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## **"The Individual Pursuit of Professional Excellence"**

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Madame Chairperson, Foundation Trustees and Guests:

Your invitation to give the Foundation Lecture before this distinguished group is indeed a flattering one. To be included in that hallowed body of public relations saints and historians who have preceded me on this platform is an honor which I would have never dared expect ... and, in fact, still don't believe.

All of us in the public relations profession owe a great deal to the foundation. It's the only formal instrumentality whose sole purpose is to improve the state of the art. As such, we should cherish it, nurture it ... and as we do today, celebrate it.

Because time is so precious, I am going to skip other amenities and plunge into the subject I have chosen for this occasion. Before proceeding, let me say that I will be using the term "public relations profession" in this talk. Since some people get hung up on the word "profession," I use it advisedly ... not because I think we are a profession in the strict, technical sense of the word.

But I do think that we are -- or had better be -- "professionals" in the true sense of that word. As will be made clear in my remarks, I cannot accept the word "craft," because if we accept that role for ourselves, we are doomed. Therefore, I have no hesitation in using the word "profession" in this context.

My concern, briefly, is about the very low incidence of upward mobility by public relations professionals, and I have the results of some new research to underscore this fact. I would like to explore the reasons for this, and finally, what we can do to break out of this restrictive, denigrating mold.

To set the stage, let me review the scenario of a modern public relations tragedy. Although the facts are somewhat disguised, for personal reasons, it is true. I'm sure many of you could give a similar scenario from your observations.

This scenario concerns two men, although it could just as well be two women. The background is a *Fortune 500* corporation, although it could be any type of organization -- profit or non-profit.

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After a four-month study of the corporation, a management consulting firm recommended that a new position of senior vice president for public affairs be created. The position would include responsibility for public relations, advertising, employee communications and governmental relations.

Two persons were considered for this new post. Person A was the vice president of public relations. His background was journalism, both by education and previous employment. He was extremely skilled at writing corporate news releases, annual reports (two "Best-in-Industry" awards) and speeches. A consummate communicator, he was highly regarded by top management.

Person B was the company's legal counsel. In addition to handling the day-to-day legal chores expertly, he had served as chairman of the industry's trade association governmental relations committee, where he did a very statesman-like job. It was primarily due to his early warnings and planning that the company was fulfilling its environmental and EEOC requirements.

Both A and B were totally loyal, hard-working, committed company persons. Each was personable, well-liked, socially responsive, active in the community, of high integrity and good managers of their respective departments.

Who got the job? B, of course.

Why did A, the crack communications professional, lose out to a lawyer for a position that embraced the major communications functions of the corporation?

The CEO who made the decision wasn't dumb. In fact, in this case, he made the right decision. But what disturbs me -- and it should disturb everyone in our profession is that this is happening over and over in all types of organizations today. (Please understand that I am generalizing. I know there are some outstanding exceptions, and I salute them.) It isn't just the lawyers who are beating us out. Substitute financially trained executives, marketing specialists and, in some cases -- heaven forbid -- engineers.

When I first considered discussing this with you, I realized that I couldn't accept this premise just because of my own personal observations over 40-odd years. So, I went to my colleagues at Hill and Knowlton for support. They said: "Let's find out."

As a result, Group Attitudes Corporation, the Hill and Knowlton opinion research subsidiary is now concluding a study involving in-depth interviews with chief executive officers, or those top executives to whom the public relations function reports, of private business enterprises, banks, health facilities, hotels, public utilities, educational institutions and governmental agencies. These are personal, structured -- face-to-face or by telephone -- interviews lasting often from a half to a full hour.

Because the study has not been completed, I cannot give you the final results. I urge you to watch for them when they are published. You will find them revealing and quite relevant to what I consider to be our biggest problem as a profession.

I can, however, give you a preview of this study, based on 54 full-length interviews. (The target number for the study, by the way, is 75.) I can tell you what is coming through loud and strong for our research experts tell me the pattern is unmistakably clear ... a pattern that probably will not change.

In general, the function of public relations is not only highly regarded and understood by top management, it is considered to be essential and growing more so every year. There is practically total agreement that it is a fundamental and valid function in any organization.

