



ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE

How Penn State turned a crisis into a disaster: An interview with crisis management pioneer Steven Fink*



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In November 2011, the biggest scandal in the history of college sports exploded into the American consciousness. Jerry Sandusky, a retired assistant football coach at Penn State University, was accused of sexually abusing multiple young boys. He was later convicted on dozens of counts and given a 30-plus-year prison sentence. The Pennsylvania Supreme Court recently rejected his appeal.

What made the scandal a cause célèbre was that iconic football coach Joe Paterno and three high-ranking Penn State administrators were accused of covering up Sandusky's crimes. In 2013, the lead prosecutor in the Sandusky case stated in a televised interview with *60 Minutes Sports* that there was no evidence that Joe Paterno covered up anything. As of this writing, the three administrators involved are awaiting trial.

Penn State's board of trustees fired both Paterno and the university's president when the scandal broke. The latter move created a leadership vacuum that the board itself tried, but failed, to fill. The results were disastrous. Indeed, many critics have hammered Penn State's handling of the crisis and its fallout. *Business Insider*, for example, listed the Sandusky situation among its top public relations disasters for 2011 and ranked it as the biggest disaster of 2012.

As a two-time Penn State alumnus, I wondered how the board of a great university—many members

of which were accomplished business leaders—could have mishandled a crisis so badly. Enter Steven Fink, the president and CEO of Lexicon Communications Corp. (www.CrisisManagement.com), the nation's oldest and most experienced crisis management and crisis communications consulting firm. Fink has been dubbed the 'Dean of Crisis Management' for his pioneering work in the field.

As noted at his personal website (<http://www.stevenfink.com/bio.htm>), Steven Fink served on the crisis management team in the administration of then-Pennsylvania Governor Dick Thornburgh during the infamous 1979 Three Mile Island crisis: the nation's worst commercial nuclear power accident. By its remarkably calm handling of that potentially devastating crisis, this team was widely credited with having averted a panic among the population of south central Pennsylvania and the rest of the nation. Indeed, *The New York Times* proclaimed that modern-day crisis management was born at Three Mile Island. Fink later served as an unpaid adviser to the then-Soviet Union during that country's tragic nuclear crisis at Chernobyl.

Steven Fink has represented some of the world's most prestigious companies and organizations, including leading colleges and universities, in both proactive crisis management training and reactive crisis management response. He has consulted with various branches of government—foreign and domestic—on highly sensitive crisis issues, some involving matters of national security and international diplomacy, and has provided crisis management-focused litigation support and expert witness testimony in a wide range of high-profile, crisis-related legal cases.

Fink frequently serves as an expert crisis management commentator for news outlets such as *Nightline*, *The NBC Nightly News*, *The TODAY Show*, *ABC WorldNews Tonight*, *The CBS Evening News*, *The CBS Morning News*, *BBC World News*, *NPR's Morning Edition*, and *All Things Considered*, as well as networks including CNN, MSNBC, CNBC, and FOX News. He has been interviewed by and quoted in myriad national news and business publications including *TIME*, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Newsweek*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *The New York Sun*, London's *Financial Times*, *BusinessWeek*, *Industry Week*, *Investor's Daily*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The Guardian*, the Associated Press, and others.

The handling of the 2011 Jerry Sandusky child abuse scandal by the Penn State board of trustees has been of particular interest to Steven Fink since the crisis first erupted. I wanted to know his evaluation of the Penn State board's performance, as well as what lessons other organizations can learn from Penn State's situation. In answering my questions, Fink drew in part on

comments he made in October 2013 at a standing-room-only talk at Penn State (<http://ps4rs.wordpress.com/2013/10/25/viewing-the-penn-state-crisis-through-the-lens-of-a-professional/>).

David J. Ketchen, Jr.: You have offered strong criticism of how the board of trustees at your alma mater and mine, Penn State University, handled the Sandusky Scandal. Not everyone agrees. In a February 2014 USA Today op-ed, Jeffrey Sonnenfeld—a senior associate dean at the Yale School of Management—wrote, "Rather than fight, as many alumni demanded, the Penn State board...examined the facts, and saw the failures of oversight and inadequate protection of children. They faced a classic recovery dilemma, and courageously made the right choice...contrition." Why should Business Horizons readers believe you and not Professor Sonnenfeld?

