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PR lessons from the Ocean Ranger tragedy

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ABSTRACT

This commentary discusses the Ocean Ranger accident that happened on Valentine's Day in 1982, which created a crisis of significant proportions for the Ocean Drilling Exploration Company (ODECO) which designed and owned the ship and Mobil Oil of Canada which leased the Ocean Ranger to drill for oil in the harsh offshore environment of the Grand Banks of Newfoundland. Despite being referred to by many as the "Ocean Danger," the oil rig was described as unsinkable - a name that nature would prove to be a reckless test of fate. Using personal narrative as the basis for describing the impact of the Ocean Ranger disaster, the author, a seasoned professional communicator discusses how the crisis was communicated as well as what could have been better and more ethically.

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The Ocean Ranger was a massive, semi-submersible drilling rig designed and owned by Ocean Drilling Exploration Company (ODECO) and leased to Mobil Oil of Canada in the 1980's to drill for oil in the harsh offshore environment of the Grand Banks of Newfoundland. Despite its enormity, many of the men who worked on the rig referred to her as the "Ocean Danger." Like the Titanic, the massive oil rig was described as "unsinkable." But also like the Titanic, nature proved that description to be a reckless test of fate.

On Valentine's Day 1982, a vicious storm brought winds over 90 knots and seas that reached heights over 30 meters high. As described in the Royal Commission Report, sometime after 7:00 pm the Ocean Ranger reported to the Mobile shore base in St. John's that a giant rogue wave crashed over the rig smashing a porthole in the ballast control room. Water rushed in and shorted out circuits and the rig began to list. The situation quickly got out of control and at 1:05 am radio room requested that the supply ship come close and to stand by.

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At 1:09 it sent an SOS signal to search and rescue. At 1:30, the Ocean Ranger signalled it was sending its crew to lifeboats. That was the last time anyone heard from them. Two hours later Coast Guard and other rescuers watched their radars as the Ocean Ranger disappeared (Hickman, 1984).

Despite best rescue efforts, all attempts failed and all 84 crew members perished. Fifty-six of the crew were residents of Newfoundland. The crew were employees of several companies contracted to provide a range of services like drilling, engineering or catering. Over the next 4 days search teams were only able to recover twenty-two bodies, 2 life boats, and 6 life rafts. The Royal Commission looking into the disaster concluded the Ocean Ranger had design flaws, particularly in the ballast control room, and that the crew lacked proper safety training and equipment (Hickman, 1984).

The sinking of the Ocean Ranger was the worst post-war marine disaster in Canadian history. For those lost in the icy waters that fateful night of the 15 February 1982, the ordeal had ended. For the families left behind however, the nightmare was just beginning.

Stories about how poorly some companies treated the families of those lost in the tragedy would make any heart sink. One company shut down its office that day and wouldn't talk to families, media or anyone else. Another company had their 18 year old receptionist call families with the horrible news that there were no survivors. One company even went so far as to issue lay-off notices to the men who had drowned so as to avoid having to pay out benefits. Good God! There must not have been any public relations professionals employed by these companies at the time.

Some companies acquired professional public relations assistance. CPRS Life Member, Edsel Bonnell, was on contract to Mobil Oil Canada and Susan Sherk had just been hired by Mobil to do "people stuff" (Dodd, 2012, p. 125). According to Sherk, they wanted someone on staff who "understood Newfoundland and could help translate the values of its people to their company," (as cited in Heffernan 2009, p. 108). As Edsel looked at the crew list prior to the first news conference, he saw John (a CBC cameraman) who had a son on the rig. He approached John and convinced him to leave the news conference and go home to his family. John, also being a professional, was very reluctant to leave. Fortunately, persuasiveness is one of Edsel's greatest strengths.

I was only eighteen years old and in my second year at Memorial University when the tragedy occurred. In 2006 I was hired to manage public relations for the Canada-Newfoundland and Labrador Offshore Petroleum Board, a federal-provincial joint management agency established to regulate the off

shore oil and gas industry. Months before the 25th anniversary of the Ocean Ranger disaster, I received an e-mail at work that originated from a woman in South Carolina (Michele) who lost her Dad (Thomas) and her uncle (Robert) on the Ocean Ranger. She was about 12 years old at the time and the fifth of six children. She remembers how he considered staying home to finish work on their kitchen cabinets, but instead decided to go to Newfoundland to work on the Ocean Ranger. She remembers him kissing his family goodbye and saying that he would see them all again in three weeks.

He never came home.

Michele has been haunted by the loss of her Dad and her uncle for decades. She sent the e-mail to the Provincial Government hoping that someone would respond and tell her if there were any special plans for the sombre anniversary. The pain was quite evident in Michele's e-mail. She didn't write much, but she said a lot. The e-mail bounced around to several communications staff in various government departments, but none were sure how to respond, or what they might say other than provide some basic information about the planned services. Most people would be accustomed to responding to much less emotional correspondence than this particular e-mail. She wanted to visit St. John's for the 25th anniversary and was hoping the visit would help her find closure or some peace of mind. She had never been to the province and this was the last piece of earth that her father had ever set foot on. Unfortunately, she couldn't make the trip. The 25th of anything is a special anniversary, but this would no doubt be an important one and certainly for Michele and her family. I felt very bad that she couldn't be here for it.

