

Foundation for Public Relations Research and Education
Annual Foundation Luncheon and Address
San Diego, California
November 13, 1977

“Public Relations: The Stubborn Opportunity”

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Rambling toward retirement, I paused to teach for a few years. The prospect tingled the ego. I had visions of reveling in the interpretation of my real-life experiences to eager young men and women over-fed on theory. Well, it didn't turn out quite that way.

During the first semester we spent considerable time on the honorability of business and government. Students, stimulated by news stories, pointed at repeated instances of hanky panky by public and private officials. The infractions were the kind that parents and elementary teachers had told children were wrong. Students wanted to know where I stood on such conduct and what had I done for or against it in my own career.

As time went on, the classroom mood became less vocally critical and skeptical. The main factor was a thinning of the job market for college graduates. The anxiety about jobs permitted me to become something of an advocate and a prophet.

My advocacy is that bright and morally motivated students should do their best to get into business and government, assist in airing out the closets, and help make changes for the better. In this way, honorability will be revised, and young people will have helped. My classroom prophecy is that there will be decent and fulfilling jobs available, at least for the 101 public relations majors in journalism at San Diego State University, particularly if they attend class regularly and stay awake, read my textbooks carefully, and otherwise manage to hack a B or better in my courses.

Heaven help my teaching career if private enterprise and the U.S. government do not fulfill my prophecy, no matter what the condition of the economy or which party is in the White House.

New Pursuits Hone Skills

Teaching is challenging and refreshing to a corporate practitioner. I commend it to others. The academic atmosphere of inquiry emphasizes that effectiveness in my career depends on a resiliency in meeting unexpected circumstances, and an empathy in confronting hostility objectively without surrender of principles. Beyond that, exposing oneself to a new or different challenge is good medicine for an occupational ailment afflicting many of long tenure in one job or place. Actually, some sort of career rotation plan on a grand scale, but falling short of Plato's design, might be a worthwhile way to keep minds and skills refreshed in the 21st Century when

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mechanical means take over more and more of the functions long regarded as creative and human.

The implications in that thesis are too complex to address here and now. The impact of changing circumstances, however, and the need to prepare for them, makes up the substance of my thoughts.

All who profess a particular marketable knowledge and insight, a skill and an artistry in its application, are required to hone and adapt those talents to sustain their value. Additionally, most pursuits must have an outreach to test and extend their parameters. Few can afford to be self-contained worlds deliberately walled off, like Disneyland, from external realities. The dynamics of adaptation to change, outreach and interaction with other pursuits are tenets of survival for the business manager, the public servant, the publisher, the teacher, the artisan. I cannot think of any exceptions or immunity. Not even Rip Van Winkle could have evaded.

Certainly these tenets apply to all who profess a sophisticated knowledge of human behavior, an insight into opinion formation, a skill in communications, and an artistry in persuasion. It matters little whether these particular talents find their outlets in such specialized forms as news, speech, advertising or personal contacts. The necessity of functional revalidation does not discriminate.

Ideally, change would be gradual as in the shape of a passing summer cloud, and, adjustments would be as painless as daydreaming. The actualities more often seem like thunderheads and nightmares which leave one uneasy on awakening.

During the 55 years or more of my lifetime that still remain on the moist bank of my memory, societal changes calling for adjustments have been drastic, at times tempestuous and usually unexpected. Along the way, time-tested virtues and values have been buffeted. Some have not weathered well. A few have been reconstituted under new banners or lifestyles.

Technology has been a major source-spring of change in the field of communications. I can recall being fascinated by the clickety-click of Morse code transmission at my hometown railroad station, and hawking for five cents the thin local newspaper purchased for two and one half cents. Nowadays, I share with millions of others the major news events instantly emblazoned globally in lavish color and dramatic detail. Public reaction and consensus, too, have become instantaneous in controversy or crisis.

