



## Does Your CEO Have Spokesperson Deficit Disorder (SDD)?

by Barbara Gibson, ABC

It's an all-too-common ailment, a not-so-silent killer of corporate reputation—often going undiagnosed even when the symptoms are evident. Early symptoms include negative or weak media coverage, "misquotes" and interviews that go off track. Although it can strike at any level within an organization, Spokesperson Deficit Disorder, or SDD, is perhaps most damaging if left untreated at the CEO level. So what can you do if your CEO suffers from this dreadful condition?

Over the past year, I've surveyed more than 500 communication professionals, asking the question, "Have you ever worked with a company spokesperson who was not fully competent in the role?" I have yet to receive a "no" response. So it seems we've all faced this problem. Or perhaps, more to the point, we've avoided it, sidestepped it, suffered in silence, cleaned up the resulting messes as best we could. We may have tried bringing in a media trainer, or using other spokespeople whenever possible, but few of us feel confident directly addressing the problem. It's hard, after all, to tell the boss that he or she is a lousy communicator—especially when they don't seem to see it. But if our job is to help the organization achieve its strategic objectives, we have a responsibility to take on the challenge of helping make executive spokespeople more effective.

Here, then, are a few tips for correctly diagnosing and treating the problem:

### Involve the patient

According to my research, the average corporate media spokesperson has had only four hours of media training, more than 10 years ago. Then they were most likely thrust out into the world of media interviews, and have received little feedback or other development since. No wonder many are so weak!

A good way to begin is by surveying your spokespeople. How do they feel about their own skills? Do they believe they would benefit from additional spokesperson development or training? Are they receiving the right level/kind of support to prepare for interviews? Do they regularly receive feedback on their performance?

I'm often surprised when I ask a spokesperson to assess their own skills and find that although their PR counsel believes them to be arrogant and uncoachable, they rate their own abilities as only average, and indicate an interest in further development.

### Get the diagnosis right

Every spokesperson is different, with a unique mix of strengths and weaknesses. Even if you've been working with them for a while (and feel as if you know some of their weaknesses inside and out), you probably haven't fully analyzed all the factors that influence their effectiveness. The more objectively and credibly you can measure their capabilities, the better you'll be able to help them improve. I perform a formal assessment, analyzed by both a journalist and PR assessor, rating the spokesperson's abilities across 12 key skill areas critical to interview success. This provides the basis for a detailed report of strengths and weaknesses, and also produces a numeric score, which I call the Spokesperson Competency Level (SCL). This metric can aid in benchmarking individual development, as well as in selecting the right spokesperson for each media opportunity.

For example, one of the things we assess is "ability to handle difficult questions." Scoring high in this area is particularly important for anyone handling high-risk communication, like crises or financial communication. So if we're assessing a Chief Financial Officer or CEO, and their skills here are not already very strong, we'd recommend some specialized training or coaching. The flip side is that a spokesperson working mainly with lifestyle reporters or doing other feature-type interviews may be absolutely fine with only average skills in this area, as long as they're strong in areas like providing great examples and telling an interesting, compelling story. So the assessment informs both your training and coaching recommendations, and your choice of which spokesperson to use for which interviews.

Diagnosing strengths and weaknesses can also be done more informally, through monitoring interviews, paying particular attention to the full range of skills. The downside of informal assessment is that it doesn't provide the third-party credibility of a formal assessment.

In my own experience, I've found that the process of going through a formal spokesperson assessment—even before we begin to address the results—makes spokespeople more open to coaching.

### **Adjust the prescription**

Once you know what the weaknesses are, you can outline a tailored development plan. It may involve going through basic media training, but it's much more likely that there are a few key areas to work on which would be better addressed through advanced training or a few coaching sessions. By providing it as a written plan, you set up the expectation of ongoing development and position yourself as the spokesperson's coach. Every spokesperson, no matter how good, should have an ongoing development plan that includes, at minimum, feedback after every interview and regular coaching sessions.

### **A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down**

Now the hard part, giving feedback without bruising egos or endangering your job. Actually, if you've involved your spokespeople in the process, performed a formal assessment and set up the expectation that they'll receive regular feedback, it's not nearly as hard as you think. Still, CEO egos can be fragile, and as you begin the coaching relationship, you'll want to ease into it. It often helps to utilize the "bad news sandwich" approach: Start with a piece of positive feedback, followed by a negative piece, and finish with a positive.

Reviewing a video of their own performance can also help people see themselves more accurately. I worked with one spokesperson whose personality was so laid-back he was practically asleep. He spoke in a quiet monotone, rarely showing any enthusiasm. Although incredibly knowledgeable, his interviews rarely resulted in coverage. He'd been given feedback on this trait previously, but had not taken it to heart. Since he'd only been asked to do print interviews, he'd never seen himself in action. When I played back his 40-minute interview, he finally saw the problem, and for the first time, he became open to improving his performance.

Any negative feedback should always include a specific recommendation for improvement. Don't just say, "You didn't give any good examples." Suggest a one-hour coaching session to work on developing examples to use next time. If he or she falls apart under fire, bring in a media trainer for a one-on-one advanced session on dealing with difficult questions. If your spokesperson tends to get sloppy after doing several interviews in a row, require an "energy break" to refresh them between sessions.

Finally, remember that the feedback you provide is not criticism, it's coaching, with the ultimate goal of helping your CEO be more effective and successful.

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