When confronted by a reference to public relations as a necessary evil of organizational life, most respondents were genuinely horrified. Said the president of a large industrial corporation: "A remark like that tends to denigrate the corporation, its entity and its life as well as the public relations professionals themselves."

Said the executive director of a large professional society: "What are you saying? That is the same as saying advertising is a necessary evil or legal services or anything else... Society could not function without understanding and since the vast majority does not have the ability to communicate, public relations serves a vital function."

Most managers understand that public relations is the means by which an organization presents itself to the public, and some go so far as to refer to it as the backbone of the organization. Through a number of questions, definitions and interpretations, it was apparent that this group of top executives was knowledgeable, intelligent and sophisticated as to the function of public relations. They are not cynical or non-supportive, as we have sometimes characterized them to be.

OK ... so the function is respected and accepted as a basic need for the organization. What about the practitioners themselves -- the professionals -- and their prospects for advancement?

While most of the interviewees gave high marks to their professionals for their communications skill, they do not believe that PR specialists have a good chance to move up to higher levels of management. They contend that this is because the professionals lack administrative training and the appropriate educational background. Public relations, they say, is too narrow a discipline for movement up the ladder. Listen to these quotes:

- "Most PR people die in their corporate PR position. They just don't have the training in business. Very few will go on to senior management."
- "Management does not perceive the public relations person as moving high in the corporate structure."
- "PR people are relatively unimportant in the eyes of management, perhaps because they do the very worst PR job for their own profession."

- "The profession is too ingrained. PR people can see only their own function. The limited ability of the people keeps them from advancing."
- "They do not have administrative capabilities. They can function in an advisory capacity, but decisions must be left to the decision makers."

A minority of the respondents do believe that public relations professionals can rise to the top of the fields they service, but only if the gap between public relations and the operational field of expertise is bridged by further education.

Within corporations, the practitioners are less likely to be promoted to top positions, according to the respondents, than are financial specialists, sales managers, lawyers and chief engineers. They do have an advantage, it is admitted, over personnel directors and advertising directors.

Furthermore, public relations directors were assessed as less competent in their field than were financial specialists, chief engineers and lawyers in theirs. However, sales managers, advertising directors were judged to be less competent in their jobs than were public relations specialists.

Finally ... one ray of hope. The respondents do contend that the function will become more and more important during the 1980s. At present, they say, management is feeling pressured by a more sophisticated consumer, government regulations, competition, internal corporate needs and employee demands. As the public relations staff responds to these pressures, more interviewees indicate that budgets will -- if they have not already -- increase to accommodate the growing demands.

As discouraging as this assessment of us as individuals is and as much as we dislike being reminded of it in public, I doubt if these opinions come as a shock to those of us who have been around a while. Yet, it is a curious paradox, is it not, that in this age in which communications is everything -- an age in which most managements admit that the very survival of their organizations depends on strong communications with their publics -- the professionals in communications rank low in the organizational hierarchy.

At this point, we must ask the question: "Why?"

Before trying to answer this question, let me refer to three articles I've seen recently on the qualities or attributes that top management looks for in advancing people up the ladder. One was in the *Harvard Business Review* in the July-August issue by Harry Levinson, the well-known psychologist and consultant. One was in an article by Milton Rockmore in the October 1979 issue of *American Way* entitled "Management Shopping List." The other was in last Friday's *Wall Street Journal*.

In Levinson's piece, he lists 20 dimensions of leaders' personalities. The Rockmore article mostly quotes the chairmen of four corporations -- Ford Motor, Pepsi Co., R. J. Reynolds and Xerox. The *Wall Street Journal* article summarizes a *Wall Street Journal/Gallup* survey of 782 CEOs.

Now, I have studied these pieces fairly carefully and nowhere did I find as requisites for success and advancement any mention of a professional discipline background such as law or engineering or accounting.

Instead, I find the same qualities or dimensions that you people in this room have in abundance. Asked about the most common weaknesses in subordinate executives, the *Wall Street Journal/Gallup* respondents cited narrow mindedness and inability to work with and understand others.

Some years ago, I remember reading about a series of tests that were made with two groups of employees -- one was a group of high salaried executives and the other a group of middle and low echelon executives, all of whom made less than the salary dividing line between the two groups. Test after test was given and both groups scored about the same. It wasn't until a test using hypothetical situations and calling for imaginative solutions did the higher salaried group out perform the others. In other words, the magic ingredient was imagination.

