

When a secret tape of an executive meeting surfaced, Texaco was accused of racism. A memorable sound bite referred to African Americans as “black jelly beans” who were “glued to the bottom of the jar.” This study examines management’s response to this image crisis. Peter Bijur, chair of Texaco, disseminated six messages enacting four image restoration strategies: bolstering, corrective action, mortification, and shifting the blame. However, the blame was not transferred to an external entity but to a subgroup of the accused (a small group of employees characterized as “bad apples”). For this strategy to be effective, the target group must be identified and clearly distanced (separated) from the rhetor engaging in image repair.

## **THE TARNISHED STAR**

### **Restoring Texaco’s Damaged Public Image**

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For many years, Texaco’s public image was based on the catchy advertising jingle, “You can trust your car to the man who wears the star,” that created an image of a scrupulous, upright, and responsible company. In 1988, the company revised its image by marketing itself as “The Star of the American Road” (Goldman, 1995). By the spring of 1996, Texaco readied itself to launch a new ad campaign designed to create yet another, more modern, public image and to appeal to more specific consumer groups, including young African American drivers (Abcede, 1996). Ironically, Texaco did succeed in acquiring a new image, but not the one that it intended, that enhanced its public standing, and that appealed to its targeted group of potential new consumers. Instead, in November 1996, Texaco’s new image shouted “racism,” and some of the very demographic groups that the company most wanted to attract as customers were organizing boycotts against the company (Eichenwald, 1996d).

Prior to this event, allegations of racism at Texaco had been advanced,<sup>1</sup> but Texaco’s most serious image troubles began when



Richard A. Lundwall, a senior coordinator of personnel services, gave plaintiffs in the racial discrimination lawsuit a secret tape recording of a conversation between Lundwall and three other Texaco executives (Eichenwald, 1996b). The dialogue captured on tape was explosive. The plaintiffs' attorneys released it to the press, and *The New York Times* broke the story on November 4, 1996, including excerpts from the conversation (Eichenwald, 1996b). The most damaging comments on the tape involved the executives' references to African American employees as "black jelly beans" who were "glued to the bottom of the jar." The tape also revealed insensitivity toward two holidays: "I'm still having trouble with Hanukkah. Now we have Kwanzaa" (Eichenwald, 1996b, p. C4). Initial reports indicated that the inflammatory epithet "nigger" was used: "These [expletive] niggers, they [expletive] all over us with this" (Walsh, 1996a, p. A13). However, subsequent intensive analysis of the tapes (by consultants hired by Texaco) provided an alternative reading: "I mean, I lost Christmas, poor St. Nicholas, they [expletive (shit)] all over his beard" (Eichenwald, 1996c, p. D10). Although perhaps less damaging than the initial transcription, even this rendering is hardly flattering to Texaco, revealing as it does its executives' intolerance. As if the revelations of corporate racial epithets were not enough, transcripts of the conversations also revealed these executives' plans to destroy evidence that might help the plaintiffs' lawsuit.<sup>2</sup> These accusations constituted a serious threat to Texaco's image and its business (Eichenwald, 1996b).

The media widely disseminated these allegations of racism at Texaco. Dozens of articles were published in newspapers and news magazines throughout the country (e.g., France, 1996; "The Men Who Wear the Star," 1996; "Texaco Chairman," 1996; "Texaco: Lessons," 1996; Turque, 1996; White, 1996a, 1996b). The broadcast news networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC) devoted significant amounts of time to covering the story (*Vanderbilt News Archives Index*, 1996), and journalist Charlayne Hunter-Gault (1996) extensively interviewed African American former employees of Texaco on PBS's *News Hour*. The publicity regarding the accusations against Texaco was widespread and intensely negative.

Clearly, the potential damage to Texaco's image from these revelations was considerable as a firestorm of criticism erupted. Walsh (1996c) reported that "the giant oil company has been stung by a drop in its stock price, criticisms from international investors, and messages from individual consumers who say they will not buy Texaco products following reports . . . of the taped conversations" (p. A1). Peter I. Bijur (1996a), chair of Texaco, acknowledged the threat the tapes represented to Texaco's image when he said, "Texaco's reputation depends on the honesty, integrity and good judgment of us all." He admitted that, having received hostile e-mail from customers, he was eager "to get this behind us" (Sullivan & Fritsch, 1996, p. A2).

No company in contemporary America would want to face the situation confronting Texaco in this episode. As a society, we pride ourselves on, and value those who enact, tolerance and sensitivity to the feelings and traditions of others. Companies are being held accountable for their public and private actions as never before. Given the huge size of this company (\$35.6 billion in sales) (Walsh, 1996c), the severity of the accusations (corporate racism in the 1990s), and the high public profile of both the company and these charges, this controversy clearly deserves to be the subject of scholarly inquiry. How Texaco responded to accusations of racism—and whether its response was accepted or spurned—would help define corporate culture in the mid-1990s. A rhetorical analysis and criticism of Texaco's response to this crisis undoubtedly would contribute substantially to our understanding of corporate image repair discourse and corporate culture whether Texaco succeeded or failed in its image repair effort.

