

CEO gone AWOL? How to maintain stakeholders' calm
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S.C. governor's vanishing act raises ethical and tactical questions for corporate communicators

To paraphrase Simon and Garfunkel: Where have you gone, Mark Sanford?

For the past few days, journalists, politicians, South Carolinians, bloggers, and your wife wondered about your whereabouts. First, we heard you were hiking the Appalachian Trail.

Well, not so much.

It turns out that you were in Argentina visiting a woman with whom you've been having an affair. (That's a whole other *domestic* communication quandary.)



The issue for corporate communicators is this: Let's say your CEO leaves unexpectedly—doesn't even send a postcard. How do you communicate the message to your employees and other stakeholders?

Dustin R. Walling, principal of Dustin Walling Associates, shares these four tips on dealing with a missing or ailing CEO.

Business as near-usual: Every good corporation of size has—or ought to have—a well-conceived set of strategic and tactical plans. This is one of the primary jobs of the CEO and the executive team. If these plans don't exist, hire a management consultant and get to work.

Appoint the next in command: The COO, CFO, or another key executive is the likely candidate to stand in during the CEO's absence. The board should meet immediately and appoint one executive, a member of their own ranks, or another trusted leader to the position.

Identify immediate operational plans: Identify any immediate plans, including how the situation with the CEO will be resolved, as well as how other major changes need to be handled.

Communicate appropriately: The above serves to form the basis of informed, calm communications that depict a company managed for continuity.

Dwayne Waite, president of DW4R in North Carolina, says a missing CEO poses a real challenge. "Talk about crisis comm at its best," he says.

"Notify staff immediately," Waite says. "It's better they find it out from you, instead of someone else. Next, tell all key stakeholders. As long as the executive team looks completely in control, board members and stakeholders will be at ease."

Vic Beck, director of communication planning and strategy for S4 Inc., says that many of the basic principles of good PR still apply to the situation. Here's what Beck advises:

- Provide details as soon as possible for your external and internal audiences.
- Be open, honest and transparent with your information.
- Do your very best to be accurate—vet all the information you have.
- Express your concern for your CEO.

Let's say your CEO doesn't go missing outright—but has to go to the hospital, similar to Apple CEO Steve Jobs' getting a liver transplant. How do you communicate that message?

“Planning ahead is the name of the game,” says Edwin Yeh, CEO of St. John's Capital Group. “In a business, a company can be ‘people driven’ or ‘systems driven.’ The more we create a system, the less we depend on any single person. When Steve Jobs was absent from Apple, it created a crisis because it's still too people driven.”

Even though Sanford returned in good health, it's possible that the missing boss could be in real peril.

“Your CEO could be bleeding in a ditch somewhere and need help,” says Rick Bentley, CEO of Connexed Technologies Inc. “So it might be prudent to file a missing-person report with the police, try to track his or her cell phone, call all friends and relatives; check the company credit card activity; and try to find him or her and help out.”

And when your CEO returns at last, we just hope he or she brings you an “exotic” souvenir from South America—or at least a stuffed animal from the hospital gift shop.

Governor's Travels: A new brand of fiction

Jake Wengroff, global director of corporate communications at Frost and Sullivan, wonders whether anybody *really* knew the particulars of South Carolina Gov. Mark Sanford's star-crossed trek.

“Apparently, there was a breakdown in communications if it became leaked to the press that ‘the governor is missing,’” Wengroff says. “Executives and leaders travel frequently for business, as well as personal reasons. Gov. Sanford's lack of simply communicating his whereabouts certainly raises questions about his credibility and ability to carry out his responsibilities.”

Wengroff poses two possible scenarios:

1. Gov. Sanford truly did not tell his team where he was headed. His silence led to confusion, which led to mild hysteria.
2. Certain individuals *did* know his whereabouts but chose to tell the press and Internet sources that he simply “disappeared.” This obviously created an embarrassing situation—leading to speculation of retaliation and deliberate damage to the governor's reputation.

“Then, we find out he's having an affair with someone in Argentina,” Wengroff says. “To an audience who's heard it all and seen it all, is this a cover-up for some other activity we have yet to learn about?”

Ohh, the drama continues. Kinda makes us eager for the next exciting chapter.