

Matthew's Book Club Summary #5

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Title: Do The Right Thing

The book club started as an informal, fun way to explore and consider business ideas relevant to our work with colleagues. The format consists of one person (usually Matthew) reading a book and writing a summary for discussion during team meetings. This allows the other team members to benefit from the book's insights, without carving time in their schedule to read the full volume.

The idea was to summarize *an interesting part* of each chapter in a paragraph or two, and where applicable, note how these could be relevant to the workplace. This provides the reviewer with practise condensing a mass of data into a few pieces of key information: an underappreciated skill. The reviews are meant to be accurate but light-hearted, on the assumption that people learn more when they're having fun.

Matthew's company gave permission for these to be distributed to non-employees as long as the employer-specific content was removed, for which he is sincerely appreciative.

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About the author and book:

Jim Hoggan heads Hoggan & Associates, Vancouver's biggest PR / Communications firm. They're big into corporate social responsibility and the environment, which is reflected in their client list, which has included the David Suzuki Foundation, BC Hydro, Ballard, the Vancouver Canucks, the City of Vancouver, and many others. His co-writer, Richard Littlemore, was UBC President Martha Piper's speechwriter during her tenure there. Disclosure: I've exchanged correspondence with both of them, which could affect my objectivity.

It was thought that learning about Public Relations might be of interest to team members as the then-upcoming Olympics would provide an opportunity to see a lot of PR going on.

Part I. Strategy: the basics, the background, and the big ideas

Ch	Title	Summary
1	Finding the Right Thing to Do	<p>Hoggan's three big rules for companies:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do the right thing <i>ie. make sure you're doing what's right</i> 2. Be seen to be doing the right thing <i>ie. as a separate activity, talk about the fact that you're indeed doing the right thing (because you are in fact doing it)</i> 3. Don't confuse 1 and 2 <i>never confuse the talking with the doing!</i> <p>Public sentiment is like karma: good or bad, it takes a long time to wear off. Consumers are still punishing American car companies for past decades of poor workmanship.</p> <p><i>[As of May 2010, it remains to be seen whether the ongoing brake saga will overwhelm the Prius good-karma halo and put Toyota under a raincloud.]</i></p>
2	Darth Vader PR: <i>The Lure of the Dark Side</i>	<p>Philip Morris created the world's first organized, global-warming denier groups.</p> <p>They created a network of "independent" think-tanks to challenge the science on second-hand smoke. But they realized unless they opposed other stuff, the public would immediately realize it was an industry-funded sham. (<i>Astroturf</i> as opposed to a <i>grassroots</i> movement.) So they argued against scientific concerns about nuclear waste disposal, pesticides, and global warming.</p>
3	The Social Media Revolution	<p>With the web, citizens can look up / double-check a lot more information, relatively cost-free. Even one vindictive person can give you a very, very hard time.</p> <p>DeSmogBlog, Hoggan's watchdog website which exposes climate-change spin, lies and distortion from denier groups, has been named one of the world's top 50 most influential environmental blogs... despite being staffed by only two FTE's.</p> <p>Which also makes you realize how few people an industry-funded group needs to employ, to get a lot of influence and media attention themselves.</p>
4	Once Upon a Time:	<p>When it comes to facts vs. fiction, fiction wins every time. Stories almost always beat stats.</p>

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	<i>The universal appeal of storytelling</i>	<p>In the past, when environmental groups would cite scary statistics, coal lobbyists would talk about grandma and her tasty home-made cookies ... then say that new regulations would bankrupt her and make the bank foreclose on her home, throwing her out on the street.</p> <p>Effective brands provide a story for their customers, e.g. "despite being a balding 43-year-old corporate lawyer in Manhattan, I'm at heart a rebel, which is why I own this Harley-Davidson".</p> <p><i>New companies need to develop good brand stories. Existing companies may have to refine their brand story to fit their current focus.</i></p>
5	Rewriting Reality: <i>How framing an issue can help (or hinder) communications</i>	<p>What the coal lobbyists did was <i>frame</i> the issue as "coal legislation will hurt your defenceless grandmother". The biggest key to persuasive communication is to define the frame – or at least, neutralize the other person's frame.</p> <p>e.g. if someone's asking for a raise, their boss might frame the issue as "<u>for your level</u> you're paid above-average". They might counter "<u>by industry standards</u> I'm way underpaid".</p> <p>This is a challenge for environmental groups like Greenpeace. If they provide bad news, many in the public will frame the message as "just another false alarm from the Chicken Little fringe" and ignore it. When such groups offer constructive solutions, people seem to be more receptive.</p> <p>Note: the David Suzuki Foundation's new tagline is "<i>solutions are in our nature</i>". Coincidence? (No. Hoggan is the Chair of the DSF.)</p>
6	Dialogue: <i>Successful conversations, even public consultations, go two ways</i>	<p>A researcher named Yankelovich (no relation to "Weird Al") devised ten principles for communicating in a climate of mistrust, based on fifty years of experience. While meant for firms dealing with a suspicious public, it's broadly relevant (e.g. strained supplier relationships).</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. effective communication is 80% performance and 20% telling people about it. 2. make few promises/commitments, but keep them. 3. core values must be explicit and framed in ethical terms (ethically neutral value-statements are seen as deceitful). 4. more is expected from privileged institutions. 5. silence/ denial/ closed doors are almost always interpreted as evidence of bad faith.