The two-generation span of my working career in communications was launched by death in my family, nurtured through depression, interrupted by war service, accelerated by the advent of television, tested by the depersonalizing of the workplace and strained by social upheaval. My precise function was redefined several times by employers and clients who variously craved high, low or no public profiles and whose personal value standards were dissimilar.

The events punctuating this recital are personal, but not unique. They tend to exemplify the experiences enjoyed and suffered by many of today's senior practitioners.

State of Public Relations Profession

The public relations calling as a whole, audited by casual observation, has fared very well indeed despite some temporary setbacks during maturation. Its numbers and its professional society have grown. Comparative income levels have advanced. Practitioners are positioned at the elbows of policy makers in high places. A lengthening line of university graduates want to come in. Undergraduates are banding together in student society chapters and are undertaking internships to enhance their career chances.

In past periods of greatest economic strain, neither employers nor their publics have questioned either the desirability of mutually satisfactory relationships or the essentiality of two-way communications in achieving such relationships. Few employers have denied that there has been a growing body of scientific and precedent intelligence under girding the art of persuasion. Evidence abounds of skill and flexibility in application of the art to a spectrum of problems and opportunities.

Recent surveys show the pendulum of employer attitude to be swinging favorably toward frankness, advocacy and the use of public relations concepts, techniques and tools.

Although the calling can pass a routine physical and financial examination, there are some observers and practitioners who harbor concern about some symptoms beneath the surface. I am one of the worriers.

The judgment of practitioners, at times, has been suspect in holding that the public good is invariably served by attainment of an employer's immediate objectives. At other times judgment has been faulty in expecting that a true portrait of an institution can be painted entirely in the colors of good news.

Communications skills have occasionally been put to causes of questionable public value. Services have sometimes been rationalized as though the ability to influence opinion was, in itself, a sufficient end, regardless of whether the methods used invoked one or another of Walter Lippman's seven deadly sins. Strategy in persuasion, improperly labeled as progress or necessity, has frequently fostered animosity, hastened obsolescence or exalted sensuality, when such alternatives as reconciliation, conservation, and logic were available.

Every instance of fault or failure in fulfilling an inherent nobility tarnishes the beauty and diminishes the strength of a calling or commitment. The corrosion is a high price to pay. If the gain be no more than survival, the game is scarcely worth the bruises.

The pity is that such corrosion is entirely unnecessary for effective public relations. The function, by definition, by instruction and codification possesses almost all the elements needed to be respected as a decisive force for understanding and cooperation among leaders and groups sharing in the economic, political and social affairs of the nation. The one other necessary element cannot be taught or compelled. It is the character of the practitioner expressed in the depth, courage and durability of personal commitment.

Practitioners as Moral Force: Stubborn Opportunity

This opportunity to be respected as a decisive force is what I have chosen to call, as the title of this paper, "the stubborn opportunity."

The opportunity for each practitioner to set an example as a force for understanding and cooperation in his or her own precinct of influence is, indeed, stubborn. It will not yield on any lasting basis to token commitment, gimmickry, fleetness of foot or glibness of tongue. At the same time, it won't go away. It persists even in the face of weighty evidence that unworthy conduct and exploitation of one another are unalterably parts of the human condition.

Sir Winston Churchill, surveying the havoc wreaked by World War II, observed that mankind, left to its own devices, gravitated toward self-destruction. How fortunate we are that each day some of the babies born will at maturity set their lives on courses calculated to be counter-veiling forces against mankind's baser instincts.

I hold no belief that the public relations calling, simply by the exemplary conduct of its practitioners, could reverse or control strong instincts in colleagues, employers or neighbors toward greed, vanity and waste. Self-restraint, decency, compassion and sharing do not come that easily.

I would contend, however, that a coupling of exemplary conduct and artistry in persuasion might repeatedly pierce through the confusion in a sorely troubled society to make the telling point that self discipline and self denial by mankind on earth are vastly preferable to no inhabitable earth.