Steven Fink: I have been doing crisis management work all over the world for more than 30 years and have been involved in every conceivable type of crisis you can imagine, including nuclear disasters, massive oil spills in pristine waters, children dying from eating contaminated hamburgers, and even major crises involving colleges and universities. I've seen it all. But I have never seen a crisis management and crisis communications fiasco as bad as the Penn State crisis. As a Penn State alumnus, it was all the more painful to watch. Nevertheless, my observations are, I maintain, objective from a professional crisis management point of view.

Some years ago, I completed the first book ever written on the subject, *Crisis Management: Planning for the Inevitable*, which remains to this day the most widely read book ever published on the topic. As part of the research for that seminal work, I surveyed the CEOs of Fortune 500 companies and gained real insight regarding how companies and large organizations respond in crises. In the spring of 2013, my latest book in the field was published, *Crisis Communications: The Definitive Guide to Managing the Message*. As I was writing that book, the Penn State crisis erupted, and I had ample opportunity to fully analyze the many errors made by the Penn State board of trustees. That analysis is contained in a chapter titled 'Say It Ain't So, Joe!—The Penn State Crisis,' which details—step-by-step—the mistakes that were made by the board, why they were made, and what should have been done at each critical turning point.

I do not know Professor Sonnenfeld; I am not aware of any crisis he personally has managed, successfully or otherwise, so I do not know how

experienced he may be in actual hands-on crisis management. However, in addition to being what you called a 'crisis management pioneer,' I have lectured on crisis management and crisis communications in a number of leading business schools across the country for more than 25 years, and even co-created—with the then-dean of the Stanford University Graduate School of Business—the first-ever crisis management curriculum in the United States. I can categorically affirm that teaching crisis management is not the same as actually managing a crisis in the trenches. That sort of naïveté is precisely what led to disastrous consequences at Penn State. The board and the administration never had anyone experienced in crisis management advising them, then or now. Choosing to move on rather than fight misses the point: the university never resolved its crisis and you cannot successfully move on—to what I refer to as the resolution stage—without first resolving the chronic stage of the crisis, which is where Penn State continues to find itself mired. (The second of the four stages of a crisis, the acute stage, had to do with Sandusky.)

Attempting to move on while a crisis of the magnitude of the Penn State event is still active is tantamount to trying to sidestep the damage done to the front of a house by a hurricane by deciding instead to enter and exit through the rear of the structure. Yes, you can make the house accessible, but you've still got a big mess to contend with. Plus, at some point you've got to question the long-term stability of the underlying structure. This is where Penn State and its board find themselves today. In my opinion, Professor Sonnenfeld's view is wrong.

But whether readers believe in the accuracy of my critique of the university's handling of its crisis and its aftermath or Professor Sonnenfeld's is irrelevant. However, I can report that ever since I made public my views on the mishandling of the Penn State crisis, I have been inundated with untold messages of support from all over the country. I do not know one objective person who thinks Penn State did a good job with its crisis, then or now.

In most circles, Penn State's image used to be immaculate. That is no longer true in the wake of the Sandusky Scandal. What level of responsibility does the university's board of trustees have for that image being tarnished?

In my assessment, the current negative view many people have of Penn State was caused more by the ineptitude of the board's mishandling of the crisis

than by Jerry Sandusky. The board's inaction at crucial turning points contributed to and amplified the crisis.

Let me be clear: I abhor the actions of Jerry Sandusky. But had the Sandusky matter been attended to properly, I believe its fallout—yes, there still would have been fallout—would not have led to the epic crisis the board created largely on its own. When certain high-profile individuals and news organizations hurled wildly inaccurate allegations at the feet of the university, the board owed it to the university and to its vast community to stand up for Penn State. If the university is too weak or timid to defend itself, who will? The board's abject failure to do so was one of the biggest crisis communications blunders of all and badly weakened the university's reputation. When the university failed to stand up for itself, others quickly decided it was open season on Penn State and started to kick the university when it was down.

At a certain level I understand the university's silence, for I have seen it many times with clients. Because of the shame the board felt on behalf of the university it served, it most likely felt that any protest on its part—large or small—would send a wrong message to its ever-growing legion of critics. It most likely felt that any protest, even to correct incorrect accusations, might be viewed somehow as a defense of Sandusky or a cover-up by the administration. Thus, the board remained rooted to the floor and mute, allowing much of the flying mud to stick.

