



## NO TIME FOR SPIN

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*"The only way to get a good reputation is to endeavour to be what you want others to see"*  
-Socrates

As the gruesome tale of terror was unleashed on Mumbai on 26/11, lives were lost, innocent citizens, foreigners and soldiers. The shocked nation watched spellbound as the media broadcast this story non-stop, breaking news almost by the minute with one exclusive to match the other.

What followed this tragedy was not unexpected, a collective expression of anguish and anger by the common citizens against their own elected representatives, who had failed them and were seen as being completely out-of-touch with mood of the nation.

It's without doubt a failure of the government but were the crisis managers inadequately prepared to handle the media spotlight and its subsequent and on-going scrutiny of their actions? Are there any lessons to be learnt?

Tragic and catastrophic events almost always come unbidden and often when key crisis managers are unavailable. It is any government's worst nightmare when a large scale crisis leads to public scrutiny with the full media circus in play, real time.

Only the speed and quality of its response to the crisis, combined with sensible and sensitive communication, defines its public perception and once that opportunity is lost, it is a slippery slope from there. The Big Apple dealt with the catastrophe of 9/11 was not only because of the exemplary leadership of Rudy Giuliani and the quality of the response of his team but also because of the deft handling of the global media spotlight that followed.

In spite of the alleged intelligence failure and senseless loss of innocent lives (sounds familiar!), the local leadership of NYC earned the respect and the gratitude of its citizens and Mr. Giuliani eventually ran for the Republican nomination for the Presidency of the United States.

Clearly during a crisis, actions speak louder than words.

So what are the lessons learnt from Mumbai?

According to what I have seen and heard from media reports, though the local police responded bravely, they were inadequately prepared to deal with the threat and suffered a huge blow to their morale and leadership when they lost ATS chief Hemant Karkare in the first few crucial hours. The NSG only started operations the next morning and according to their estimation – most lives were lost in the first couple of hours of the attack!

No elected leader was seen "in-charge" on the ground, from the state or the centre, as the city was gripped with fear and confusion. And when they did arrive, they were hardly seen in control of the situation or capable of decisive action. In that vacuum of information, the media relayed the pictures as they got them and made their own deductions. Can you blame them? The Prime Minister's address to the nation was lost to most as it was broadcast only twenty hours later!

What followed was a communication nightmare. Every agency involved in the operation wanted their 'fifteen minutes' through interviews, sound bites, press conferences and leaks of information, giving their own take of the events resulting in confusion and loss of control on quality of information.



As Rudy Giuliani showed us, a crisis instantly demands a meticulous crisis management and communication plan. Such a blue print can emerge only with preparedness and clear understanding of the potential impact of mishandling such a disaster. Decisive action with clear and honest communication is the counter that can soften the negativity that surrounds catastrophe. In fact Mr. Giuliani has made a profession out of it!

Communication needs to be matched with action. Only then can it be heard and make a dent in times of crisis. A skilful semantic exercise can only fool people for so long and once the entire story unfolds, this initial rhetoric based on flimsy premise has the potential to lead to a negative spiral of reactions.

In the aftermath of the crisis, if the Indian political leadership has to regain the confidence of its citizens then it will have to respond to their fears and concerns about protecting their way of life by articulating a clear plan of action, following through on that plan swiftly - and sensible and sensitive communication of the progress of those actions.

They say in every crisis hides an opportunity: this is the opportunity for our political class to rise above their differences of opinion and ideologies and discharge their duty towards the citizens who have given them the privilege of being led by them.

This is not the time for spin.

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