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PUBLIC RELATIONS POST-MATURATION

The first public relations conference I attended was more than 40 years ago. February 3, 1948, The Waldorf-Astoria, New York City. The annual meeting of the National Public Relations Council, one of two organizations that merged to form the Public Relations Society of America a year or so later.

My principal recollection of that meeting is a seminar session, followed by informal discussion, bemoaning the lack of appreciation by our bosses for our work as public relations professionals.

During PRSA's first 25 or so years, I attended every annual conference -- going well into the 70s. And lesser public relations gatherings too numerous to remember. Regional meetings, committee meetings serving one purpose or another, meetings of the International Public Relations Association and other organizations of several nationalities.

The undercurrent of discussion, formal and informal, among public relations professionals at those meetings invariably centered on getting our bosses to recognize what we did for a living.

This had two purposes:

First, we yearned to be appreciated, to be wanted. We wanted confirmation that what we were doing with our lives had value. What we sought, in a sense, was, indeed, self-serving.

Second, as true believers that what we did as public relations professionals had real value, we sought an opportunity to be of even greater value to our employers and our clients. Even early on, there were some in public relations who recognized the centrality of public relations input in the decision-making process. In effect, those early public relations pioneers wanted a seat at the table of management.

During the earlier days of my career -- the late 40s and the decades of the 50s and 60s -- the role of the public counsel at the highest levels of management was by no means, even then, a

new concept. Names like Ivy Lee, Edward Bernays, Carl Byoir, George Hammond, Pendleton Dudley, T. J. Ross, Earl Newsom on the counselling side and Paul Garrett of General Motors and Arthur Page of AT&T among the corporate practitioners -- all counselled at the very highest management levels.

But the reality is that they were the minority -- the exceptions. Therefore, it is difficult for me to admit that public relations for most of my career has been regarded by many as somewhat peripheral to the mainstream of decision-making -- a necessary add-on, at best, a nuisance or an extravagance at worst to the real business at hand.

I'm happy to report today that I no longer feel that way. I no longer feel simply "tolerated" as a public relations professional. In fact, I feel pretty good about the improved status of public relations as a management function -- about our acceptance as a member in good standing of the management team.

Let me take a few minutes to relate my version of what I like to call the maturation of public relations.

On past occasions, I have traced the evolution of public relations in terms of three phases.

The first phase -- which continued until the decade of the 60s -- I describe as the "how do I say it?" phase.

What do I mean by "the how do I say it?" phase.

Simply this: many, if not most, corporations in the decades preceding the 50s and the 60s employed someone on their staff (or a public relations firm) who had some permutation of public relations as a descriptor for their responsibility. After management decided to do something or make an announcement, the person with the public relations title was asked to "write a release." Generally, but not always, the public relations contribution was simply transliterating the action or the decision into language in the form of a news release for distribution to the press and other interested audiences. The public relations practitioner was being asked, in effect, "how do I say it?" in a way that outsiders will understand. Cosmetic, but all too often true.

A major upward escalation occurred in the mid-1960s. I call that the "what do I do" phase -- a step beyond the "how do I say it?" phase.

Many of you remember the environment of the mid-to-late-sixties. Social unrest was afoot throughout our society -- especially in the United States, fueled by the Viet Nam war. But

there were also stirrings in other countries -- here in Canada and in the countries of Western and Northern Europe.

That was the era of minority rights, of equal opportunity in employment, of consumerism and the public's right-to-know, of the expectation of a clean environment, both water and air. Corporations -- particularly the larger multinationals -- became the popular object of scorn.

After all, were they not the instrument that discriminated male over female, white over black? Were they not the foulers of our air and the polluters of our waters? Were they not the purveyors of products and services that were often misrepresented?

The people managing large corporations -- in those days, almost invariably men -- had little experience dealing with problems of that kind -- social problems, really.

Problems somewhat different than those they encountered in their training and experience as engineers or marketers or production specialists.