This was a media-driven crisis from the start. But at no point did the university ever get a handle on the media; it never got ahead of the story. Rather than grab firm hold of the reins and drive the stagecoach, the board sat helplessly and anemically in the rear of a driverless coach, allowing itself to be buffeted side to side by the runaway stage: the relentless media.

I doubt there was a crisis communications plan in place. If there was, it was certainly deficient. The Penn State debacle never should have happened, never *would* have happened—including the punitive NCAA sanctions—had the board followed sound crisis management and crisis communications strategies.

In your opinion, why did the board perform so poorly?

What drove the board to make a series of such calamitous blunders is no mystery. I have seen first-hand how boards of companies under attack make knee-jerk decisions in the face of intense

crisis-induced stress they are ill-prepared to handle, often in search of that elusive concept known as 'closure.' Closure does not come until the crisis has been properly managed and resolved.

I was asked by a member of my audience when I spoke on this subject at Penn State last fall why the board did not handle the crisis better. I was even given the name of a certain board member who, the questioner stated, was the CEO of a huge company and surely knew how to handle crises.

Consider: If you are charged with murder, are you going to defend yourself or hire the best criminal defense attorney you can find? Or, if you are the subject of an IRS investigation, are you going to represent yourself when you meet with the auditors or hire the best tax attorney or CPA you can find? Rhetorical questions, to be sure, but the reason you hire these trained professionals is because they are experts at what they do and have done it many times before. They, hopefully, know how to maintain their calm when the heat intensifies. So why wouldn't you want to hire the best crisis manager you could find to help your organization face the biggest crisis it has faced in its more than 150 years of existence? Sadly, big egos often get in the way of clear thinking; or, it's merely poor decision making.

Let's delve into some of the board's pivotal choices. The late Joe Paterno was a Penn State icon. As the Sandusky Scandal exploded, the board of trustees fired Paterno in the middle of the night as Penn State's head football coach. Good decision or bad decision?

First and foremost, it is important—nay, essential—to remember that at the time of the firing, Coach Paterno had been accused of nothing! The grand jury to which Paterno testified had not accused him or indicted him, and certainly no children ever accused him of any impropriety. The factually challenged Freeh report—problematic in its own regard—was still many months away. Paterno was not accorded due process by the board, either. He was never presented with a list of charges or accusations against him, and certainly never given a chance to explain or defend himself. I know that Happy Valley—Penn State's nickname—has an occasional reputation of being out of the mainstream because of its isolated location, but the basic American Constitutional tenet of innocent until proven guilty should still exist there. Even Sandusky was accorded that right. Paterno could have—perhaps *should* have—been suspended and put on paid administrative leave pending the outcome of an investigation,

but an outright firing at that time was wrong on so many levels.

That said, whether or not I, personally, think Coach Paterno should have been fired is beside the point. But once the board made the late-night crisis management decision—"Joe must go!"—everything that followed was a series of horrific crisis management and communications blunders borne of panic and ineptitude on the part of the board. It was very much a 'domino effect crisis,' and the late-night firing of Coach Paterno was the first domino to be knocked over. Everything that followed can be traced back to that one ill-fated decision and its near-midnight timing.

Unless you are issuing a warning that a train has derailed and toxic fumes are headed toward a residential area, or a leak at a nuclear reactor has released a radioactive cloud, or a dam is about to burst and may wipe out a town, or convicted killers have escaped from prison and are on the loose, or aliens have landed on the White House lawn, never hold a press conference or issue statements in the middle of the night. It sends the wrong signal: that someone—in this case, an entire board of someones—is in panic mode. It was not the firing so much as it was the manner and the timing of it that directly contributed to the late-night student rioting that subsequently occurred. Sadly, this was completely foreseeable and entirely preventable. The board, no doubt, felt besieged by reporters banging on its doors and was desperate for sanctuary.

An experienced crisis manager would recognize the importance of weighing *all* options in a timely manner before acting. There is no evidence that the board considered or anticipated the fallout from its actions. Consider: What was gained by the late-night firing? Where was the urgency? Was anyone in danger? Were any children at risk? No! What in the world was the board thinking? If the decision was made to terminate him, the ending of Coach Paterno's career should have been done in broad daylight, perhaps at noon the next day. He should have been given the news by the university president personally, certainly not via an impersonal late-night phone call. That was cowardly. That wrong-headed action became as much of the story, if not more, than the firing itself.