Accordingly, we apply the theory of image repair discourse to the messages created by Bijur in his attempts to salvage the company's seriously damaged public image. Analysis of Bijur's six messages reveals a fairly consistent use of image restoration strategies, although this defense clearly evolved over time. In fact, this case study affords an opportunity to examine two sets of messages, for some were aimed at employees and others at the general public. After a brief literature review and description of our method, we turn our attention to the rhetorical analysis.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW: IMAGE RESTORATION DISCOURSE**

When people, groups, and organizations are accused of objectionable behavior, reputations can be damaged. Image restoration rhetoric attempts to redress allegations or suspicions of wrongdoing. Benoit (1995a) articulates a theory of image restoration discourse based on previous work in communication (e.g., Burke, 1970; Rosenfield, 1968; Ware & Linkugel, 1973) and sociology (e.g., Scott & Lyman, 1968). Benoit argues that there are five general options available for self-defense, some with subdivisions: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Each of the five general approaches, along with appropriate subcategories, are discussed briefly (see Table 1).

#### **TYOLOGY**

Denial occurs in two basic variants: simple denial and shifting the blame. When using simple denial, the accused can deny performing the wrongful act or deny that the act occurred (Ware & Linkugel, 1973). A third variant has recently been recognized: deny that the act was harmful (Brinson & Benoit, 1996). Shifting the blame is another label for Burke's (1970) notion of "victimage" (or scapegoating), arguing that another party actually performed the offensive act.

An alleged offender uses evasion of responsibility as a repair strategy in an attempt to dodge or reduce responsibility for the wrongdoing (e.g., excuses). This strategy includes four subcategories: provocation, defeasibility, accidents, and good intentions. Provocation suggests that the wrongdoing was a response to previous wrongful acts that provoked the offender. Defeasibility argues that lack of information or control over events caused the wrongful act. The strategy called accidents points to unforeseeable circumstances as a self-defense strategy. Finally, the accused could use good intentions as an evasion strategy. This option presents the

**TABLE 1: Self-Defense Strategies**

<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Key Characteristic</i>	<i>Example</i>
<b>Denial</b>		
Simple denial	Did not perform act	Tylenol: did not poison capsule
Shift the blame	Another performed act	Tylenol: a "madman" poisoned capsules
<b>Evasion of responsibility</b>		
Provocation	Responded to act of another	Firm moved because of new taxes
Defeasibility	Lack of information or ability	Executive not told meeting changed
Accident	Mishap	Tree fell on tracks causing train wreck
Good intentions	Meant well	Sears wants to provide good auto repair service
<b>Reducing offensiveness of event</b>		
Bolstering	Stress good traits	Exxon's "swift and competent" cleanup of oil spill
Minimization	Act is not serious	Exxon: few animals killed in oil spill
Differentiation	Act is less offensive than similar acts	Sears: unneeded repairs were preventive maintenance, not fraud
Transcendence	More important values	Helping humans justifies testing animals
Attack accuser	Reduce credibility of accuser	Coke: Pepsi owns restaurants, competes directly with you for customers
Compensation	Reimburse victim	Disabled movie-goers given free passes after denied admission to movie
Corrective action	Plan to solve/prevent recurrence of problem	AT&T long-distance upgrades; promised to spend billions more to improve service
Mortification	Apologize	AT&T apologized for service interruption

SOURCE: Derived from Benoit (1995a, 1997b).

rhetor's praiseworthy motives as a way to reduce responsibility for a wrongful act.

The third major category involves reducing the offensiveness of events. Six subcategories are noted: bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attack accuser, and compensation.

Bolstering encourages the audience to have positive feelings about the offender. The idea is to offset negative feelings by describing positive characteristics of the offender. Minimization attempts to reduce the amount of negative affect from the wrongful act. The offensiveness of the act is reduced so that the audience views it as less harmful than it may have appeared initially. Differentiation attempts to separate the wrongful act from other similar but more abhorrent acts. This may reduce the negative feeling toward the questionable act; thus, negative feelings toward the offender are reduced. Transcendence tries to put the act in a broad, positive context to help improve the offender's image and includes appeals to other persons, values, or group loyalties. A fifth variant of reducing offensiveness of the event involves attacking the accuser. Rhetors can try to harm the attacker's credibility as an attempt to reduce the intensity of the attack. Finally, compensation is used when an offender offers to reimburse the victim of the offense. This strategy is used to help reduce the negative feelings arising from the failure event.

The fourth major strategy is corrective action, which attempts to repair existing damages and/or tries to prevent future recurrence of the wrongful act. A fifth major self-defense option is mortification. Mortification, discussed by Burke (1970), admits wrongful behavior, asks for forgiveness, and apologizes (*mea culpa*). Admitting guilt and showing regret can often lead the audience to pardon the wrongful act.

This typology has been employed to critically analyze public image repair efforts in a variety of contexts: corporate (Benoit, 1995a, 1995b; Benoit & Brinson, 1994; Benoit & Czerwinski, 1997; Brinson & Benoit, 1996), political (Benoit, 1995a; Benoit, Gullifor, & Panici, 1991; Benoit & Wells, 1998; Kennedy & Benoit, 1997), and entertainment (Benoit, 1997a; Benoit & Anderson, 1996; Benoit & Hanczor, 1994; Benoit & Nill, in press).<sup>3</sup> We use the theory of image restoration discourse here as the critical lens for our rhetorical analysis of Texaco's image repair discourse. Each author independently performed a close textual analysis of each of the texts, identifying the recurrent themes that enacted the image repair strategies in Texaco's image repair effort.<sup>4</sup> We illustrate this

view of the discourse with excerpts of Texaco's image repair efforts. Then we evaluate this discourse and discuss implications.