My point here is simply this. If we have any inferiority complex about not having the character, personality, intelligence or natural leadership ability, let's wash this right out of our hair... but quick! In fact, I could make an excellent case that we as a group start out with more of the assets for personal success than our colleagues in other disciplines.

Don't tell me that lawyers, financial specialists or engineers have higher imagination quotients than public relations professionals! And, if a public relations professional is narrow-minded and does not have the ability to work with others, he or she won't stay in business one week -- and shouldn't.

No ... the fact that we may be low on the managerial totem pole is not because we have less of the personal qualities for success than others. No way!

Getting back to Group Attitudes Corporation's current study of top management, many of the respondents suggest, as we have already noted, that public relations professionals lack administrative training and the appropriate educational background. Conceding the obvious--that most practitioners naturally would not have the administrative training of others in their organization -- perhaps we should take a longer look at our educational backgrounds. Have we been spending too much of our precious educational time on developing the tools of our trade, not enough on the social and economic environments in which our organizations operate?

These quotes from the survey respondents suggest the latter:

- "PR people must keep learning. They can never know enough."
- "They must do their homework and research thoroughly. They should be up to date on all issues. They must read everything they can."
- "Public relations people are held back by their narrow educational background. They should be trained as jack-of-all-trades."
- "PR professionals underestimate the sophistication of their various publics."

I wish I had time to read more, because these are not isolated comments. In some cases, the complaints are directed to a lack of sociological background. In others, more education in such areas as finance and administration is suggested.

It was particularly significant to me in reading the comments to note the high priority these top managers put on the importance and need for knowledge and counsel on the social issues of the day. Complained one CEO, "Nobody seems to have time to keep abreast with issues." At the same time, a number say that public relations specialists lack a comprehensive understanding of the social, political and business problems and issues about which they are asked to write.

This shift in emphasis jibes with the experience of our firm, whose attentions have been increasingly directed toward the impact of societal issues on our clients in recent years.

Surely there is much soul-searching that needs to be done about a more effective educational mix for those public relations careerists who aspire to the policy level echelons.

However, there is another -- and possibly more important -- factor that may explain the low level of advancement potential for public relations practitioners. That is the low expectations set for us by top management. There are two schools of thought on this. One puts the blame squarely on management. The current study certainly indicates a high regard for the function of public relations. But, at the same time, it indicates to me a less than high regard -- which can be translated into low expectations -- of public relations people as individuals.

As a text for this area of discussion, I'd like to refer to a talk given earlier this year by Tony De Lorenzo, former Vice President of Public Relations for General Motors and currently a senior consulting colleague of mine at Hill and Knowlton.

A few years ago, he points out, during one of our periodic discoveries that children weren't doing very well in school, especially in the big city ghetto schools, a couple of educators, Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson, made a study developing the not-so-surprising theory that student achievement tracked very closely with teacher expectations. The middle-class youngsters, sons and daughters of business and professional people, were expected to achieve well, and, in general, usually did so.

The ghetto youngsters, the kids from deprived backgrounds, broken homes ... expectations for these children were not high. Teachers stamped them at the outset as problems. They were not expected to succeed. Little was demanded of them. They produced little. In short, they met expectations.

Other similarly striking examples of performance matching expectations could be cited, but I think this is enough to make the point.

Now, when a CEO hires a top executive, he's not just looking for a chief financial officer, or administrator, or engineer. He's hiring a person who might wind up as CEO.

But, says Mr. De Lorenzo to management: "What do you look for when you hire public relations directors? A glad-hander for the media? A courtier instead of a counselor? A mouthpiece, an apologist, instead of a spokesman?"

Confirming the thesis I set forth at the outset, Tony De Lorenzo is even more brutal. "The PR people sit below the salt. Even when the director is a vice president, he is seldom a part of the inner circle. He has a title without power, often without influence, usually without a future, a reward for faithful service, not a launching pad to new advancement. It's not a milestone. It's the end of the road."

How many CEOs expect the public relations director to handle a genuine crisis, when they hired him to write news releases and the annual report? When a real crisis occurs, who is usually called? The general counsel or a prestigious outside counsel. And because he or she is doing what is expected of them, the public relations director is probably not equipped to handle the crisis.