In my career, I have headed off knee-jerk decisions before they became finalized and publicized on any number of occasions. I can imagine how much tension filled the air that night in the Penn State boardroom, and how the arguments unraveled. It is precisely at moments like that when a seasoned crisis communicator needs to be the voice of reason, force a break in the proceedings to explain the consequences of the impending actions, and offer

more thoughtful alternatives. That voice of reason was either not present or so lacking in gravitas that it was drowned out by those with different agendas.

Remember, as a board or as an executive, certain things are within your control and others are not. If you're going to terminate someone, the manner and timing of the termination is within your control. Don't foolishly squander the opportunity.

Assuming the board was committed to removing Joe Paterno, how should it have handled his exit?

If Coach Paterno had agreed to exit quietly—remember, at that time he had already said he would step down voluntarily at the end of the season, just a couple of games away—then a joint announcement should have been made, with Penn State President Rodney Erickson and Joe Paterno standing shoulder to shoulder. This would have served to somewhat quell the media frenzy and certainly would have played a large role in preventing the regrettable late-night student unrest, which resulted in overturned cars, broken storefront windows, random fires, and a mob run amok.

A good crisis manager would have made this termination happen smoothly, or with as few ripples as possible. But at no time did the university engage an adviser with the proper crisis management experience, and this is just one more example of what can happen when fear and inexperience reign.

So, why did the board make the bone-headed firing play? It was reacting to the media frenzy and the mob mentality of a media horde that was screaming for blood. Firing Paterno was tantamount to throwing red meat over the besieged battlements to try to appease the barbarians storming the gates. The university had no one experienced in dealing with a media firestorm, and it caved, foolishly thinking the madness would go away once Paterno was sacrificed.

The media were driving the story—not the grand jury presentment, which, as I pointed out previously, had not charged Paterno with anything. But the wolf pack mentality of the media had them reporting stories ahead of facts and they drove the story with wild abandon. The board and the university were victims of reckless media frenzy, and the university quickly and too easily became the media's piñata.

Media in these situations often adopt a mob mentality. An apt metaphor might be a cattle stampede: what is required at those times is a crisis leader who can change the direction of the herd. Penn State lacked this necessity, and certainly no one on the board was capable of stepping up and filling the huge void.

I understand that you offered your crisis management skills to Penn State pro bono. What was its response?

In the more than 3 decades that I have practiced crisis management and crisis communications, I have never been accused of ambulance chasing. Clients generally tend to come to me because of my reputation, or are referred by other clients or law firms. However, when the Penn State crisis first erupted I tried to offer my services to the university, but was rebuffed. And as I helplessly witnessed on a daily basis costly mistake after mistake, it saddened me greatly that I was powerless to assist.

The Penn State board of trustees hired former FBI director Louis Freeh to conduct an investigation into how Sandusky was able to prey on children for so many years. Freeh concluded that Paterno helped conceal Sandusky's crimes, a charge that both the head prosecutor in the Sandusky case and the chair of the Penn State board later debunked. Was launching an independent investigation a mistake?

In my career, I have been involved in calling for outside independent investigators a number of times. We have even used retired FBI investigators to uncover the facts in a crisis. Hiring someone like Freeh was the right move in that it sent a strong crisis communications message that the university was serious about uncovering the truth. But it seemed that no one on the board had a handle on Freeh, and he took independence to a new level.

The generally accepted method for this procedure would have called for Freeh to conduct an independent investigation and then submit to the board, or a special sub-committee of the board, a draft of his report before it was finalized and released to the public. This would have given the board a chance to review the draft findings and ask questions for clarification, so as to avoid being blindsided. It would also have given the board a chance to flag or correct any perceived inaccuracies in the report. This is a common courtesy. None of this was done, which was a huge flaw in the board's competence level to not insist on it.

For a variety of reasons, including issues of confidentiality and the legal concept of privilege, it generally falls to legal counsel to engage the investigator. But bear in mind that at the time there was—and continues to be—much criticism of former Penn State general counsel Cynthia Baldwin, including her

lack of criminal law experience. So this may be another area in which the competence of Penn State officials was found wanting in the heat of the crisis.