Meantime, we have come to a national predicament described by the late John Hill and others as a crisis of credibility and confidence between our major institutions and their constituents. We are all caught up in it. Whatever is to be rests in part with communicators who, in turn, will share the consequences. Spokesmen for the public relations calling say variously that this is a cross-road; the calling is in a holding pattern, or turning on an axis. The one common agreement seems to be that there is a dilemma.

For my part, here I am, basking well-fed in the twilight of one chosen career, and working up a sweat in the mid-morning sunlight of a new career. In this incongruous position, I have the temerity to suggest how the loins of the calling might be girded, and the essence of the mission renewed, to take good advantage of the stubborn opportunity ahead. As with most suggestions, mine are easy to describe, difficult to do.

Moral Commitment

As a starting point, the calling needs to be better identified publicly in terms of its commitment as well as its skills. What does the calling stand for on its own? Is the function more than an echo of its employers? Can value standards be chameleon, rearranged to fit each passing employer or client? These questions are moralistic. The times call for it.

In a court of law "the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth" are demanded. In the court of public opinion where public relations works, there is only moral obligation, not compulsion. Nothing less than exemplary standards of conduct will suffice for leadership in the public arena. The professional position must be that persuasive information serving the best interests of all affected by it also ultimately serves the best interests of its sponsors. This holds whether the goals of private sponsors are circulation, votes, members, donations or profit. It holds whether the communications intermediaries are lobbyists, publicists, advertisers or news media.

The practical advantage of impeccable and incorruptible personal conduct by public relations practitioners should not be overlooked. The whole calling should cherish the day when the very employment and presence of practitioners, in themselves, identify employers and their doings as being above moral reproach.

Societal Commitment

Beyond a personal and private commitment to exemplary conduct made in the silence of one's conscience, there is a need to do a better job of defining and proclaiming the legitimacy of public relations in the resolution of social problems. Not all matters of public issue can be elevated to the level of good versus evil. All public issues of a social nature having public relations involvement, however, do invite a professional group posture.

This is an opportunity. Surely the calling can determine and implement its social utility in the handling of practical workday matters involving its own field of authority and expertise.

As one example, each year hundreds of tons of printed reports, speeches, news releases, and flyers generated for public relations purposes are sprayed widely through the mail far beyond those target audiences that might reasonably be expected to have a stake or an interest in them. Hundreds of tons more of these documents wind up as printing over-runs or leftover inventory.

The extent to which this tonnage clutters the mail, wastes times and money, annoys recipients, piles up as rubbish, or goes up in colorless, air-polluting smoke, is controllable by public relations people. In this case self-restraint becomes a social service as well as an economic virtue.

Surely public relations as a group or a professional society can reach a consensus, and implement its position on such practicalities as preferring persuasion over the purchase or coercion of public opinion, exercising self-discipline in the exaggeration of facts or claims, and rendering a proper response to the instances of news media bias, or carelessness in reporting. Such matters as these lie properly within the authority and domain of the calling. The opportunity and the obligation are there.

Commitment to Communication Issues

Another aspect of this opportunity concerns the natural authority of the calling in matters where more self-discipline or more government regulation of communications hangs in the balance. Actions involving privacy, copyright, disclosure, petition, fairness, public right to know, freedom

of information and several others, will have much to do with the destiny of the public relations function. The maturity of the calling urges that its destiny not be relegated by indecision or inaction to political wheeling and dealing or to a handful of missionaries and martyrs pitted against a handful of mavericks and individualists. Collective efforts should be redoubled to grapple with communications rights and wrongs, to take positions, and to advocate those positions as effectively as if they were those held by a long time employer or client.

Upgrading Professional Credentials

Another area of stubborn opportunity is the upgrading of professional credentials. No calling can be more effective than the substantive knowledge on which it is predicated. No professional practice can become more competent than the entry ticket made up of academic requirements.