Again, addressing management, Mr. De Lorenzo states: "...that's your misfortune. That's the misfortune of much of American business and industry. Because I will tell you something else: the lawyers aren't equipped to handle the problem either ... not the public relations and public affairs problem. You will get legal advice from the lawyer. His environment is the courtroom, his tools the law, his strategy legal argument, his objective, a favorable legal decision. He may achieve his objective, and the corporation may still have a public relations disaster."

Now, I really didn't start out to attack the lawyers. Some of them have a finely developed sense of public relations and public affairs. If you find any, hang on to them. They can be your stoutest ally.

The second-school of thought would put the blame for management's low expectations of us as individuals on our own doorstep. They say that we are too narrow in our scope, that we don't know enough about business, about administration, and have failed to provide the caliber of counseling, anticipatory planning and statesmanship that our job descriptions call for. I'm not sure I'm prepared to disagree with this.

The key point is not who is to blame for this sad state of expectations, but to recognize that it is there and to do something about it.

So far in this discussion, I have contended that public relations professionals as individuals are not highly regarded in the organizational hierarchy, I've quoted research to support this thesis and I have suggested that the reason for this may be:

- (a) narrowness of training and education (at least, as viewed by our bosses); and
- (b) low expectations.

If all this is true, where do we go from here? Or do enough of us really care? You know, as I was preparing these remarks, a horrible thought came over me. Could it be that these things which disturb me so much don't bother the majority of public relations practitioners? Maybe writing or honing the techniques of audio-visual communicating is the end in itself for them,

not growing and advancing to decision-making levels. If so, this lecture is an empty exercise. And so is most of this conference.

For those who share my concern about pursuing a career or profession that can make a difference in our society, let's shift our focus from diagnosis to remedy.

In the first place, I have to deduce from the evidence that the educational process for the public relations professional -- both at the undergraduate and graduate levels -- needs a good, hard re-evaluation by a consortium of educators, professional practitioners and those organizational leaders who are sympathetic and concerned enough to lend their knowledge and experience.

While we cannot afford to relax our pursuit of excellence in the development of skills and tools, are we emphasizing them too much and too early in the educational schedule?

When should a comprehensive dose of economics, of social and political science -- yes, and even the arts be injected? When and where should administrative and management training be given? And by whom?

Could not certain universities structure an MBA with major emphasis on public affairs?

Could not a totally new type of graduate degree be created ... a degree that encompasses a blending of societal issues and human intercommunications?

I don't know of any law that says educational degrees have to conform to the same pattern they have for centuries, particularly in a culture that has changed more rapidly in the last three decades than at any other time in human history.

In 1973, a young Harvard MBA noted that college graduates with BA degrees who had not attended graduate school were given little if any credit by management for their education, as against the deference shown to MBAs. To partially bridge this gap, he founded a private school of management in Chicago, featuring a short course at the end of which a CBA -- Certificate of Business Administration -- was given ... a credential half way between a MBA and a BA. The school had an advisory council of top Chicago business leaders and jobs were guaranteed to every graduate. The school's CBA is fully accredited, as is its subsequent MBA. And I am told that now, the vast majority of CBAs continue on to the MBA. The school's enrollment has grown from its first class of seven students to 1,130 this year ... all in just seven years!

Now if one bright young man can innovate an entirely new pattern of education to fit the need of the times, cannot the profit and non-profit institutions of this nation which are in such desperate need for public affairs leadership do the same? Or, how about us?

I know this may sound like hearsay to my old friends, Scott Cutlip, Ray Hiebert, Otto Lerbinger and other educators who have enriched our profession. They and their colleagues, together with the practitioners and our professional society, have been responsible for bringing public relations to its present high stature as an essential function of organizational



life in our culture. But now, I have to ask the question: Is it not time to re-evaluate and reorganize from the beginning our educational pattern to train leaders? Can we not have academic credentials that signify more than certificates of trade apprenticeship? How long can we listen to the stream of accusations of educational inadequacy without making some drastic changes? Or do we take the position that we are properly educated, that management just doesn't understand?

