Abernathy MacGregor and the Response to the 2010 Gulf Oil Spill

A '66 Tiger Tale
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The 2010 BP Deepwater Horizon Gulf Oil Spill was an environmental catastrophe. Five million barrels of oil surged into the Caribbean over five months, doing terrible harm to the life of the sea, and to the lives of those made their homes and their livings from the sea on its shores. We were asked to help two organizations dealing with this crisis. Here are a few thoughts.

First, "we" is the big We. There are no solo stars in these situations. It's all about strangers figuring out how to work together, learn and make something good happen fast.

When you walk into this kind of situation, the First Big Question is, "who's in charge here?" Sometimes 30 people want a piece of the action. Other times, no one is even willing to answer the phone. (Correct answer is usually two: one to actually fix what's broken, the other to talk to everyone who needs to be talked to. Neither of these is the CEO).

Next, "who's the most important audience?" It's almost never the news media. More likely: Customers. Employees. Vendors. Regulators. Lenders. Investors. Communities. Etc. Identify which is most important. Figure out what they need to hear or know or take part in. If they are satisfied, most other pieces will fall into place.

In the Gulf Oil Crisis, Client Number One made very sophisticated equipment for the corporations that bring oil out of the ground and move and use it up on the surface. For the Macondo well, they had made a blow-out preventer, which is designed to prevent what actually happened. But did this preventer fail to prevent, or did the problem occur before the oil actually rose up to the preventer? Great question for reporters and lawyers, but not much help in stopping the flow.

So for Client One, who's most important audience? The rest of the petroleum industry. No matter who's individually at fault, the whole industry is on trial. Can we trust these people with our well being? This is no time for finger pointing, or squabbling with regulators.

Strategy: Connect with everyone who matters in the industry. Highest level, CEO to CEO if possible. "This is about the credibility of our industry, not one well and three or four companies. Here's what we are saying to the media: Our only priority right now is getting that well closed in quickly and safely. There's nothing else we want to talk about until that's

done. If you want to give us a call after that, happy to hear from you. Hope you'll go along with that, (pause). We don't know yet everything we might need to get this job done. I hope you'll be willing to lend a hand if it's needed." Most folks agreed.

And it turned out there was one device that was only made in a factory in Hokkaido. That factory worked around the clock to make it. And when it was done, a charter plane magically appeared to fly it, and a couple of spares, to the gulf coast. It worked.

Client Number Two was charged with dispensing insurance funds to victims of the disaster, mostly families dependent on fishing and other small businesses on or near the water. Who's the primary audience? The breadwinners. They're hurting the most. And if they have nowhere else to go, their last resorts are reporters and lawyers. Strategy: Rent cheap store fronts out where everyone can see them. Big signs: "Insurance Help Here."

So a guy walks in. "Need help. Can't fish. Can't buy food. Can't pay rent." Response: "Gonna take forever to sort out the paperwork. Guess you can't wait that long?" Nod. "OK, here's what we're gonna do. Come back tomorrow 10 a.m. Bring with you a photo of your fishing boat, and a letter from someone who buys fish from you regularly. We'll try to do something for you then."

Next morning 9:58 a.m. he's at the door, letter in one hand, photo on the other. "Good. Here's $5,000 in cash. That'll keep you going for a while. When it runs low, come back and we'll talk some more." For people living hand-to-mouth, that kind of rough-and-ready assistance went a long way toward making a horrible experience more manageable. And, perhaps as a result, the volume of complaints was quite low for an event of that magnitude.

In time, Washington got involved. A renowned crisis manager took charge. Standardized procedures were put in place. The rough-and-ready cash faucet was turned off. Complaints multiplied dramatically.

But the well did get closed in, a truly phenomenal feat of science and engineering. Life along the coast got back to something like normal, boosted and buffeted by all the other things that happen. Fish got caught and sold and eaten. Oil got drawn from the depths and sent off to be used wherever. And nobody who wasn't in those two target audiences remembers that our clients were involved.