

DIRECTOR'S CRISIS PLAYBOOK

JAIME WATT

AND BREEN WILKINSON



PREFACE: WHY THIS BOOK?

THE UNIQUE DUTY OF BOARDS TO SAFEGUARD ORGANIZATIONAL REPUTATION

Some books are born from a chance encounter, a eureka moment, or a vague intuition.

This is not that book.

This book is the product of hard-earned experience, built in boardrooms and crisis war rooms across the country over many years. It was written with one clear objective: to fill a critical gap in the literature on crisis management, one that addresses the distinct role of board directors in steering organizations through turbulent times.

A Director's Playbook—Not Another Management Manual

There is no shortage of material on crisis response for communications teams, operational leaders, or other advisors. But remarkably little exists that speaks directly to the board's unique responsibilities. That omission is risky.

Because when the stakes are highest—when a crisis occurs that is beyond the role, scope or skill of management and threatens the integrity, credibility, or very survival of an organization—it is the board that must lead. Directors are not passive observers or backstops. They are duty-bound to provide oversight, ensure accountability, and, when necessary, take the reins.



See “*When and How the Board Steps In*” in Chapter 5:
The Role of the Board Before, During and After the Crisis.

This book sets out to equip directors with what they truly need: a principled, proven, and practical playbook for navigating crises with clarity and resolve. Its purpose is not to blur the line between governance and management, but to strengthen it—ensuring that management is equipped and supported by disciplined, expert oversight.

Value Add

While this playbook is written primarily for directors, not every section speaks exclusively to them. Some chapters—particularly Chapter 7: Six Mistakes Made Again and Again, Chapter 8: The Ten Rules of Effective Crisis Response, and the Sample Crisis Plan—will also be useful to management and crisis communications teams.

These inclusions are intentional. Our aim is to provide directors with a comprehensive understanding of how effective crisis management operates in practice.

Why This Book Matters Now

In an era defined by heightened expectations, hyper-transparency, and unforgiving public scrutiny, the risks facing organizations have never been more complex, dynamic—or consequential. From cybersecurity breaches to values-based boycotts, operational breakdowns to leadership scandals, the crisis landscape today is relentless and evolving at a pace that could not have been imagined just a short time ago.

Yet while much has changed in the external environment, one truth remains: a well-prepared, well-informed board can make the difference between organizational failure and long-term resilience. This book will show you how.

What Informs This Work

This playbook is not hypothetical. It is built on four decades of front-line experience advising Canada's most prominent boards and organizations through their most difficult moments.

At Navigator, we've worked with public companies, family businesses, crown corporations, universities, hospitals, and nonprofit organizations as they've faced reputational threats, legal exposure, and existential decisions.

We've also had the privilege of teaching board governance in the Directors Education Program at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management, helping to prepare hundreds of current and future directors for the realities of the boardroom.

What we've learned, both in the classroom and in practice, is that the demands placed on directors in crisis are uniquely challenging. But they are also manageable—if you are prepared.

A Clear Proposition

At its core, this book advances three guiding ideas:

1. **Boards own risk and reputation.** Regardless of the sector or structure of the organization, risk oversight and reputation stewardship are core to every director's fiduciary duty. A director who fails to recognize this is a liability to the organization they serve.
2. **Crisis response today is radically more difficult.** The convergence of digital media, social activism, geopolitical instability, and evolving public values has changed the game. The board's responsibilities have not diminished—they've intensified.
3. **Experience matters.** The lessons in this book are not academic abstractions. They are rooted in practice, drawn from real cases, and honed under pressure. They reflect what works—and what doesn't—when everything is on the line.

Looking Ahead

The *Director's Crisis Playbook* is designed to give you more than information. It is meant to give you an edge. And it is written using the principles of Smart Brevity, a communication system created by the team at Axios to cut through noise and deliver clarity. Smart Brevity pares language down to its essentials: sharp, concise, and designed for busy leaders who need to absorb key insights quickly.

In short: this book is written with an economy that respects your time and a style that sharpens your focus.

When crises strike, hesitation costs. And can sometimes cost dearly. Boards that are ready—confident, principled, prepared—protect their organizations and fulfill their fundamental duty.

Let this book be your guide. 🌟