### **TEXACO'S RESPONSE: BIJUR ADDRESSES EMPLOYEES AND THE PUBLIC**

Appropriately, Bijur wasted no time in initiating a response to this threat. On the same day the article appeared in *The New York Times*, Bijur issued a news release (Texaco, 1996), mailed a letter to employees (Bijur, 1996a), and delivered a video address to employees (Bijur, 1996b). On the following day, Bijur (1996c) made a live appearance on ABC's *Nightline*. Two days after the story broke, he released another statement (Bijur, 1996d) regarding "allegations of employee misconduct," which was followed in 4 days by a statement (Bijur, 1996e) after a meeting with African American leaders. These six messages constitute the corpus of texts used to analyze the strategies Bijur used to restore Texaco's public image.

The analysis discusses several consistencies across these messages. However, Texaco's stance was somewhat fluid in that earlier statements paved the way for later developments (specifically in connection with the peculiar form of shifting the blame). Some strategies (e.g., mortification) do not appear in all messages. Thus, we analyze these messages chronologically to indicate how the defense evolved over time.

#### **NEWS RELEASE (NOVEMBER 4, 1996)**

Texaco's initial news release (Texaco, 1996) contains two image repair strategies: bolstering and corrective action. It does not attempt to deny the accusations, although neither does it admit them, framing remarks with a sharp qualification: "if these allegations are true."

*Bolstering.* The company repeatedly employs the strategy of bolstering. First, Texaco demonstrates the "proper" attitude of out-

rage, declaring in unequivocal terms that such behavior is improper, describing it as “unacceptable,” “deplorable,” and “outrageous” and asserting that it would “never be tolerated.” This language suggests that the company is appropriately offended by the alleged behavior.

Furthermore, the company explains that its policies, values, and principles are appropriate. Discriminatory behavior is prohibited by Texaco’s “clear and vigorously-enforced policies against discrimination”; discriminatory behavior violates the “company’s core values and principles.” Texaco “is committed to providing a work environment which reflects an understanding of diversity, and is free from all forms of discrimination, intimidation, and harassment.” Texaco maintains that “we are dedicated to equal opportunity in all aspects of employment and will not allow any violation of law or company policies.” All of these policies, values, and principles—if accepted by the audience—function to bolster Texaco’s image as a company that does not tolerate discrimination.

In response to the revelation that executives were conspiring to destroy evidence, Texaco bolstered its reputation as a law-abiding organization. “Texaco enforces strict policies regarding the retention and production of documents. If any documents related to this lawsuit were in fact concealed or destroyed, such conduct would constitute a clear violation of these policies.” Thus, the company policies in place prohibit such misbehavior.

*Corrective action.* Texaco’s first step was to investigate the allegations of misconduct. As Bijur stated in the news release, “Immediately upon learning of the allegations of misconduct, Texaco retained outside counsel, Michael Armstrong of Kirkpatrick and Lockhart, to conduct an extensive independent investigation to determine whether these allegations are true.” This action demonstrates that the company wants to learn the truth, a positive attitude. Furthermore, if the results of this inquiry support the allegation, Texaco promised to take corrective action. “It will take appropriate disciplinary action against the employees, which could include termination.” This promise of corrective action



could also discourage employees from engaging in further discriminatory behavior.

**BIJUR'S LETTER TO EMPLOYEES (NOVEMBER 4, 1996)**

Bijur's letter to Texaco employees (Bijur, 1996a) contains two clear strategies (bolstering and corrective action). It also provides the first indication of the unusual form of shifting blame. Again, the letter neither denies nor admits the accusations, continuing to qualify its remarks ("If [the allegations are] true").

*Bolstering.* Again, Bijur demonstrates an appropriate attitude. He declares that "this is a very sad day for Texaco." He reveals that he shares these sentiments: "I am deeply angered and saddened at the allegations." He ends the letter by declaring, "Let there be no mistake: there is no place for this kind of misconduct at Texaco." Thus, Texaco the company and Bijur the executive show the appropriate reaction to such charges. However, this statement lacks some of the emotionally charged language of the news releases ("deplorable," "outrageous").

This letter also describes Texaco's policies against discrimination. Bijur characterizes such behavior as a "direct violation of Texaco's long-standing core values and principles concerning respect for the individual and ethical behavior." He maintains that Texaco has a "commitment to maintain a work environment which is free from discrimination." However, in this letter, he does not discuss the charge of conspiring to destroy evidence.

*Corrective action.* Once again, Bijur's letter announces the fact that Texaco has initiated an investigation: "Texaco has retained outside counsel to immediately conduct an independent investigation to determine whether these allegations are true." The company wants to discover the truth. He informs his employees that "if the company finds that the alleged misconduct occurred, immediate disciplinary action will be taken against the employees involved. This action could include termination of employment." So, the company is actively investigating the accusations and promises to

take remedial action if appropriate. Bijur pointedly makes a personal pledge here: “My personal commitment to you is to intensify our efforts to eliminate this behavior from the workplace.” These statements serve to promise that misbehavior, if it occurred, would be discovered and punished.

*Shifting the blame.* Texaco had not denied the allegations of discriminatory behavior on the part of some of its executives. Thus, it is not appropriate to shift the blame (i.e., it makes little sense to attempt to shift the blame for an offensive act that it admitted it performed). However, Bijur distinguishes between company policies and the employees who execute them: “No matter how good our policies are, they are only as good as the people that implement them.” It is important to note that this utterance separates the good policies from the bad employees who carry them out and helps lay the groundwork for shifting the blame to those bad employees, if Texaco later decides that would help the company.