It seems trite to say that competence starts in the library, the research work, the classroom, and finally in the requirements for entry into the field.

Classes of membership and accreditation notwithstanding, I would suggest that the starting place to raise and tighten the entry requirements is in a better interchange between educators and employers on a continuing basis. From this a mutually beneficial understanding can result as to what kind of finished "product" employers want to hire and what kind of response educators can and cannot make. Given this working relationship, a dynamic curriculum will evolve that discourages unqualified students and attracts more of those "most likely to succeed."

Definitive research in this direction was done by Dean Ray Hiebert, University of Maryland, and by Dr. Albert Walker, Northern Illinois University, under grants from the Public Relations Foundation. A major step forward came in 1975 when the Commission on Public Relations Education submitted its recommendations. Most public relations teachers in America have carefully reviewed these materials. I doubt that very many practitioners have scanned them or considered their significance. That is a missed opportunity.

One form of screening and winnowing to upgrade credentials would be for the Public Relations Society of America and its chapters to reinforce the associate membership classification with simple tests at the start and along the way. The name of the game is quality not quantity. It does little good to worry about those who practice without membership. And, licensing would help but it is no panacea. There will always be some sincere dissidents and a certain number of free-loading leeches in any profitable pursuit.

Professional Obligation: Take and Give

My final suggestion involves professional obligation. Each practitioner in his or her own way has a positive obligation to put back into the future state of the art as much as has been extracted in precedents, success and personal recognition.

Long ago, Sir Francis Bacon, in "Maxims of the Law," put this more forcibly than I do. He said: "I hold every one a debtor to his profession; from the which as people of course do seek to

receive countenance and profit, so ought they of duty to endeavor themselves by way of amends to be a help and an ornament thereunto."

There is no shortage of opportunities for those who want to be a help and an ornament. The availabilities start with the committees and task forces of the Public Relations Society of America. The key is member attitude. There is a mile of difference between *being* on a committee and *servng* on one.

Another area of opportunity is in the funding needed by the Public Relations Foundation to extend the intellectual under girding of professional practice. What a magnificent outreach would result from annual endorsement by a few hundred more practitioners, each giving according to personal financial capability. Again, attitude is the critical factor.

A third and large field of opportunity is in the need for educational aids among hundreds of universities with required and elective public relations courses for tens of thousands of students annually. This need cannot be satisfied entirely if exploited only as an outlet for promotional material. A diet of success stories does not add up to education. Learning proceeds from inquiry into problems and their resolution.

I suspect that where public relations aids are concerned the situation at San Diego State University is typical. The school's audio-visual catalog lists over 4,000 films and tapes available to be requisitioned for the classroom. There is only one of these, "Opinion of the Publics," specifically dealing with the function of public relations. It is listed in the catalog under "Marketing."

Also in academia there is an opportunity inherent in the needs of hundreds of graduate students and public relations teachers each year who must publish and expand their experience or risk being by-passed when promotion time rolls around. They hunger for meaningful summer or sabbatical experience in off-campus settings. They pray for financial sponsorship in fellowships or in the publication of worthy research projects.

Outside academia, and related to public education, an opportunity awaits in many of the public libraries across the land. I refer to those that need helpful counsel in arranging their reference index and their shelving of books so that lay users of the library will find public relations to be something more than publicity.

These few examples merely scratch the surface of the fertile soil available to be tilled by successful practitioners who are genuinely committed. From the tilling will come the future roots of the knowledge, insight and skill that combine to determine whether this calling shall flourish or wither.

Every calling is made up of a majority who concentrate on *taking*, *using* and *getting* and a minority who also *put back*, *give* and *share* their gains for the sake of others who follow. The getting helps make practitioners successful and affluent. The giving assures practitioners of being fulfilled and illustrious.

The return of oneself back into a calling is the greatest of all career opportunities. It is also the most stubborn. I believe with all my heart that it will yield to an equally stubborn commitment.