



TEMIN AND COMPANY

REPUTATION MATTERS

# JUDGING JUDGMENT:

How Can Leaders Know  
Whose Advice to Trust in  
Crisis Situations

[www.TeminandCompany.com](http://www.TeminandCompany.com)

## JUDGING JUDGMENT:

### HOW CAN LEADERS KNOW WHOSE ADVICE TO TRUST IN CRISIS SITUATIONS?

**“What were they thinking? Who were they listening to?”** we asked ourselves as we watched the three university Presidents face a searing Congressional inquisition on anti-Semitism at their institutions — harming not only their credibility and that of their universities, but causing two of them to leave their positions.

While the Presidents of MIT, University of Pennsylvania, and Harvard gave strong, elegant and convincing opening statements — all of which seemed strikingly similar — their advantage was dissipated during the questioning, which was notable for its toughness, but also for pushing the Presidents into a trap that was almost impossible to escape.

#### THE ULTIMATE NO-WIN SITUATION

‘Yes or no’ they were told to answer by Representative Elise Stefanik, did the cries of “Intifada” on their campuses — taken to mean death to Israel and Jews

— constitute bullying and harassment, and were thus against the rules of their universities?

The Presidents were basically asked the impossible question of the decade on college campuses — to choose between free speech and the banishment of hate speech that calls for violence. The question demanded strong, emotionally intelligent but institutionally decisive answers. And absolutely everyone knew that the question was coming. The need was for real answers, not verbal gamesmanship. Yet, the Presidents just were not prepared to answer the questions decisively and resonantly; they kept reverting back to the idea that there was no one answer — such bullying had to be taken “in context.”

But “it depends,” is hardly an emotionally satisfying response for those seeking moral clarity and simplicity. ‘It depends’ not only doesn’t work, it infuriates. And the Presidents’ advisors should have told them that, in the preparation. Instead, it appears the advisors may actually have counseled such answers... Clearly the preparation was not sufficient for the task.

(My general advice: when in doubt, when in an intractable situation, go human first, and deal with the specifics later.)

## WHOSE ADVICE DID THE PRESIDENTS TAKE, AND WHY?

So, whose advice did the Presidents take? Who did they choose to listen to and trust in the breach? And why? Was it because the advice confirmed everything they believed themselves; because they were forced to use the same advisors that their biggest donors trust and use; or because their fields of vision were just too narrowly focused on the academy, and not the rest of society over which they still have great influence?

**As a leader, you are only as good as the worst advice you take. And the art of figuring out how to judge judgement can make all the difference to the performance of a Corporate CEO, College President, or political contender.**

Later it [was revealed](#) that the same law firm had advised both Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania, and had met at least once with MIT. Moreover since one of the Presidents is a legal scholar and all are research-driven, in all probability they all agreed and “spoke the same language.” But that’s not necessarily the same language as Congress, or the American people relate to.

On the most evolved corporate boards, they appoint a different director as the “critic” for each meeting. That director’s job is to challenge every decision made; to stress test the proceedings so that group think does not take over. It seems to me that this is an important role for every crisis advisor to play, as well.

## THE TONE-DEAF CLUB

But, the Presidents’ performance was not a total outlier. With their tone-deaf responses to the Committee’s challenges, these Presidents joined a Club made up of corporate, educational and governmental leaders that you would never want to be a part of, including:

**Michael Dukakis**, who, when asked in a Presidential Debate if he would still be against the death penalty if his dear wife had just been raped and murdered, gave the most dryly academic and unemotional response as to why he would still be against it. Many say this example of ultimate sangfroid helped cost him the election.

Also in the Club, is the former CEO of BP, **Tony Hayward**, who when asked about the Deepwater Horizon oil-spill disaster in the US Gulf, where 11 men died, said, “There’s no one who wants

this over more than I do. I want my life back...”

Almost no one in the Tone-Deaf Club survives their missteps.

## LISTENING TO THE WRONG ADVISORS

What each Club member forgot, as the heat was turned up, was that they are moral leaders and role models first, and organizational leaders second. That needed to be understood and lived up to, even if they had to give up their legally exact definitions — for the moment. The primacy of their moral centers would, in the end, make them even better leaders.

And if they forget, their advisors should have reminded them. Instead, these leaders each made a cardinal mistake of leadership — they did not know who to listen to, they doubled down on their own preferences, they picked the wrong advisors, and they took the wrong advice to heart.

**There is an art and skill to choosing the right advisors that can be learned, to leaders’ advantage.**

In the second of this two-part series, I discuss the “**11 attributes**” leaders can and must consider in order to judge

judgment and choose the right counsel, from the most trustworthy of advisors.

---

Originally published in [\*“Reputation Matters” on Forbes.com\*](#)

## About Temin and Company

Temin and Company Incorporated creates, enhances, and saves reputations.

Temin and Company also markets by leveraging the expertise, ideas and insight of its clients to produce differentiated intellectual capital and content.

The firm helps corporations, professional services firms, and other institutions define and strengthen their public image – and their bottom line – through strategic marketing; branding; media relations; thought leadership; social media; speaker, media and leadership coaching; financial communications; and crisis and reputation management.

Strategists, coaches, writers, and social media experts are available “25/8” to assure that every crisis is addressed, and every opportunity leveraged.

Clients include the CEOs and Boards of some of the world’s largest and most well-known corporations, financial institutions, portfolio companies, pharma and biotech companies, law firms, consulting firms, publishing houses, venture capital and private equity firms, authors, politicians, and colleges and universities.