

Crisis Experts Tout Need for Ethical Leadership

February 21, 2011 11:15 AM Mark Miester
newwave@tulane.edu

Having a well-defined code of ethics may not prevent every crisis, but according to one of the speakers at this year's Burkenroad Symposium on Business and Society, it helps prevent those crises that do occur from becoming worse.



At the Burkenroad Institute symposium, consultant Gael O'Brien talks about the importance of ethical leadership in a time of crisis. (Photos by Cheryl Gerber)

"Ethical leadership is one of the ways of keeping problems problems before they become catastrophes," said Gael O'Brien, principal of the consulting firm Strategic Opportunities Group and a columnist for *Business Ethics* magazine.

The importance of ethical leadership was a central theme of this year's program, entitled "Honor in the Face of Fire: Turning Crisis Into Opportunity." The annual symposium, presented by the Burkenroad Institute at the [A. B. Freeman School of Business](#), took place on Friday (Feb. 18) in the Lavin-Bernick Center on the uptown campus.

In addition to O'Brien, presenters included Anjali Sheffrin, a research professor with the [Tulane Energy Institute](#), and Robert Ulmer, a professor at the University of Arkansas and an internationally recognized expert in crisis communications.



Avoid spin and always tell the truth, says Robert Ulmer, a crisis communications expert.

As market monitor during the California energy crisis, Sheffrin was the regulator who determined that companies like Enron were manipulating the market to drive up prices.

California's wholesale electricity market was praised as a model of innovation when it was introduced, but Sheffrin said none of the individuals involved in creating the system questioned the assumptions at its core.

"Always question the fundamental assumptions people are making," Sheffrin said. "If people had questioned those assumptions, we might have prevented some of the damage."

Ulmer closed out the symposium by emphasizing the importance of ethical communication during times of crisis. First and foremost, he said, organizations should avoid spin and always tell the truth.

"Lawsuits come back years and years later, and if you have to start to think, what did I say again, that's where you start to look silly," he said. "That's why values are crucial to organizational responses."

Mark Miester is senior editor in the A. B. Freeman School of Business and editor of Freeman magazine.