Most egregious, of course, was the fact that two of the main players in the alleged cover-up—former Athletic Director Tim Curley and former Vice President for Administration Gary Schultz—as well as eyewitness Mike McQueary, all declined to be interviewed by Freeh. Plus, Paterno had died. The absence of statements from any of these key players leaves a gaping, Grand Canyon-sized hole in the validity and usefulness of the Freeh Report. At best, Freeh should have labeled that as a preliminary report until all the facts were in. Moreover, the board—or its legal counsel—should have done so, but the board was too quick to drink the hemlock. . . again, looking for closure.

To those who say the three aforementioned players were not about to speak publicly until their trials, and therefore Freeh was right to release his report when he did, I say: How long is too long to wait when truth hangs in the balance? For whatever a person may believe about Louis Freeh and his report, it is indisputable that no report can be considered complete without testimony from Messrs. Curley, Schultz, and McQueary. Moreover, the board should have launched its own internal investigation contemporaneously with Freeh's inquiry. Comparing and contrasting the two reports would have been illuminating, to say the least, and may have served to head off Freeh's misstatements. But the board failed here, too.

Next, Freeh's infamous seven-page press release—which the board never saw in advance and which Freeh read to the media on live television—made charges that were not supported by the actual 267-page report. Freeh hyperbolically connected dots that the written report did not, some of which are spelled out in detail in my book. Suffice it to say, had a draft report been provided in advance—along with a draft of the press release—these things would have been caught by a competent crisis communicator, which the board did not—and still does not—have.

Here's a brief example to illustrate one of the holes in the report: Freeh alleged in his press conference that Paterno participated in a cover-up of Sandusky's perversions for many years, and references a more than 10-year-old email exchange between Schultz and Curley as the basis for his charge. Paterno, who never used email, was not a participant in the exchange and, therefore, could not be cc'd. But the word 'coach' was used in the email text, which Freeh pounced on as the smoking gun that implicated Paterno. The problem is the way the message was worded—and I have read it, as well as

the report—'coach' could just as easily have referred to Sandusky. Either way, the only person who could clear this up is Tim Curley, the man who wrote the email in the first place, and he refused to talk to Freeh. This matter might be cleared up if his case ever goes to trial, but without firm clarification on this game-changing point, you need to question the completeness and the credibility of the Freeh Report.

Additionally, that sole email was more than a decade old. Common sense would strongly suggest that a decade of conspiracy—if one truly existed—would leave a more revealing trail than a solitary, 10-year-old message. But the comatose board never questioned this rather flimsy evidence.

Instead of a thoughtful, logical approach, Freeh's findings were released in a press conference that you just cited. Was this another blunder by the board?

Yes. Who gave Freeh leave to hold his grandstanding news conference in the first place? I doubt anyone would want to take credit for that gaffe. The university—which, after all, hired and was paying Freeh—should have released the findings of the report, perhaps in a joint Erickson-Freeh press conference. That's what I mean by getting a handle on Freeh. But apparently the media spotlight was too alluring for Freeh and he did not give anyone a chance.

On that day, Freeh completed his news conference in Philadelphia at 11:00 a.m., while the board was meeting on other matters in Scranton, Pennsylvania, about 150 miles away. Yet without having the time to read, digest, and/or question the report or its authors, the board—in my view—arguably committed a grave error of judgment when Erickson and Karen Peetz, newly minted chairwoman of the board of trustees at the time, issued a statement which said the board accepted Freeh's report unconditionally—including all the allegations it contained and the 100+ recommendations it proposed. The board questioned nothing, investigated nothing, and challenged nothing. The Penn State faithful can only be grateful that Freeh did not also accuse the university of complicity in the Lincoln assassination.

Many of the problems with the report that have since surfaced would have been caught before the report was made public. No one saw the report in advance or had a chance to review Freeh's findings, but they should have. This is common practice, especially in high-profile matters; but the ineffectiveness of an ill-advised board failed this important crisis

task. Consequently, the universe today has a badly skewed, negative image of a great university—an image that will take years to eradicate.

Mishandling the Freeh Report had major repercussions for how the NCAA responded to the Sandusky Scandal. How well did Penn State deal with the NCAA?

