Handling Media and Press Moments as a Leader

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A different discipline from internal communication

Many leaders, comfortable and skilled in internal communication, are caught off guard by media interactions, where the audience is broader, the stakes of an imprecise statement are higher, and there is far less room to clarify or walk back a poorly phrased remark. Media communication is a distinct skill, worth deliberate preparation rather than assuming general communication competence will transfer directly.

Core preparation principles

Identify your key message before the conversation, not during it. Journalists control the questions; you control the message you consistently return to. Deciding in advance on the one or two points you most want to land, regardless of the specific question asked, gives structure to an otherwise unpredictable interaction.

Assume nothing is truly off the record unless explicitly and mutually agreed in advance. Casual remarks made before or after a formal interview are sometimes used regardless of intent. The safest approach is to treat the entire interaction, from the moment contact begins, as potentially publishable.

Bridge back to your key message after answering directly. As in general Q&A, this only works, and only should be used, after genuinely answering the question asked. Bridging without answering reads as evasive and is a common way media trust is lost.

Prepare for the worst plausible question, not only the expected ones. Thinking through, in advance, how you would honestly and calmly answer the most difficult question a journalist might reasonably ask reduces the chance of being visibly destabilised if it comes up.

Written statements deserve the same care as live interviews

A written statement, particularly during a sensitive moment, is often scrutinised as closely as a live interview, and every word can be read as deliberate. Having a trusted colleague or communications professional review sensitive statements before release, even under time pressure, is worth the delay in most cases.

When something goes wrong

If a statement is later found to be inaccurate or is genuinely misunderstood, a prompt, clear correction generally does far less reputational damage than a defensive attempt to avoid acknowledging the issue. Speed and honesty in correction tend to be rewarded, or at least not further punished, more than most leaders expect.

The value of preparation, even for leaders who rarely face media

Leaders who are not frequently in the public eye sometimes underprepare for the rare occasions when they are, assuming their internal communication skill will transfer directly. Given how high-stakes and unforgiving media moments can be, even leaders with infrequent media exposure benefit from basic preparation on these principles well before the moment actually arrives.