I replied to Michele's e-mail and told her about the planned services. I also decided to compile several digital photos that I have of the Ocean Ranger and sent them to her. Some pictures have people in them, and one of those persons might even be her father or uncle. I was reluctant at first to do this, but these were pictures taken for a public purpose many years ago and it felt like the right thing to do. I also wanted Michele to know how important this tragedy has been in the province's history. I explained through my e-mail correspondence how the tragedy has helped shaped our attitudes towards offshore safety today and helped create a strong safety culture in our offshore and in the industry worldwide. I wanted her to know that her Dad and the others did not die in vain. I believe that something good comes out of even the darkest tragedy. The safety legacy of the Ocean Ranger is now obvious in the dramatic improvements that have been made as a result of the Inquiry into the tragedy.

Michele was very appreciative. She had never seen the pictures before

and in fact, very few people ever have. She shared them with her family and friends and it helped her through the difficult anniversary. I didn't hear from her again until 3 years later. She sent another e-mail just before the 28th anniversary. This time she was coming to St. John's, but could only stay for a day. It would however, be one of the most important days in her life.

When Michele arrived, I picked her up at the hotel and brought her to the church service. I had made contact with a local woman (Samantha) who also lost her Dad (Guy) on the Ocean Ranger. Samantha was also about 12 years old at the time. They met at the church service and the two became friends. At Michele's request, I joined her in the seats reserved for family. As awkward as I felt, how could I say no? Both ladies shared a good cry as they lit candles in memory of each man lost. The choir sang beautifully and the entire service was very moving. We then left the church and went to Confederation Hill for a wreath laying ceremony.

Several media normally attend the ceremony each year. When they learned that she was in town they of course wanted to speak with her. She and I discussed it and she decided it might be a good thing to do. Knowing the good people of Newfoundland as I do, I guessed that she might receive an outpouring of love and compassion once people became familiar with her story. Both ladies did several interviews, including a wonderful interview with a television reporter in the church and at the wreath laying ceremony at the Ocean Ranger monument. The interviews drew the kind of public response that I knew it would in the viewer reactions.

After the ceremony I treated everyone to lunch and we talked for hours. I went back to my office and Samantha and Michele spent some time together walking along Middle Cove Beach. When Michele returned to South Carolina she called me and sent a picture of a heart shaped rock that she found on the beach. When I suggested that it was a valentine from her Dad, we both lost it.

When I reflect on Michele's initial e-mail, I could have gone with a "cookie-cutter" response and simply sent the promotional flyer for the church service. Perhaps this would have been satisfactory. But as I reflected on the disaster itself and on the impact it had on families, I felt that it deserved greater attention and she deserved greater respect. Three years ago I was reminded once again of the perils of the offshore oil and gas business when Cougar Flight 491 crashed resulting in 17 deaths and one survivor. This time however, the families were treated with respect and compassion by the companies that employed their loved ones. They were compensated substantially and not forced to endure a long and painful litigation process. Of course, no compensation can replace the loss of a loved one, but fighting over money only adds

to the bitterness. Times have certainly changed.

Helping someone deal with a traumatic loss, even one that happened three decades ago, is an amazing feeling. When Michele first contacted me she didn't know about the annual memorial service. She wasn't aware of how much this tragedy affected the people of this province. In South Carolina, the Ocean Ranger is not spoken of and is completely unknown. She didn't know about the huge impact (lessons learned) that this tragedy had on off-shore safety and she didn't have the comfort of knowing that this tragedy gave great meaning to her father's death. Because of tragedy countless lives have been saved.

This experience has helped me to rediscover why I entered the profession of public relations. I chose this profession initially because I considered myself to be a "people person". Like my university friends that became lawyers and doctors, I too wanted to be part of a profession that helps people. The one thing that all three professions should have in common is philanthropy. You probably won't find words like 'compassion', 'benevolence' and 'caring' in the various values statements of professional associations, but they are important to us as professionals nonetheless. I've always thought that the best doctors and lawyers are those that care about clients; maybe not all clients, but certainly those that deserve respect and compassion.

I believe post-secondary public relations programs in Canada do a fine job of providing young professionals with the skills they need in the workplace, but I'm not sure how well educators can teach philanthropy. I'll leave this to the educators to discuss. I am certain however, that it can be taught through mentoring and I know plenty of mentors who do this very well. For me, it is not good enough to have students simply read and get familiar with the *CPRS Declaration of Principles, Code of Ethics and Statement of Values*. New practitioners need to see from veteran practitioners how the principles and values are applied. Not every practitioner will be as fortunate as I was to help someone overcome a lifetime of grief, but we owe it to the profession to help new practitioners be as good as they can be.

Building relationships is a cornerstone of public relations and sometimes it involves some risk. This is one time that I am glad I took the risk to do that little bit extra.

As for Michele, she now has closure and her oldest sister, Donna, joined her in St. John's for the 30th anniversary. She had an equally satisfying experience.

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