Penn State allowed itself to be badly intimidated and pushed around by the NCAA and its president, Mark Emmert, who I describe in my book as a “brass-knuckled bully.” The board’s ill-conceived decision to accept the Freeh Report unconditionally gave Emmert and his henchmen carte blanche to rain a mountain of hurt on a badly weakened university. In fact, when a member university of the NCAA admits guilt and institutional failure such as was alleged in the Freeh Report, other member institutions would have protested vociferously had the NCAA *not* imposed severe sanctions on Penn State. Sanctions are one thing; what the NCAA did is known as ‘piling on.’

Whatever mistakes the board committed by accepting the Freeh Report, the university was still entitled to its day in NCAA court. There should have been a formal investigation by the NCAA into any alleged transgressions at the university. Emmert stated publicly that he had sidestepped the NCAA’s own bylaws, its committee on infractions, and well-established NCAA investigating procedures because Penn State had accepted all of the accusations in the Freeh Report without question or objection—in short, because it had offered up an admission of guilt. This was a huge error on the board’s part to let that end-run scheme go unchallenged. The board, still dazed and confused by events, in my view, did not exercise its right to a fair and unbiased independent review by the NCAA. The university should have demanded an investigation by the NCAA rather than meekly accept the most draconian sanctions ever handed down by the sports governing authority—sanctions worse, I argue in my book, than the so-called ‘death penalty’ suffered by Southern Methodist University in 1986.

Why did Penn State accept the NCAA sanctions without so much as a whimper?

Given how the board had already embraced the Freeh Report, it could hardly turn around and complain that its punishment was too severe, and the NCAA certainly knew that. This is why, in crisis management, every step counts, including the first one. In my view,

had the crisis been properly handled from the start, if the NCAA were to do anything, it almost certainly would have followed its own, well-established policies on investigating infractions.

As many others have already observed, there was ample precedent for the NCAA to have viewed the charges against Sandusky as a criminal matter—which, of course, they were—and simply let the police and the courts handle the situation. This is essentially what the NCAA did when a number of lacrosse players at Duke University were charged with rape—although they were later acquitted—and when a male athlete at the University of Virginia was charged and later convicted of killing his girlfriend, also a star athlete at the university. But in neither case did the NCAA intervene. In Penn State’s case, the board’s missteps had tied the university’s and the NCAA’s hands.

Many Penn Staters were angered by the assertion that the university’s culture values football above all else. Why did the board let this assertion go unchallenged?

For the same reason the board was accepting every other allegation: it thought the quicker its skin was peeled back and flayed, the sooner this torment would end. Remember, as I assessed the situation, this was a panicked board—one under intense fire, pressure, and microscopic scrutiny.

In announcing the sanctions, NCAA head Mark Emmert grandly proclaimed that Penn State had put football ahead of education, giving the erroneous impression to the world that all the university cared about was recruiting muscle-bound football players who had nothing between their ears, but who could help Joe Paterno garner wins on Saturdays in the fall. If the woefully uninformed Emmert had bothered to read his own NCAA website, he would have seen that Penn State’s Graduation Success Rate for football players that year was a very impressive 87%—second in the Big Ten and tied with Stanford University for tenth place nationally. Those statistics hardly qualify for the ridiculously unfounded charge of “putting football ahead of education.”

This is a common problem in high-profile, media-driven crises when grandstanding people speak for sound bites rather than from facts. And in my view, Mark Emmert and Louis Freeh are grandstanding past masters.

But the board and Penn State leadership never bothered to correct this erroneous accusation, which was certainly easy enough to do. Was the board so stunned and dazed by events that it didn’t

think to correct such an inaccurate and grossly inflammatory comment by the head of the NCAA? Inexcusable.

The NCAA appointed former U.S. Senator George Mitchell to oversee Penn State's compliance with the terms of the consent decree between the NCAA and Penn State. Mitchell later gave Penn State's leadership strong accolades for their performance and the NCAA reduced some of its sanctions. I think the board would say to you: "There were serious problems and we are cleaning them up." Your reaction?

There were indeed serious problems and progress has been made in cleaning them up, but I don't think that's the only reason the NCAA has reduced some of its sanctions. I believe, rather, that the NCAA realized a while ago it had gone too far and established dangerous precedents it was not prepared to live with going forward. The NCAA was looking for a way to backtrack, and the Mitchell Report gave it cover.