#### VIDEO MESSAGE FROM BIJUR TO EMPLOYEES (NOVEMBER 4, 1996)

This message (Bijur, 1996b), not surprisingly, is quite similar to Bijur’s letter to employees. It relies heavily on bolstering and corrective action. He expresses regret (mortification) and continues to lay the groundwork for shifting the blame.

*Bolstering.* Bijur expresses the proper attitude toward the accusations: “This is indeed a sad day for Texaco.” He explains that “we care about each and every employee—I care deeply.” Later, he declares that “the rank insensitivity demonstrated in the taped remarks reported in today’s *New York Times* deeply offends me.” Similarly, he maintains that “this alleged behavior does not represent the way this company feels about any of our employees.” So, Bijur demonstrates that the company is appropriately offended by discrimination.

The message also stresses that Texaco’s policies and values prohibit discrimination: “This alleged behavior violates our code of

conduct, our core values and the law.” He vows that “we will not tolerate disrespect or prejudice in this company. Anybody who behaves like this will not work for Texaco.” Once again, he makes a personal commitment: “We are determined to root out this type of behavior, and I am personally responsible and accountable to see that we succeed.”

*Corrective action.* Bijur notes that the company is investigating the charges, seeking the truth: “We have a special investigation conducted by independent counsel under way as we speak. Wherever the truth leads, that is where we’ll go.” If necessary, “appropriate disciplinary action, including termination, will be taken against employees who are involved.”

The video message also announces for the first time other forms of corrective action. “I have directed today that all of our diversity and equal employment opportunity programs to be reviewed and have instructed Dick Brenner, our head of Human Resources, to redouble our efforts with new programs to bring our employees back together.” This not only investigates potential discriminatory behavior but also attempts to intensify Texaco’s efforts to eliminate it.

*Mortification.* In the video message, Bijur explicitly refers to the victims of the alleged discrimination for the first time: “You must feel as sad and hurt as I do for our employees.” Bijur also explicitly expresses regret: “I am sorry for our employees and both ashamed and outraged that such a thing happened to the Texaco family.” Thus, Bijur expresses regret for the alleged behavior as well as sympathy for affected employees.

*Shifting the blame.* Bijur continues the conceptual process of separating the offending employees from the general Texaco population. Although couched in the terms of “alleged behavior,” the Texaco chair is quick to assert that this “behavior does not represent the way this company feels about any of our employees” and thereby separates the offensive remarks made by the executives as out of touch with mainstream company attitudes.

**STATEMENTS BY BIJUR DURING NIGHTLINE  
INTERVIEW (NOVEMBER 5, 1996)**

Restoring a company's image for its own employees is a noteworthy goal, but the bottom line on the spreadsheet requires that the public must be targeted for image restoration messages as well. Bijur (1996c) attempts this goal in a live appearance on ABC's *Nightline*. Mirroring the strategies used in the employee messages, Bijur uses mortification, bolstering, and corrective action. Bijur also implements the unusual form of shifting the blame, which is found in previous messages in which he blames a small group of bad employees.

*Bolstering.* By creating an image of a company victimized by a few employees, Bijur turns his attention to bolstering the accomplishments of the majority of employees. He assures Ted Koppel and, by extension, the American public that "in Texaco there is no corporate culture that precludes or prohibits women or minorities from moving up in the corporation" and asserts that "we have excellent statistics with respect to women and minorities who are moving up in our company . . . and our employees believe firmly in the importance of women and minorities rising through the corporation." In so doing, he attempts to offset the negative impressions created by the tapes by promoting the image of the equal-opportunity workplace.

Bijur expresses laudable sentiments, exclaiming that "it's outrageous that any employee of the company would say the kinds of things that employees on that tape said. We consider it to be intolerable." Later, Bijur reiterates this sentiment: "It is incredible . . . that any managers or executives within our company have the gall, the intolerance, the insensitivity, to say the things that they said." Clearly, he portrays the company as possessing appropriate attitudes.

*Corrective action.* During the *Nightline* interview, Bijur promises to take corrective action in a variety of areas. First, he promises that Texaco will "do everything in our power to heal the painful wounds that the reckless behavior of those involved have inflicted

on all of us.” Calling the behavior “reckless” implies that it is not condoned by the company. Bijur similarly promises to take corrective action specifically for African American employees. At the outset of the broadcast, three African American female former employees were shown explaining their experiences at Texaco. Bijur responds that

I am going to do everything in my power within this company to root [the kind of behavior exhibited toward those women] out. We are going to take steps immediately within the company to see to it that every individual who works for us understands that [that kind of behavior is] not tolerated within Texaco.

Finally, he assures viewers that “we’re going to do everything we can to eradicate prejudice within our company.” He explicitly states the actions he will take to correct the problem.

Finally, Koppel questions Bijur about the corrective action he plans to take regarding the antidiscrimination lawsuit, to which the Texaco chair responds, “Clearly injustices were done and we are exploring every possible opportunity to put this behind us and begin the healing process within our company.” Dissatisfied with this response, Koppel pushes Bijur until Bijur admits that he wants to settle the lawsuit, clearly signaling his willingness to take one of the ultimate corrective actions in this particular case study.

