

PR experts question city's response to blast

'It was a lot of verbiage without a lot of help'

BY ALLISON HANES

A mayor who returned from holiday to handle a disaster only to leave again before a fallen firefighter's funeral. A volatile city councillor yelling at a constituent to "shut up" on live television. The comparison of devastating property damage with the Holocaust and Chernobyl.

Experts in communication during a crisis are questioning the city's response to the propane explosion that rocked a North York neighbourhood on Sunday.

Wednesday's press conference at the scene of the blast — where an angry mob confronted officials over their fears of asbestos exposure and Councillor Maria Augimeri (York Centre) lashed out angrily at a detractor — was no doubt the communications nadir of a difficult week for the city.

But public relations professionals identified a number of weaknesses in Toronto's reaction to the disaster — although they also noted the total absence of any leadership by the provincial government.

Key among the issues is Mayor David Miller's decision to rejoin his family on holiday mid-week after returning from British Columbia on Sunday.

His absence was questioned at a pair of community meetings on Thursday evening, as well as yesterday's funeral of District Fire Chief Bob Leek, who died while on duty at the scene of the explosion.

While sympathetic to the Mayor's dilemma, Linda Smith, executive vice-president and senior partner at



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Councillor Maria Augimeri has apologized to the public after yelling at a detractor during a news conference.

ency of that leadership voice is absolutely important. People need to feel that that person is absolutely there for them and provides the right tone and provides a balance between fact and empathy.

"The most appropriate person to be here and to have consistently commented and to have been that face would have been the Mayor."

Stuart Green, a spokesman for Mr. Miller, said that since returning to B.C., the Mayor has remained well briefed on developments. Mr. Miller also spoke to the family of the dead firefighter and they were sympathetic to his situation, he said. A statement from Mr. Miller was read at the funeral.

Allan Bonner, of his eponymous consulting firm, said Mr. Miller may have underestimated the duration and seriousness of the emergency. But besides disappearing from public view, he said a bigger problem may be who has stepped into the spotlight since.

Mr. Bonner — who has advised everyone from Cabinet ministers to NATO officials to former mayor Mel Lastman — called the chaotic press conference where Ms. Augimeri told a critic to shut up "absolutely unbelievable" and said he's never seen anything like it.

"She is using a sledgehammer to kill a fly. She has a live microphone. She should be

phone. These are powerful symbols and be careful about abusing that power."

While not minimizing the difficulty of having to stand before a jeering crowd and take abuse, he said people are entitled to blow off steam in such situations and public officials just have to take it.

"It's pensionable time. This is what you do for a living. Go stand up there. Listen. Take notes. Say, 'Tell me more. Thank you,'" said Mr. Bonner, adding that being confrontational only sets a bad tone for communication, undermines confidence in authorities and sends the message that nobody really cares.

Ms. Augimeri has since apologized to the public for her outburst — though not to the man who prompted it. However, she also raised eyebrows anew by referring to the disaster as a "holocaust without the human element," during a TV interview on CP24 and later "a Chernobyl" on AM640 Toronto Radio.

"In my business we always say how you apologize is more important than what you did," Mr. Bonner said. "And calling it a holocaust in North York, where there are more Holocaust survivors apparently than anywhere in the world, is not on."

Councillor Anthony Peruzza (York West), who represents the neighbouring ward and

once worked for Ms. Augimeri, defended her efforts to help her community.

"These are difficult situations to deal with in the best of times," Mr. Peruzza said. "The reality is whoever steps up to the front of the line is the person people look to for leadership and at the same time is the person that gets singled out for blame."

Bart Mindszenty and Gail Roberts run the firm Mindszenty and Roberts and also teach public relations at Royal Roads University in B.C. While echoing many of the points expressed by other experts, the partners said they were also "surprised" at the lack of coordination they saw in the city's initial response the explosion.

Mr. Mindszenty said he found the initial press briefings at city hall self-laudatory and not very informative.

"It was a lot of verbiage without a lot of help," he said. "They were talking about what a great job this group had done and expressing condolences. That's all fine, but it you really listened to it there was no information. It didn't help you be any smarter or any better prepared."

Ms. Roberts remarked that even when officials don't have the information or a situation is changing rapidly, they need to anticipate what people want to know, let the public know they are on it and tell them when they might expect news.

"If they didn't know the answers, they should have at least acknowledged some of the questions people had," she said.

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