However, seeing how the clock is ticking, by the time the NCAA fully backtracks it will largely be a moot exercise, with one very important exception: the vacating of 111 wins in the last 13 years of Coach Paterno's reign. This punitive measure punishes only innocent student athletes whose hard work on the football field has been eradicated with the stroke of a pen. To say that 111 football games—each a part of history—did not occur, with no victories or losses recorded, is childish and mean-spirited. This sanction, above all others, should be reversed immediately.

In contrast, I point out in my book that even though gambling resulted in Pete Rose being banished from the game for life by Major League Baseball, he is still listed in the record books for all-time hits: 4,256. If the NCAA wants to put an asterisk next to Paterno's name in the record books, so be it; but to erase 111 victories is punitive. Explain history, don't rewrite it.

What lessons should other boards learn from the Penn State debacle?

As a result of the Penn State board's abject ineptitude in the face of the crisis, effective grassroots efforts to systematically replace the board have already met with some success. This lesson should not be lost on other boards, especially university boards that can and do often face militant students

as part of their constituency, as militant students fighting for a passionate cause can be a force to be reckoned with.

I have seen boards over the years become tone deaf to sometimes urgent calls from their constituents, especially—as in the case of Penn State's board—where members serve for very long times. Reasonable term limits might be one way to address this type of problem.

Perhaps one of the biggest and most common blunders is that boards tend to become insular. Penn State's board should have had a competent crisis management professional advising it from the very first volley. In a heated crisis, the benefit of an outside, objective perspective cannot be overstated.

What is an example of a major crisis that was handled very well?

When I am asked that question in an interview or during a Q&A following a speech, I generally reply that the best-handled crises are ones you've never heard of, because the crisis management team resolved the crisis before it erupted and it never became public. Regarding the Penn State crisis, there was never a chance that even if it had been properly handled from the start, it would not have become public; however, becoming public does not necessarily translate into crisis.

Still, after more than 3 decades, the gold standard for crisis management excellence is the Tylenol crisis. Following the gruesome deaths of seven innocent people in Chicago who inadvertently swallowed cyanide-laced Tylenol capsules, parent company Johnson & Johnson was widely lauded for making the \$100 million decision to pull product from store shelves in order to prevent other potential killings. Although not common knowledge at the time, J&J was under tremendous pressure from the FBI to not remove the goods, believing that would be one way to catch the culprit 'in the act.' But a strong crisis management team and board held firm: nothing trumped the safety of its customers.

More recently, the Yahoo! board was confronted with indisputable evidence that its recently hired CEO had fabricated educational credentials on his résumé. After an investigation, the board terminated him. The same thing happened at RadioShack and at a company called, ironically, Veritas.

These investigations produced hard evidence and, when said evidence was presented, the firings were viewed as justified. When Coach Paterno was

fired, there was no evidence of any wrongdoing on his part. It was a rush to judgment or, as others have said, a rush to injustice.

In what ways did the crisis management in the Tylenol situation differ from how Penn State acted?

Simply stated, in Tylenol and other situations, the people handling the crises did not panic, did not overreact, and did not make hypervigilant decisions. Good crisis management has sometimes been described as the ability to make vigilant decisions under intense, crisis-induced stress. J&J accomplished that.

All academic boards today, in close concert with the institutions they serve, should have well-thought-out crisis management and crisis communications plans in place to plan for the inevitable. Such a plan, if properly created, would anticipate in advance the sorts of high-stakes decisions that may need to be made in the heat of a crisis. We actually create and test such crisis scenarios for our clients to

see and evaluate how organizations perform under crisis-induced stress. The results are often quite illuminating.

As part of our training process, we usually teach a classic seven-step decision-making matrix via which clients learn how to make vigilant decisions under stress. We refer to these as 'defensible decisions' because we know from years of experience that almost all crises result in some kind of litigation. And if you can defend your decisions, even if they are unpopular, you are ahead of the game.

The polar opposite of vigilance is hypervigilance, or ill-conceived and ill-considered knee-jerk reactions. This was the Penn State board's model: a series of calamitous decisions, seemingly without considering likely consequences, each one leading to another blunder.

There are many ways to judge how a crisis is managed. By any reasonable measure, Penn State's board failed.

Thank you very much for sharing your time and insights with the readers of Business Horizons.