What I am saying, of course, is a direct challenge to the profession. But, it is even more a challenge to the individual practitioner, because all the courses and degrees in the world are to no avail if the individual ignores them. And I sometimes wonder if we as a group may not be intellectually lazier than our colleagues from other disciplines. Or, do we lack the ambition, the drive?

Were you shocked when I indicated that even engineers were sometimes beating us out for public affairs positions? Do you know why? For one thing, engineers are going to graduate business schools in droves. And it's paying off for them.

What about public relations practitioners? Have they recognized yet that, in the business world, the hot ticket is an MBA?

Recently, one of the nation's largest and most prestigious executive search firms received an assignment to find a public relations vice president for a major corporation.

The CEO wanted an MBA, if possible. The firm took the Who's Who in Public Relations directory, researched it, and found that one half of one percent had MBAs. If this is what it takes in the business world, our upward mobility potential is not very promising.

An executive of the search firm told me that searches for a top public relations position are the most difficult ones they do because of the lack of qualified candidates. Now, this is our own fault, so let's not cast the blame on an ignorant management.

Secondly, there's another very important step we can and must take. Those who have any aspiration of reaching policy-making levels in their organizations must -- and I cannot stress this enough -- must get into the futures research business. This is an art or science -- whatever you want to call it -- that is in its comparative infancy but is fast emerging as a strategic planning requisite. We must embrace this quickly until it becomes part of our thinking, part of our skill and an integral part of our profession. And we should do this before some other discipline does it first.

A former chairman of IBM once said: "The distinguishing characteristic between barbarism and civilization is the ability to plan for the future."

The textbooks on public relations, our own media and our leaders have for years laid down as a basic tenet of our business that it must anticipate problems or crises and through the communications skills we possess, plan and execute programs that will either prevent the crisis or create an environment of understanding when it does happen. Now, if there is any one area

in which we have failed our profession and our employers, it is this. We have lost job after job because we did not have the acumen, the ability or the courage to be our employer's early warning system. This is precisely why Person A lost in our earlier scenario.

It is a truth in management that, if there are two people under consideration for a single higher post, assuming all other factors are equal, the job will go every time to the more future-oriented person. Doesn't it stand to reason, therefore, that if we are going to put an end to our losing streak, we must jump fully clothed into the futures research pool?

It has been said that most of today's organizational managers have come to understand that the future will not be merely a variation of the past, but different from it. And that state of mind now favors the introduction of futures research to the planning process.

When I use the term "futures research," I am not talking about financial predictions, market projections, or computerized statistical analysis -- skills which any MBA or trained specialist is expected to know. I'm talking about a technique the experts call future scanning.

If you want to get an inkling of this new world, I commend to your attention an article in the August issue of *Financier* called, "The Future Can Be Researched" by two vice presidents of Security Pacific National Bank -- Robert L. Thaler and Hank E. Koehn ... bankers, mind you!

Getting management to believe -- if they don't already -- in futures research is a rare opportunity for all of us. It begins with acceptance of the future scanning technique. This involves, say the authors of the article, a continual monitoring of the world for those bits of information which indicate something different is happening. Seemingly unrelated reports, polls, magazines, studies and conversations are monitored for those signals of future direction.

This process may unearth bits of information about the competition, consumer acceptance of new services and products and areas of need not yet serviced, if you are in the business world. It may uncover the first heartbeats of a societal trend that someday will impact heavily on your organization, business or otherwise.

Future scanning, the authors continue, is not a process run by a single person. Informal groups or networks of individuals produce the best results. The intuition of the group members combines into a "sweeping radar, which frequently picks up items that escape the notice of individuals. It intensifies a weak signal."

We are told that contemporary management has been trained to rely on what is called the "left brain" powers of rationality ... in other words, the forecasting and predicting activity that has so readily been used and accepted. What is now needed, the experts say, is the development and acceptance of the "right brain" process, which is intuition. The utilization of the intuition process is, they contend, the most direct challenge to conventional management attitudes. It has been called by the futurist, Hazel Henderson, "the missing link in the planning business."

Well, if futures research is part of the wave of the future, does it not stand to reason that the public relations professional should position himself as the resident expert? Who has better credentials for it? Do you know any quicker route to the planning council of your organization? Since futures research has been characterized as a group, not an individual, activity, so much the better. Who is more qualified to be the leader, the catalyst, the organizer?

