

IPR Alexander Hamilton Medal.

Björn Edlund, Nov. 21, 2013

Dear friends

Heartfelt thanks to the Institute for Public Relations. I am humbled, grateful and proud.

I dedicate this medal to my wife, Veronika, who unfortunately couldn't be here. For more than 40 years she has been, as the song says, "the wind beneath my wings".

I am happy that our daughter Rebekka is here tonight. In her early teens, she spotted the first moose I ever shot. It is cool she is here for another significant trophy moment.

Professionally, I first tip my hat to Tony Dyson, who in 1989 hired me into his agency in Zurich. In the three years I worked for him, he taught me PR consultancy. Tony and I have found ways to work together ever since.

I salute Harold Burson: his generosity of spirit and great gift of friendship. Harold's way of practicing PR, his wise advice and profound observations make our work seem truly worthwhile.

I thank the 11 CEOs I worked for. They allowed me and my teams to carve out space and play in it. And I thank my teams – for having played so well. This is their medal, too.

Last but not least, I thank Richard Edelman. In his great, vibrant firm, I have the privilege to work with people I like on things I care about.

Looking back, briefly. How did I get here, and what – if anything – have I learned?

When Veronika and I met in 1972, I wrote her a song. It began "The cat it has nine lives. I have only one. The best way to waste it is so hard to find." To me, it seems that I did find a good way – or, it found me.

After taking an education degree and teaching school in Switzerland for a year to prove that I could feed my family, my work life really began in journalism, in 1977.

I had 12 years with UPI and Reuters as a foreign correspondent, bureau chief and news editor in Eastern and Western Europe, and Latin America.

The news agency years taught me good lessons.

- How to be a boss.
- How to keep my eye on the story.
- How to plan ahead without knowing what was about to happen.

- How to help others navigate uncertainty with confidence, most often real but sometimes really just a brave front.
- How to listen for what was not being said.
- How to see what was not being shown.
- How to say what no one really wants to hear, but they needed to hear. I learned that working in dangerous countries. In the highly political indoor sport of business, that, too, proved to be a useful skill.
- And how to trust the process of writing as a way to think through problems.

I also learned by doing what reporters do – observe, listen and reflect – that any group really wants to be led.

- Reflection number one. In my view, PR at its most ambitious is about how to lead. It is the job of PR to help leaders meet that deep-seated human need of groups to be included, engaged, inspired and rallied towards a shared goal.

So, *how* do we as heads of communications help leaders lead?

First and foremost, we help leaders think things through. We add context, depth, nuance and contrarian views to often very linear decision-making processes.

A CCO's job is about culture, brand, purpose, reputation, the narrative, and stakeholder engagement. It is about how to shape behaviors, both our behaviors and that of others.

Grappling with those tasks in the force field of a corporation's societal interaction is hugely energizing. There are many moving pieces, much uncertainty and many notions that need definition, through clear thinking and clear writing.

I can't say it often enough. Writing is key. It helps you think and it helps you lead. As the German literary critic Walter Benjamin said: "speech conquers thought – writing commands it".

At best, the work could make me feel like a pathfinder, mapmaker, trailblazer, and road-builder. At worst, I simply felt lost. But I would keep that to myself until we had plotted a way forward.

I probably grew most in the situations when I deeply disagreed with the CEOs but was compelled to understand their priorities, and to faithfully act on them.

In all this, of course I missed journalism. The thing I missed most is the banter. Reporters and photographers have a light-hearted yet fiercely intense approach to their work.

Theirs is a clear-eyed view on the mess that power will leave behind if it moves carelessly through society. The good ones also maintain distance to folk in power.

- Reflection number 2. As CCOs, we can use some of that distance as we learn to find our way. We must also balance the rush to facts of our business colleagues with our own intuitive understanding that facts alone won't make it work.

Epictetus, a first century Greek thinker, said, "It is not facts that govern our society, but *opinions* about facts." In that sentence, he explains why journalistic scrutiny is indispensable to a well-functioning society.

He also sketches the societal foundation that PR stands on – the search for shared opinions that will, in the best case, open doors. Ninety years ago, Edward Bernays would call it 'the engineering of consent'. Today we call it public engagement.

Of all the problems a CCO will face, changing values is the hardest: values are like diamonds, formed over time and under pressure.

And the worst situation we can find ourselves in, is to feel that the leadership team has lost its confidence. At the low point in ABB, I said to our new Chairman of the Board that we were "the glue-less led by the clueless". A terrible truth. Not surprisingly, it took us 2 ½ years to recover.

Of course at times I bit off more than I could chew. But it never bothered me that I often was the only corporate officer who would argue that the best way for us to seize the initiative in a situation would be to let go.

- Reflection number 3. It is a mistake to think you can ever be fully in control, and very foolish to feel that you, as a person or a company, always need to be right.

As the former White House speechwriter William Safire said: "Nobody stands taller than those willing to stand corrected."

My friends, there is some magic in the roles we hold, even though it may at times seem that we work in the Institute of Applied Generalization, trading in that rare and much needed commodity – common sense.

When we get it right, we change our companies a lot. And when our companies get it right, they might even help change the world a little.

- Reflection number 4. As in our own personal lives, it is in the search for true purpose that companies will find real meaning, their true character. The search for meaning gives life meaning.

Let me conclude by sharing a conviction which has only grown stronger over my more than 40 years of working with others across cultures.

Simply this. Nothing yields greater returns than respect. There is no currency more precious than kindness.

Let us not be too hard on ourselves or on others. If anyone deserves censure, then let's intervene with respect and kindness.

Thanks again. Let's enjoy dinner.