

# Fess Up and Move On

✘ *By Virgil Scudder, President, [Virgil Scudder & Associates](#)*

Here's a basic rule of [public relations](#): when you mess up, fess up. Then move on. Get out in front of the story even if you're a day late and a dollar short.

Politicians, who far too seldom have solid public relations professionals on their teams, often apply this approach: dodge, feint, deny. The result is frequently to take a story that should have died in a day or so and keep it in the news for days or even weeks. Worse, it can crowd out your organization's positive news.

That's what happened to the Trump campaign this week. Tuesday, which should have been a good news day for them, became a disaster.

On the opening night of the [Republican National Convention](#) on Monday, Donald Trump's wife, [Melania](#), made a speech on family and values that apparently plagiarized one that Michelle Obama made eight years ago at the Democratic National Convention. A journalist noted the similarities and tweeted about them. Soon, side by side comparisons of key sections of the talk had gone viral. The plagiarism accusation became extremely hard to deny, especially in light of verbatim lines like "...values that you work hard for what you want in life, that your word is your bond and you do what you say."



(Photo Source: Twitter)

It gets worse. Melania had earlier told NBC's Matt Lauer that she herself wrote the speech "with as little help as possible." That put the onus on her and made crucifying some ethics-challenged writer even harder.

The Trump camp promptly blamed the controversy on media bias and the Hillary Clinton campaign even though the story had gone viral before the Clinton team made any comment.

*So, Mr. or Ms. PR pro, what would you do now?* My advice would be this: fess up, apologize, give a reason ("in his haste to finish the speech the writer took an unacceptable shortcut,") and then fire or discipline the writer. That would have shortened the shelf life of the story.

Instead, the Trump camp implausibly denied there was any plagiarism. Campaign chairman Paul Manafort feebly declared, "There wasn't any cribbing...these are common words and values." Maybe so, Paul, but so many of the same words and points in the same order?

Sean Spicer, the Republican National Committee's chief strategist, added insult (and a touch of humor) to injury by saying that lines similar to "the strength of your dreams and your willingness to work for them" can in fact be found in the television program *My Little Pony*. Is he saying she stole

from a kiddie TV program? Is this an example for children, hers or ours?

**Here's a bit of advice I've given my clients for over 30 years: never lie, deceive, or mislead.** And, if someone on your team does, admit it, apologize, explain what happened, take disciplinary action, and move on.

"Fessin' up" is good for the soul. And, for the image of someone who seeks to be trusted. It also gets you off the front page faster.

*About the Author: Often referred to as "The Dean of Media Trainers," Virgil is considered one of the world's foremost communication experts. In a 30-year career that has covered 26 countries on five continents, he has provided coaching and counsel to heads of some of the world's largest corporations and government leaders. Virgil is a prolific writer and speaker. His book, World Class Communication: how great CEOs win with the public, shareholders, employees, and the media, written with his son Ken, was named one of the 25 best business books of 2012. His column, In the C-Suite, appears in every quarterly issue of the Public Relations Strategist and is read by leaders of major public relations agencies and global heads of public relations of large companies. He has written or been featured in articles that have appeared in The New York Times, The International Herald Tribune, Reuters, Investors Business Daily, and numerous professional publications. Two of his speeches have been reprinted in the prestigious Vital Speeches of the Day. Prior to founding Virgil Scudder & Associates in 1990, Virgil headed the media training units of two of the world's largest public relations firms, Hill & Knowlton and Carl Byoir & Associates. Earlier, he was an award-winning news broadcaster at major radio and television networks and stations in New York City. He was a first-night Broadway drama critic for six years during that period, broadcasting reviews on NBC's all-news radio network*

*and all-news WINS radio.*