*Mortification.* Going a bit further than his earlier expression of regret, during the *Nightline* interview Bijur explicitly apologizes for the comments made by the executives. “I want to apologize not only to our African American employees and the minorities in our company, but to all African Americans that there are in this great nation of ours.” The target audiences for this apology are consistent with the intended audiences for all of the restorative strategies: both employees and the public.

*Shifting the blame.* One of Bijur’s most important aims was to separate the offending executives from the mainstream Texaco “family.” Rhetors may attempt to repair their public image by shifting the blame to others and making them responsible for the offen-

sive act. President Richard Nixon attempted this strategy by blaming his subordinates (Benoit, 1982), just as Exxon attempted to blame Captain Hazelwood for the *Valdez* ecological disaster (Benoit, 1995a). Neither was very effective. In the case of the Texaco tapes, the company also appeared to have been caught red-handed, and most of the restoration strategies would be ineffective unless Bijur can provide a means of separating the few “bad” employees from the majority of “good” employees. Shifting blame alone does not work, as demonstrated by the Nixon (Benoit, 1982) and Exxon (Benoit, 1995a) case studies. Although Bijur can shift the blame to the bad employees, Texaco would remain the focus of critical attention, just as Nixon and Exxon continued to receive attention. Consequently, it is vital to distinguish, or separate, the four offending executives from the rest of the company.

Bijur employs the strategy of shifting blame several times during the *Nightline* interview. He refers to the executives as “a few rotten apples,” emphasizing both the nature of their characters as well as their numbers within the company. He adds that “this is an unbelievably incredible situation for our company, our employees, our African American employees in particular.” Bijur clearly separates the executives from the majority of the Texaco employees. In other words, he asserts that the company itself was innocent of wrongdoing; it neither performed nor condoned the executives’ comments. Having successfully created a clear division between the bad employees and the good, Bijur argues that the company as a whole should not be held accountable for the actions of the “few rotten apples.”

**STATEMENT BY BIJUR ON ALLEGATIONS  
OF EMPLOYEE MISCONDUCT (NOVEMBER 6, 1996)**

This statement by Bijur (1996d) contains four image repair strategies, all of which are consistent with prior statements: bolstering, corrective action, mortification, and shifting blame.

*Bolstering.* Bijur explains that now he has listened to the tapes, and “the statements on the tapes arouse a deep sense of shock and anger among all the members of the Texaco family and decent peo-

ple everywhere.” He expresses his attitude that such statements are inappropriate: “They are statements that represent attitudes we hoped and wished had long ago disappeared entirely from the landscape of our country—and certainly from our company.” Bijur explicitly declares that “we believe unequivocally it is utterly reprehensible to deny another human of his or her self-respect and dignity because of race, color, religion or sex.” Furthermore, he reports that “I spoke and wrote to all of Texaco’s employees, denouncing the alleged behavior in the strongest possible terms.” So, Texaco displays an appropriate attitude toward discrimination.

Bijur explains that these utterances violate the company’s values and policies:

They are statements that represent a profound contempt not only for the law, not only for Texaco’s explicitly clear values and policies, but, even more importantly, for the most fundamental standards of fairness, of mutual respect, and of human decency.

In this statement, Bijur for the first time quotes Texaco’s policies:

Texaco’s statement of our core values is very clear. It says, “Each person deserves to be treated with respect and dignity in appropriate work environments without regard to race, religion, sex, national origin, disability or position in the company. Each employee has the responsibility to demonstrate respect for others.”

He also explains that there can be no doubt that everyone who works for Texaco is aware of these policies: “Every employee signs our guidelines each year acknowledging that they have read them, understood them, and are in compliance with them.” Texaco’s values and policies prohibit discrimination.

Bijur also briefly bolsters Texaco’s image on the question of the other accusation, conspiring to destroy evidence of a potential crime: “And it is absolutely deplorable and intolerable to evade the laws of this land.” This topic is not elaborated further.

*Corrective action.* Bijur again reports that Texaco lost no time in conducting an investigation to discover the truth. Here, he mentions that it is an “independent” investigation: “As soon as we heard

about these allegations, we immediately hired Michael Armstrong as outside counsel to conduct an independent investigation to determine whether the allegations were true." Bijur explains that the company has already begun to take action against the offending employees. The two who were currently employees "are both being suspended today pending completion of the investigation, which will be accomplished promptly." Two others are now retired, and Bijur notes that "we believe there is sufficient cause to withdraw benefits. Pending the outcome of the independent outside investigation, further financial or other penalties may be imposed." Thus, Texaco is acting swiftly to punish these transgressions.

However, Bijur does not stop at announcing punishments for past deeds. In a lengthy passage, he explains six additional corrective actions to eliminate discrimination at Texaco:

One—senior executives from Texaco will visit every major company location in the U.S. to meet with our people. Their mission will be to apologize to them for the embarrassment and humiliation this has created. We want them to understand both our personal embarrassment and our firm resolve to ensure that nothing like this ever happens again at Texaco.

Two—we will gather employees together immediately to refocus on our core values and on what we each need to do to create a workplace free of intolerance. It will be a time of reflection and a time for taking personal accountability for actions and attitudes.

Three—we are expanding our diversity learning experience to include all employees, in addition to our managers and supervisors. This two-day seminar, in which I have already participated, along with the senior officers of the company, focuses on both the intent and the impact of personal behavior on peers, teams and the organization overall.

