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DOING THE RIGHT THING



JULIE OLIVER, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Allan Bonner been sought out for his expertise in communication skills by heads of state, cabinet ministers, premiers, police and military officers and chief executives from Canada and beyond.

It was almost a perfect night for communication consultant Allan Bonner — a book launch at the Rideau Club, a packed room, warm congratulations from friends and clients, and an open bar with plenty of appetizers.

There was only one thing missing. He didn't have a single copy of his new book, *Doing and Saying the Right Thing: Professional Risk and Crisis Management*. It was still being printed.

The absence of the book, which after all was the purpose of the gathering, could have thrown another author. But not Mr. Bonner. It simply gave him the opportunity to showcase his speaking skills to a group of people who listened with the type of appreciation reserved for a skilled orator.

Mr. Bonner said he'd played around with a variety of reasons as to why he didn't have a copy of the book — it was sold out, suppressed in the wake of Sept. 11, banned like *Catcher in the Rye* — before finally settling on the truth.

"It was a last resort, but it's worked in my marriage for the last 20 years."

His gift as a communicator, hinted at by the tiny cuff-links molded into the shape of microphones that adorn his cuffs, is instantly apparent. It's also an example of why the former CBC journalist has been sought out for his expertise in communication skills by heads of state, cabinet ministers, premiers, police and military officers and chief executives from Canada and beyond.

He's coached about 15,000 people in all, preparing them for the limelight with mock

Crisis, what crisis?

interviews, media ambushes and advice on how to sit, stand and interact with reporters or other members of the questioning public.

Mr. Bonner espouses a theory he calls "SOCKO" — Strategic Overriding Communications and Knowledge Objective — which teaches people that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. They need to think strategically before speaking about the message they want to get across, to have an objective backed up by knowledge as well as the skill to present the information publically.

"Allan has the ability not only to organize thoughts but to teach people how to organize thoughts," said Bill Simpkins, vice-president of the Canadian Petroleum Products Institute, who attended the launch.

The book, which will be available in bookstores Monday, is described as a "blueprint for senior executives on how to deal with some of the most controversial and public issues of our time."

Publisher Michael Gnarowski said it is "absolutely essential for anybody who holds a position of responsibility." Writing in *The Hill Times*, Mark Entwistle, former press secretary and director of communications to two prime ministers, said there is no shortage of people who should read the book, from communications professionals to top executives.

"I recommend it to those numerous individuals in senior positions throughout organizations who believe they are naturally born communicators who can wing it," he wrote.

The launch of Allan Bonner's book on risk and crisis management went well, considering the book wasn't there, Bev Wake reports.

"They should treat Mr. Bonner's book like a religious text and return to it again and again for guidance."

But the book, like Mr. Bonner's career at the Centre for Training in Risk and Crisis Management in Toronto, goes far beyond dealing with the media, offering advice on public speaking as well as risk and crisis management.

Mr. Bonner, who holds multiple degrees, said risk and crisis management have become even more important after Sept. 11. He's hoping the events will lead people to focus more on risk management, which is designed to help prevent catastrophes, than crisis management — which includes the range of activities, including press releases, that follow a crisis.

"We're in a new era," he said. "I think Sept. 11 has said some of this crap we normally do, press releases, opinion polls ... has just always been so transparent. I hope people look more at the substance."

Risk management, he said, could include profiling of airline passengers to help reduce the risk of terrorist attacks. Allowing officers to bring guns on airplanes, he said, really only prepares people to address a crisis — while adding the additional risk of passengers being shot. These are the types of issues people need to think about, he said, post Sept. 11.

"There's a whole school of thought that says there's no such thing as an accident."

Risk management could also include a rethinking by fire departments of the benefits of sending hundreds of firefighters into a burning building that could collapse at any time, as happened at the World Trade Center.

"This book is a tiny step to say consider some other things," Mr. Bonner said. "I hope you enjoy it. I hope it comes out."