The only title remotely connected to the broad spectrum of societal problems of that period was the person labeled "public relations." Increasingly, public relations people were asked not only "how do I say it?" but "what do I say?" And that, in my view, was a major advance -- the second of the three phases of the maturation process.

Came the decades of the seventies and the eighties; the problems of the sixties did not go away. The problems were here to stay, institutionalized, so to speak. The environment, minority rights, consumerism, entitlements, even animal rights -- if anything, they have become more pervasive as issues requiring resolution.

And who's to resolve that category of problems?

Mainly, nowadays, I am pleased to report, it's increasingly the senior public relations officer. He or she may have a title bearing other nomenclature -- public affairs, communications or what-have-you -- but, for my purposes, it is now the senior public relations person who frequently has the specific and designated responsibility and invariably is a participant in the decision-making process.

And the responsibility, too, to deal with other major problems and decisions that impact the institution in its totality.

This I call the "what do I do phase?" -- a giant step beyond "what do I say?" and many giant steps beyond "how do I say it?"

And as I ponder this upward escalation of where we fit in the corporate hierarchy, I like to think that this is a sure sign that public relations has come of age. Indeed, the maturation of public relations.

So -- where do we go from here? In today's parlance, the "post-maturation" period for public relations? Now that what we do for a living has achieved a degree of acceptance, what do we do with it? How do we handle this expanded responsibility? And, are we equipped to do so on a broad-based scale?

Paramount, I believe, is that we who practice public relations must deliver on our promise. We have, I hope, passed through the perception of the "empty suit", the fluff and the cosmetic, and taken on a patina of substance. For that patina to stick, what we do as consultants and as implementers must deliver "added value." In effect, we must make good our role as problem solvers. We must produce solutions and results.

No longer are we being evaluated primarily on our facility to turn out a well-crafted news release. We are now increasingly a member of the team that decides on the action reported in the news release. That's a big difference.

Having moved into this new status so very recently, I have some concerns that not enough of us in public relations are equipped to fill this new role. And after reviewing the backgrounds of people moving into senior public relations positions at major corporations, I have reason to conclude that many CEO's share my view.

Most of you know from personal experience instances of a lawyer's appointment to fill a senior public relations or communications position. Or perhaps an economist or a marketing specialist. Or even an engineer.

All competent people -- but people outside the traditional career path we have always thought both desirable and necessary for a senior public relations person.

Why is this happening? What effect will it have on the function of public relations as it is practiced in and on behalf of our larger corporations?

Allow me to relate a composite of ten or more discussions I have had with FORTUNE 500 CEOs in recent years.

The conversation starts with the CEO saying:

"You know that Joe is up for retirement before the end of the year." (Joe is the long-time vice president for public relations.)

He continues:

“We've got to start thinking about a replacement and I need your help.”

I respond:

“Well, it's good that you have someone like Charley. He's been a great back-up for Joe all these years.”

Before I finish my sentence, there's an interruption:

“You know how much I like and respect Charley, but I'm not sure he's really the right person for what I have in mind.”

I respond:

“Oh!”

The CEO continues:

“Charley's great at putting a news release together -- just the right touch, and pretty quick at it, too. But I think we need more than that.

“Joe, as you know, has been sitting in on our weekly management committee meetings -- as an observer, but I've never asked him to leave the room regardless of what's on the agenda. And, you remember, I made him a vice president -- two or three years ago. Joe has really grown into the job, but I've been concerned even about him. But knowing he's been so close to retirement, I decided not to rock the boat.”

I respond:

“Oh!”

The CEO continues:

“I don't have to tell you. But the job is a lot bigger than it used to be -- environmental problems, lawsuits, dealing with consumer groups, things that have to do with women and minorities -- it's a big job and I can't see Charley doing it (much as I like him and it's going to be hard for me to tell him he won't be getting Joe's job)...”

“I've even been thinking that the job is now so important that the person filling it should have a permanent seat on the management committee. And, you know all the players: you can't see them accepting Charley as their equal -- can you? Plus the fact that I think I'll upgrade the title to senior vice president.”