Four—we will reemphasize the critical importance of our confidential Ethics Hotline as a vital tool for reporting any behavior—any behavior—that violates our core values, policies or the law. Calls may be made anonymously, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. We are extending this service to a broader list of countries outside of the U.S.

Fifth—I have today asked Judge A. Leon Higgenbotham of the New York law firm of Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison to work side by side with us to assure that the company's human relationship policies and practices are consistent with the highest stan-



dards of respect for the individual and to assure that the company treats all its employees with fundamental fairness. . . . [Higgenbotham's qualifications follow.]

Sixth—we are also creating a special committee of our Board of Directors, to be headed by John Brademas, President Emeritus of New York University. This committee will be charged with reviewing our company's diversity programs in their entirety—at every level within our company.

This rather extensive list of corrective actions seems clearly designed to assure that Texaco reduces if not eliminates discriminatory behavior among its employees. As such, it should help show that Texaco is attempting to prevent the recurrence of this behavior.

*Mortification.* Unlike the statements issued 2 days earlier, this one does not hold out the possibility that the allegations might be unfounded—there is no “if true” qualification when the accusations are mentioned. In fact, Bijur reports that “our review of the tapes has made it clear to us that these values and policies have been violated.” Furthermore, Bijur's statement ends with an explicit apology to affected employees:

I want to offer an apology . . . to our fellow employees who were rightly offended by these statements; to men and women of all races, creeds and religions in this country; and to people throughout America and elsewhere around the world: I am sorry for this incident; I pledge to you that we will do everything in our power to heal the painful wounds that the reckless behavior of those involved have inflicted on all of us; and I look forward to the day we are all striving for when the attitudes in question are consigned to a sorrowful chapter of our past—and that we have created for our future, within the very soul of Texaco, a company of limitless opportunity and utmost respect for every man and woman amongst us.

This statement acknowledges wrongdoing and demonstrates that Texaco is willing to accept responsibility for its misdeeds.

*Shifting the blame.* Bijur indirectly separates the offending executives in this statement. First, he reveals that “the tapes made it

clear to us that [Texaco's] values and policies have been violated" and that the "four individuals involved" either have been suspended or have had their retirement benefits withdrawn. Notice that these actions physically separate the offending executives from the rest of the corporation. Similarly, he later asserts in this message that "fundamentally, we don't believe the statements and actions on the tapes are representative of Texaco." Unlike previous statements in which Bijur specifically castigated the executives, this approach is less direct in referring to a scapegoat. He also asserts that discriminatory actions are atypical or only true of a few employees.

**TEXACO STATEMENT FOLLOWING MEETINGS WITH  
AFRICAN AMERICAN LEADERS (NOVEMBER 12, 1996)**

This statement contains three strategies: bolstering, corrective action, and shifting blame. Each is illustrated with excerpts from the text (Bijur, 1996e). We also note points that seem conspicuously absent from this statement.

*Bolstering.* Bijur explains the nature of Texaco's aim: "Our goal is to eradicate this kind of thinking wherever and however it is found in our company. And our challenge is to make Texaco a company of limitless opportunity for all men and women." This utterance clearly functions to bolster the company's image as a proponent of diversity in Texaco's workplace.

Second, Bijur broadens the context of his discussion beyond the bounds of Texaco. He explains that the company has wider antidiscrimination goals:

We also want to broaden economic access to Texaco for minority firms, and increase the positive impact our investments can have in the minority community. In areas such as hiring and promotion, in professional services such as advertising, banking, investment management, accounting, legal and others, in wholesale and retail station ownership and other areas, the counsel of the leaders I have met with today and others can help Texaco establish a track record of progress in which we can all take pride.

This statement also obviously functions to bolster the company's prodiversity image by referring to relationships with minority firms.

*Corrective action.* In this statement, Bijur does not go into detail discussing the specifics of the company's corrective action. However, he does mention it, bringing it to the table:

I've already announced a number of steps to start us on this mission, and we are exploring still others. We are reaching out, in meetings like today's, for ideas and perspectives that will help Texaco succeed in our mission of becoming a model of diversity and workplace equality.

This utterance reminds the audience of Texaco's extensive list of proposed corrective action.

*Shifting the blame.* As in the statement of November 6, 1996 (Bijur, 1996d), Bijur attempts to separate the offending executives from the larger Texaco population. "In any organization of 27,000 people worldwide, unfortunately, there are bound to be people with unacceptable attitudes toward race, gender and religion." Here, he provides some details, revealing that Texaco has 27,000 employees. Although he does not make explicit the final step in the enthymematic argument, the clear implication is that four offenders out of 27,000 employees is a very small problem. It is possible that he did not elaborate this claim because the obvious response is that these four were not ordinary employees, but high-level management personnel.

*What's missing?* In his strategies of bolstering, Bijur does not repeat earlier statements that stress the company's positive attitude. He does not express sadness or regret for the discriminatory behavior of his employees toward other employees. It seems odd that he offers no details of the company's extensive program of corrective action. Although this topic need not be extensively discussed, some more details would have been useful. Finally, Bijur omits the apology that is present in his previous statement.

