Twitter Thread by Elizabeth Spiers



Elizabeth Spiers
@espiers

The ongoing Lincoln Project story reminds me that I haven't met anyone in politics yet who really understands how journalism works and how to handle a bad story. The Winning FormulaTM is also the right thing to do, but it involves a lot of humility and relinquishing some control.

First, don't lie to reporters. Ever. Even if you fool one, another one will find you out. And there are a lot of people who naively think they will fool ALL the reporters. This is just arrogance.

Don't try to intimidate people you suspect might be sources. It gives them more of an incentive to be a source, and it usually has the opposite of your intended effect: it encourages other people to talk to reporters.

If you know something is going to break, tell the story yourself, truthfully. There's a line from some Chris Matthews book that is actually applicable (and he did not do): hang a lantern on your problems.

Don't get defensive. It makes you sound like you don't *really* think you did anything wrong.

Do not try to bully reporters. That's like waving a red cape in front of a bull. It pisses them off and reinforces any evidence they already have that you are in the wrong. And they are not afraid of you.

Apologize and do not hedge it with excuses. All humans have problems doing this, but it's maybe the most important part.

Do not believe that you can do something bad and keep it a secret internally. If someone besides you knows that you did something bad, it can and probably will come out. It helps if you DON'T DO THE BAD THING IN THE FIRST PLACE.

If you think your employees are leakers, the problem isn't the employees; it's you. People leak when they're unhappy, feel compromised ethically, feel like there's no other recourse. Punishing them will create more leakers.

I feel like I need to say "don't lie to reporters" TWICE. I've seen people think they were going to hide things from reporters who on a previous beat spent much of their time wrenching secrets out people who work in espionage. You are not a better liar than a professional spy.

Don't assume that when something materializes, it's the result of leaking. Actual leaking is not a primary source for most reporters. Reporting is. And that doesn't involve a reporter passively waiting for a phone to ring.

But really, the best advice is don't do anything that you wouldn't want to read about on the front page of The New York Times. If you do that, you don't have to worry about any of this!