

# What Tony Hayward Should Learn about Handling Tough Questions

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Tony Hayward, CEO of BP Oil, has become a punching bag for Gulf Coast residents, as well as newscasters. His penchant for making insensitive and misleading statements may have done irreparable damage to his reputation and the reputation of BP Oil Corporation. Some of the statements that have infuriated the American public are well known. “The size of the spill is relatively small in comparison to a very big ocean.” OR “No one wants this over more than I do. I would like my life back.” President Barack Obama said if it were up to him, Hayward would be fired.

While Hayward is not officially stepping down, he has been replaced as the head of the day to day operations by Robert Dudley. In doing so, BP’s Chairman of the Board, Carl Henric Vanberg acknowledged, “It is clear Tony has made remarks that have upset people.” Hayward’s handling of the oil spill in the Gulf will undoubtedly become a text book example of how not to handle a disaster. What can we learn from this regarding dealing with the public, media or government commissions?

1. **Be prepared.** If you are going to talk on a sensitive issue, be very sure what you will say. Never try to “wing it.” Consider all the possible questions you might be asked and by whom. Determine how you will answer them. Chose your words carefully. Do not be blind sighted.
2. **Practice.** Rehearse out loud any statements or answers to questions in front of your own executive team. Your responses will sound more focused and succinct when you actually are interviewed. Your voice will also be more confident.
3. **Pause.** Thinking on your feet is difficult. Allow yourself time to process the question. A pause for 3-4 seconds is wise, even if you are

sure of the answer. It demonstrates you are trying to be precise.

4. **Take responsibility immediately.** Acknowledge the problem and apologize before responding. It will put you in a more favorable light with the public.
5. **Answer the question.** Listeners will notice if you “stonewall” or evade a question. Hayward has been criticized for saying over and over at a Congressional Hearing, “I didn’t know anything about that.”
6. **Don’t blame others.** Hayward has also tried to lay blame for BP’s situation on other drilling partners, particularly Anadarko. As Senator John Barroso, R. WYO, said, “The shifting-the-blame game” doesn’t get us very far. The message, “It’s not my fault,” doesn’t work.
7. **Sound and look sincere.** It is really important to listeners to sense you connect with their pain. In every public statement you give, your body and voice must show compassion or sorrow. To this day, Hayward has been staunchly criticized for his lack of emotion.
8. **Be honest and upfront.** Tony Hayward has been accused of grossly underestimating the barrels of oil leaking into the Gulf and the timeline for containment. His attempt to down play the problem has created a tremendous backlash. The more upfront and honest you are with bad results early on, the more credibility you will have when it comes to explaining how you will fix the situation.

Handling tough questions is never easy, particularly when a disaster occurs. However, unless the situation is effectively handled in the media and with the public, the problem will escalate, affecting you and the survival of your company.

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