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		<p>6. no one gets the benefit of the doubt.</p> <p>7. anything but plain talk is suspect.</p> <p>8. honesty/ integrity responds to a genuine hunger on the part of the public.</p> <p>9. noble goals with deeply flawed execution are seen as hypocrisy, not idealism.</p> <p>10. it is not enough to talk the talk; credibility comes from delivering results.</p> <p><i>It may be useful to consider these principles even in the context of companies, where rivalries and departmental silos can create us-vs-them attitudes. Some of these ideas complement themes discussed in subsequent book club text <u>Thinking in Systems</u>.</i></p>
7	<p>Getting Your Way: <i>Six principles of persuasion (and the reasons you should use them carefully)</i></p>	<p>The six identified principles are:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. People like those who like them 2. People repay in kind 3. People follow the lead of others 4. People align with their commitments 5. People defer to experts 6. People value scarce things more highly <p><i>Charities send "gifts" of address labels because recipients are more likely to reciprocate by donating. More fundamentally, if you listen to someone, they're more likely to listen to you.</i></p> <p><i>People gravitate to what they perceive to be a social norm, whether it's blue box recycling, or even something mundane like dressing up at work.</i></p> <p><i>If you need something big from another party, start small. The key is to get momentum; once we say yes to something, we rarely say no to follow-on requests.</i></p> <p><i>If speaking to folks you rarely interact with, it's prudent to reiterate your qualifications. That frames your message as an expert's message, instead of the frames the audience might be putting on you.</i></p> <p><i>This is the psychology behind "limited time only" sales. Consider that your career has a time limit and you'll probably see things differently ("I only have thirty-one more years to accomplish everything I want to do!").</i></p>

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8	The Capers Caper	<p>In 2002 Capers Foods in Kitsilano had a Hepatitis-A outbreak; one of their food handlers had tested positive. Hoggan won the top American PR Industry award for its handling of the roughly two-month crisis. Some measures they took included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - full-page apologies to customers for the outbreak - shutting down food prep for two months (at huge cost to Capers) - researching high-profile food contamination cases to study best practises - consulting with infectious disease experts at local universities to ensure that the company's communications were correct and had up-to-date information - setting up hotlines with the local Health Authority, and fielding thousands of calls - providing food and drinks to the people who lined up to get a vaccination - keeping an open-door policy when it came to media crews wanting to tour the facilities <p>Partway through the crisis, they commissioned a phone poll which showed that 97% of respondents approved of Capers' management's handling of the situation. The public perception of Capers may have <i>improved</i> on account of its handling of the crisis!!</p>

Part II. Tactics: hands-on tips for everyday success

This section consisted of innumerable bite-sized pieces of advice – a sort of *Encyclopedia Hogganica* of Public Relations wisdom. I've sampled one or two from each chapter here.

Ch	Title	Summary
9	Communicating Well	Never, ever depend on Spell Czech!
10	Framing the Message	Only use positive frames for yourself; in people's memories, the descriptor will stick, but the negation will not. (Richard Nixon's "I am not a crook" made people associate him with crooks.)
11	Courting Media Coverage	To make the front pages or the business section, savvy publicists will invest time to get to know reporters, to figure out what kinds of stories they need. <i>Public companies will often invest time with the analysts who cover their industry, to ensure these are aware of all the company's positives and strengths. This helps them get the all-important "buy recommendations" from influential prognosticators like Jim Cramer. ☺</i>
12	Building a Good Media Relationship	When you're championing an idea, it's an important skill (not just in media interviews) to be able to bridge from an informative answer to your main point, within a sentence or two. <i>"Sir, times are tight. In times like this it's crucial for companies to get as much productivity out of employees as possible! It's well known that relaxed employees are more productive, which is exactly why we should have an on-site masseurs and masseuses."</i>
13	Social Media	Nothing much interesting here. Mind you, I'm no social media butterfly...
14	Communicating in Crisis	When dealing with angry folks (community groups, protesters, shareholders) the most important thing is to listen closely, to figure out exactly their concerns. PR campaigns which target the wrong issues, fail spectacularly – because it becomes clear to opponents that the company isn't listening to them.

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15	Crisis Planning	<p>An interesting idea from this section is to do a “reputation audit”. If the company had a crisis, how many employees, suppliers, customers, and community groups would give it the benefit of the doubt?</p> <p><i>Despite its heavy-handedness, Apple gets a lot of benefit-of-the-doubt from consumers. Microsoft though, gets no mercy whatsoever:</i> http://www.theonion.com/articles/microsoft-ad-campaign-crashing-nations-televisions,2587/</p>
16	Investor Communications	<p>Start with the bad news. Or, don't bury it partway through a press release. Or at the very minimum, don't make it look like you're trying to bury it into the press release. The media will smell blood. ☺</p>
17	Environmental Communications	<p>In the web age, any company touting its environmental benign-ness will get called on it. (Apple did, a couple years ago – and has recently come back with what seems to be industry-leading action.)</p> <p>It is absolutely crucial that a company calling itself “green” can back the claims up 100.0%.</p>
18	Public Speaking	<p>Delivery-wise, people should try to be themselves when giving presentations, and not try to fit an artificial mould.</p> <p>Content-wise, it's important to know what message(s) you're trying to communicate; what you want the audience to learn. To be effective, the stats need a story. If there's no clear direction from the presentation, audiences might think you're telling them “we did stuff and saw things”, without understanding its implications for their own work.</p>
19	Research	<p>Not much here – “know what the public thinks of you”.</p>
20	Community Relations	<p>If you're going to make decisions that affect a community, start <i>very early</i>. Otherwise people will conclude you're just putting on a façade of public input.</p> <p><i>This concept can actually be applied even within a company (the “workplace community”).</i></p>

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21	Employee Communications	<p>Two big rules:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- keep employees in the loop on decisions (and listen to their feedback, so they feel heard)- employees with real input give real effort (If they feel they've been given a fair hearing, people tend to accept decisions they disagree with. But if they don't think they had input, they'll resist.)