**EVOLUTION OF TEXACO'S IMAGE REPAIR DISCOURSE**

Analysis of these texts reveals that Texaco's defense progresses through a gradual but clear evolution over time. Initially, the very existence of the problem was qualified, for the company promised action "if [the accusations] are true." The initial messages promised corrective action consisting of an investigation to determine if a problem actually existed. In the second message, Texaco began laying the groundwork for the shifting-the-blame/separation strategy, suggesting that good employees followed company policy, whereas bad employees might not. By the time of the *Nightline* interview, Bijur expressed his desire to "heal the painful wounds" caused by "reckless behavior," acknowledging that the problem is no longer hypothetical and that corrective action will be taken beyond mere investigations. Separation emerged as he referred to the "few rotten apples" in the company's barrel. On November 4, 1996, Texaco expressed regret (mortification) over the taped remarks, conceding at least part of the accusations, and promised to "root out" such wrongful behavior. By November 6, Bijur had moved on to outlining six explicit forms of corrective action. Corrective action also had extended to punishing the employees involved. By the November 12 statement, Bijur was earnestly proclaiming his desire for "ending this kind of [racist] thinking." Thus, this image repair effort—and, in particular, his acknowledgment of the accusations, separation, and corrective action—clearly evolved over time. Some might assume that this kind of shifting defense is improper, indicating a shifting story. However, it is perfectly reasonable, for example, for Texaco to determine the existence and nature of the problem before taking action. This would necessitate an evolutionary approach as the facts came out.

Interestingly enough, our analysis did not reveal any important differences between the two messages for Texaco employees and the four messages for the public. Given that all six of these messages were published on Texaco's World Wide Web page, this consistency may well have been intentional, meant to help dispel the suspicion that Texaco's private messages are usually different from its public messages of nondiscrimination. After all, the secretly taped messages that created this controversy were an example of

private utterances at odds with Texaco's public policy. Consistency in these image repair messages to employees and to the public is not proof that the company condemns racism in other private messages (like the ones captured on tape), but the consistency of these messages subtly works to discredit those suspicions. If this consistency was intentional, it was a wise decision.

### EVALUATION: A SUCCESSFUL CAMPAIGN

Texaco settled the racial discrimination lawsuit (Eichenwald, 1996c), making good on Bijur's desire to "put this behind us." Along with this important legal action, Texaco used discourse to repair its damaged reputation. Synthesized into a single message, Bijur's and Texaco's fundamental approach to the attacks of racism was the following: We are a terrific company (bolstering), we will not tolerate discrimination in the future (corrective action), we are sorry (mortification), and any wrongdoing was performed by a few "bad apples" (shifting blame). These strategies—along with Texaco's decision to settle the discrimination litigation—were very effective in quelling both media attention and public condemnation of the company. After only a few weeks, the allegations of racism, which had occupied newspaper headlines and television news across the country, disappeared. Boycotts were called off, criticism trickled off, and the crisis was averted. Texaco sales had never suffered from the boycott, although "it was a public relations nightmare for Texaco" (Walsh, 1996b, p. E1). Texaco stock, around \$99.60 before *The New York Times* story on November 4, 1996 (Eichenwald, 1996e), dropped to as low as \$94.50 during the crisis (Eichenwald, 1996a) but had rebounded to \$108.38 in January of 1997 ("Company News," 1997). This is not to say that Texaco had managed to eradicate all suspicion of corporate racism, but the firestorm of criticism that erupted had passed by, leaving Texaco largely intact. The company had successfully weathered the storm.

When *The New York Times* story broke, Bijur appropriately took the offensive and immediately responded to both the public and Texaco employees. Unable to hear the tapes firsthand at that point,

he nonetheless declared that the “alleged” behavior was unacceptable and pledged corrective action. In a society in which the public is accustomed to hearing automatic denials—or obvious equivocation (see Tyler, 1997)—from corporate and government leaders, it was unusual to hear Texaco’s chair respond directly and responsibly. Throughout the controversy, Bijur continued to promise corrective action, and to his credit, he followed up on his pledge. The notion that crisis communication should respond immediately and forcefully is hardly new, but it is worth emphasizing.

In later messages, Bijur repeatedly apologized for the behavior of the four executives, again an unusual move given our leaders’ general refusal to take responsibility for their own actions, much less the actions of others. As Tyler (1997) argues, “Not apologizing incurs public anger and disgust” (p. 59). Although acknowledging that concerns over potential litigation could override image concerns, Benoit (1997b) argues that “a company that is at fault should probably admit this immediately” and engage in mortification (p. 183). He also suggests that “it can be extremely important to report plans to correct and/or prevent recurrence of the problem” (p. 184; see, e.g., Benoit & Brinson’s 1994 analysis of AT&T’s use of these strategies). The use of both corrective action and mortification was effective in reconstructing Texaco’s positive image. Of course, Tyler (1997) also notes that “apologizing incurs legal liability” (p. 59), but given Texaco’s decision to settle the lawsuit, it could avoid the dilemma she identifies. Although Tyler is correct in noting that legal concerns may outweigh image considerations (and often encourage equivocation) in some situations, Texaco demonstrated that mortification (apology) and corrective action can work well together.

This analysis has revealed an unusual twist in the form of shifting the blame that we label *separation*. This strategy argues that the company is innocent of wrongdoing and identifies a target, the “truly guilty” bad employees. However, the more typical form of shifting blame (e.g., Tylenol’s successful attempt to shift the blame for poisoned capsules to a madman; see Benoit & Lindsey, 1987) diverts the blame to another person, group, organization, or company. Shifting the blame diverts responsibility away from the ac-

cused precisely because another person or entity is “really” responsible for the offensive act.