Let me return to the words of authors Thaler and Koehn: "Management can be sold the concept of futures research as a way of planning to reduce the uncertainty that lies just ahead. Management will believe in the concept as the process identifies the possibilities for creative adjustment to the unknown as it materializes. The presentation of holistic alternatives will always fire the minds of the real executive." And this comes from two executives who are part of the process at Security Pacific Bank.

Well, I have just about said my piece. I doubt if I have improved the state of the art, as these Foundation lectures should do. Rather, I have tried to pinpoint the weak spots in our collective, professional armor and to make two specific suggestions.

Public relations has come a long way as a profession. As our research indicates, it has been accepted as an essential organizational function. We've fought a long, hard battle to get here. And while we can each probably cite isolated examples of frustration, I feel comfortable in saying publicly that at long last, with respect to acceptance of the public relations function, we have made it. We have overcome.

The task that now remains for us -- our greatest challenge -- is to gain acceptance as individuals ... to demonstrate to management that we are capable of leadership. Harry Levinson in his *Harvard Business Review* article offered 20 dimensions of leadership. Jones offers you four. These are:

- (1) Mastery of our craft ... we start as communicators.
- (2) Well-rounded education and training... it is axiomatic that nobody succeeds without a thorough knowledge of the business or field -- and by this, I don't mean public relations -- in which his or her organization operates.
- (3) An awareness and understanding of the important issues of our time and the ability to react positively to them. In our study, managers said that PR professionals serve them best by helping them respond to key issues.
- (4) A constant and obsessive focus on the future ... for this is where we are all going together.

The first two are technical acquisitions, so to speak. The latter two call for statesmanship and vision. They are the qualities which will determine whether you move up the ladder and raise the expectations of management or stay where you are.

I hope the negative tone of my earlier remarks hasn't discouraged you. I stated those premises to challenge you.

As for me, I have never seen a time where there were more opportunities for the public relations professional, provided he or she has the eyes to see them. The more societal changes accelerate and proliferate -- and they are currently doing so at an unprecedented pace -- the wider the avenues you travel become, the greater the opportunities.

That graduate school diploma that the manager of your organization has on his wall may have prepared him for the technical changes taking place at the time he was in school. But he is beset more than ever by forces in society that are more powerful, more fragmented, more mobile and less cohesive than any he studied. And that diploma doesn't help him much. For this society is one of shifting values and loyalties, and with a consuming passion for self fulfillment. It is a society with myriad sources of information, a myriad spokesperson. Independents may soon outnumber Democrats and Republicans. The passions of the people coalesce around a single issue and force laws to be passed that are not always in the best interests of society. People are elected to office with allegiance to this or that group or idea, but not to party, not to any identifiable political principle. The events of November 4 attest to that.

How is this manager of yours going to cope with these burgeoning shifting external influences and run an organization, too? How is business and industry going to fare in court, for example, on environmental, EEOC or consumer issues when their opponents wrote the laws? How is your manager going to deal with pressure groups who wrote the book on confrontation politics? Who is he going to turn to for guidance? In the past, he may have turned to others. In the future, he must turn to you ... that is, if you have positioned yourself correctly and earned his trust. Why must he turn to you?

Listen again to Tony De Lorenzo: "The entire nation -- even the world -- is the environment of the public relations practitioner. Information is his tool. Facts, statistics, knowledge of trends, changing values, public opinion, the political process, mediums of communication, demographics, economics, political science -- all the disciplines are his tools. Communications is his strategy. Persuasion is his objective."

For as long as I can remember, we have gathered at meetings like this upcoming conference, beaten our breasts and tried to figure out why our bosses don't understand us ... and what we can do about it. However, if we can accept the evidence that the public relations function has been accepted as a fundamental organizational need, isn't it time to address ourselves to the task of earning a higher set of expectations ... of broadening the dimensions of our job? And that's our responsibility as individuals, for in the final analysis, the pursuit of a profession or of professionalism is a personal crusade.

The door upstairs to the offices where decisions are made, where you can make a difference, is open. And you know who'll be the happiest person to see you there? The big boss. He -- or she -- has been waiting for you for a long time.