buck always stops with me."

In what can best be described as a "take charge" attitude, Winfrey promised to "clean house," starting with the headmistress of the school. She also admitted the screening process was inadequate and officials at the school had told students to "put on happy faces" and not complain to her.

Going even further in the court of public opinion, she helped detail the investigation that led to an arrest. "One of the most devastating, if not the most devastating experience of my life," she said.

Winfrey knows what it's like to be a victim (she was molested when she was four and raped when she was nine). Now that she has the power to do something about it, she acted swiftly and decisively.

The school mess is a crash landing from all the media fanfare that occurred back in January when celebrities like Nelson Mandela, Mariah Carey, Tina Turner, and Spike Lee helped open the \$40 million school.

Textbook Crisis Management

Granted, Winfrey is about as media savvy as they come, but still, she exhibited textbook



Winfrey's video news conference

techniques and expertise in how to handle a modern-day crisis. Consider some of the key elements at work:

- She got her facts straight; she traveled to South Africa and worked with police and a noted child psychiatrist. She then kept silent until officials concluded their investigation.
- Her well-timed press conference controlled the message before it began to control her.
- By using satellite and Internet technology, she ensured timely and accurate dissemination of critical information to her key audiences
- She used candor to help maintain her stature and credibility.
- By acting quickly, she likely minimized damage to her standing as a television personality, businesswoman, entrepreneur, and courageous pioneer in helping the world's disadvantaged.
- Designating herself as spokesperson, she spoke for the school with a single, powerful voice.
- She was truthful, didn't hide from the media, and answered all the difficult questions.

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Winfrey's decisive and swift actions stand in stark contrast to some recent crises, including some I have blogged on.

Mattel, the big toy company, is still digging out from massive recalls of toys made in China. When asked by journalists why it took the company so long to announce the recall, the CEO said, "...the company discloses problems on its own timetable because it believes both the law and the U.S. Consumer Products Safety Commission's enforcement practices are unreasonable."

Hardly reassuring.

TJX Cos., a national retailer, continues to deal with the aftermath of a security breach that exposed millions of customer credit and debit card numbers. The company waited a full month to go public with the information.

When Bank of America had some computer tapes stolen, it waited two months to notify customers. Even the U.S. government waited several weeks before disclosing someone had walked off with a government-owned laptop computer containing Social Security information for 25.6 million U.S. citizens.

To be sure, there are problems that need to be solved at Winfrey's school. The six victimized girls, aged 13-15 and a 23-year-old, are receiving mental health counseling and have the support and care of their friends.

Scrutiny of the school's operation will continue for some time, but, in my view, Winfrey has taken command and set the tone for remedial action.

In her own intimate style, Winfrey said, "I am prepared to do whatever is necessary to make sure the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls becomes the safe, nurturing and enriched setting that I had envisioned. It will become a model for the world."

Once again, she has proven her mettle in a tense, emotionally-charged situation that would test anyone's communications skills. If she ever gets tired of TV, crisis management counseling might be in the offing.

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