The strategy we have labeled *separation* has been observed in other research on crisis communication. Hearit (1994) argued that Toshiba used a form of dissociation (individual/group) when it blamed a subsidiary: “In effect, the dissociation transfers the guilt from Toshiba Corporation to its subsidiary” (p. 120). In another instance, Domino’s attempted to blame “unsafe drivers, not an unsafe delivery policy” for accidents made during deliveries (Hearit, 1995, p. 8). Hearit (1994) explains that dissociations “redefine understanding of the crisis landscape to a terminology more favorable to the organization” (p. 121). Hobbs (1995) examined Toshiba’s attempt to distance itself from its subsidiary, Toshiba Machine (which had illegally sold submarine propeller technology to the Soviet Union). He argued that the company argued “that the parent is different from the child and, thus, the parent should not be held responsible for the actions of the child” (p. 241). However, the conditions for successful use of separation (or dissociation) have yet to be articulated. In fact, we believe that because separation does not transfer the blame to a distinct scapegoat, it must be used carefully.

Although it has some similarities to shifting the blame, separation is more difficult to use because the target of blame is part of the entity that is claiming innocence. Contrast the Texaco situation with the case of the poisoning of Tylenol capsules (Benoit & Lindsey, 1987). Tylenol could, and did, shift the blame to a “madman” for whom the company bore no responsibility. However, Texaco hired, trained, promoted, and supervised these executives. This situation is similar to Exxon’s unsuccessful attempt to shift the blame for the *Valdez* oil spill to Captain Hazelwood, whom the company hired, trained, and supervised (see Benoit, 1995a). Similarly, a weakness in Nixon’s Watergate defense was his attempt to shift the blame to a hand-picked top adviser, John Dean (Benoit, 1982). Thus, for separation to be maximally effective, three conditions seem crucial.

First, the company should establish (as Texaco attempted to do with much of its bolstering) that the rogue employees were violating company policy. Texaco had clear antidiscriminatory policies

in place, which the employees flouted. Second, the “bad apples” (who were few in number) should not only be symbolically but physically separated from the company (i.e., terminated, denied retirement benefits). Third, the company should take action to discourage future violations of its established policy (corrective action). Notice that in this instance, unlike Exxon, Texaco met all three of these conditions for the successful use of separation. Practitioners, theorists, and critics alike can benefit from an understanding of the conditions that are essential for successful use of separation.

Every option has some costs, or potential downside. Of course, use of this strategy requires the company to admit that the “bad apples” committed the wrongful act (the first condition), so separation cannot be used in conjunction with denial. This kind of admission could open the door to lawsuits or governmental inquiry and regulation (if they are not already under way). If the employees who are punished (in the second condition) were not really flouting explicit company policy against the wrongful action, sanctions against the guilty “bad apples” could seriously threaten the morale of other employees who remain with the company. Finally, if the company fails to discourage more wrongdoing (the third condition), those future transgressions could be even more damaging to the company’s image.

## CONCLUSION

When faced with damaging evidence of executive racism (and conspiracy to destroy evidence), Texaco took swift and relatively effective action. It used bolstering, corrective action, mortification, as well as a new form of shifting the blame, separation. Separation seeks to place the blame on a small part of the organization that can be separated from the remaining (and good) part of the organization; separation requires three particular conditions for successful use. The analysis of Bijur’s statements reveals how he prepared the way for separation in earlier statements. He also supported this



strategy with an appropriate group of strategies: bolstering, corrective action, and mortification. Together, these image repair strategies, along with its decision to settle litigation on racial discrimination, helped control the damage to Texaco's image.

There are several implications from this analysis. First, we identify three conditions for successful use of separation: the organization should show that the offensive action violated company policy, the scapegoats must be physically and symbolically separated from the organization, and corrective action must be instituted to prevent future violations of company policy. Texaco successfully met all three conditions. Second, this analysis reinforces the importance of mortification and corrective action in image repair discourse. Third, we argued that Texaco was able to use mortification and corrective action effectively because it was willing to settle the lawsuit. If Texaco had wanted to continue to fight the legal battle, using these strategies would have been a liability. Finally, it shows the importance of taking swift and forceful action (cf. Exxon in the *Valdez* oil spill in Benoit, 1995a).

Four months after the image crisis ended, Bijur (1997) delivered a speech to members of the oil industry during which he commented on his ordeal. The Texaco chair echoed the sentiment that he was personally troubled by the incident. He added that, during the crisis, it was important to put the incident "behind us" and, more important, to get out of the spotlight right away. The image restoration strategies he chose were very effective at both getting Texaco out of the spotlight and escaping with a damaged—but not thoroughly destroyed—public image.

## NOTES

1. An insider's perspective on the allegations of corporate racism at Texaco can be found in Roberts and White (1998).

2. Robert Ulrich and Richard Lundwall were eventually acquitted of obstructing justice ("Jury Acquits," 1998).

3. Benoit (1997b) argues that

there are differences in the repair efforts of individuals and companies. For example, firms might use different strategies than individuals, or employ them in dif-

ferent configurations. Firms might bring greater resources to image repair efforts than individuals. Attorneys may recommend that their companies eschew certain strategies to minimize the risks of litigation. (p. 177)

He concludes, however, that "the basic options are the same for both individual and corporate image repair efforts" (p. 177).

4. Although we identified some strategies as more prominent than others, we did not feel a quantitative content analysis would be appropriate for this critical analysis.

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