At that point, there are two choices: go outside for what we in our parlance term “a public relations professional” or look inside for a competent manager with intelligence and

sensitivity who has peer group acceptance of the management committee. The trade-off is someone who knows public relations vis a vis someone who knows the company, its people, its products, its problems and, most of all, its culture.

In a significant number of cases, the preferred choice is to promote from inside the company, even though that person lacks specific public relations experience. To many CEOs, that's the safe choice. The feeling, as often expressed to me, is "it will be quicker for someone to learn what public relations is all about than for someone to learn a company as complicated as ours -- and, after all, we have a strong support staff and good outside counsel as back up."

And, let's face it, it's going to be tough for Charley to pack up and go (he's 51, been with the company 23 years and is about to get a whopping raise as a balm for bruised feelings).

There is, however, a reality in such a situation that the CEO is not always aware of. And that is the shallow talent pool of candidates for the senior public relations position at major corporations -- men and women with the requisite experience both in public relations and in business.

This may seem an anomaly to many of you. After all, expanding numbers of people have embarked on public relations careers during the past two decades. One would think that the supply of qualified candidates with 15 to 20 years experience was sufficiently abundant.

The other side of the equation is that the experience level being demanded by CEOs for their senior public relations officers has escalated in a quantum way. They seek not only the abilities we look for in public relations professionals. In addition, they seek experienced managers, people who have demonstrated they can manage both people and budgets. And they seek people who know business -- especially the business of their company.

All of which causes me to believe that we must reexamine the educational and on-the-job training programs that prepare people for public relations careers. In my generation -- and even a generation or two beyond -- it was enough to have had a good grounding in journalism. But as our tasks have spread far beyond press relations -- important as that function continues to be -- the need for more broadly trained and experienced people becomes apparent.

That -- a new approach to public relations education and on-the-job training -- is, I believe, the keystone that must be put into place as the practice of public relations moves into what I term its "post-maturation" phase.

As the function has expanded, we have tended to create career paths based on specialization. We determine the resources we need to do the various tasks assigned to public relations and we find the best people who match up with those individual niches. And as our organizations grow larger, the opportunities for cross-fertilization -- from one specialty to another -- seem to diminish. People get to be darn good at what they are doing -- but they are denied the opportunity to learn the totality of the public relations process.

Nor are we giving the management function the attention it requires. Public relations is indeed a business discipline and it can and must be managed like other staff functions. The same organizational principles and accountability apply to public relations as to research or to marketing.

To get back to the case of Joe's successor -- a lawyer (very likely), a marketing specialist (possible), an engineer or an economist (maybe) -- (I can give you names of individuals now holding the top public relations jobs in major corporations who came from each of those backgrounds) -- the question often put to me is "am I concerned that these jobs were not filled by (quote) "public relations professionals" (unquote).

On a personal basis, very frequently I am concerned because I have seen some competent people passed over -- I am certain they would have grown into their new and expanded responsibilities.

But I am quick to say that I can cite a goodly number of success stories relating to "people brought in from outside." Not only are they competent managers of the function; they have become first-rate public relations practitioners. They know their companies, they know their companies' businesses in depth and, invariably, they have both access to and respect of their Chief Executive Officer.

I think they bring to public relations a vital infusion of professional talent. And I think they very quickly come to regard themselves as public relations and public affairs managers. They are identifying themselves with what we do for a living. They serve as role models for the men and women in their organizations. And though it's too early to tell, I suspect they will ultimately train and develop people in their departments who can succeed them.

By way of summary, let me leave you with the thought that I feel very good about what's happening nowadays to the public relations function. I don't hear many complaints that "our

management doesn't understand or appreciate us.” Rather, I hear more comments along lines of “we're involved in just about everything.”

And, as I see it, that's the way it ought to be. For after all is said and done, just about every significant decision or action -- and this applies to all institutions in our society -- has public relations implications. Our ultimate goal as public relations practitioners is to impact attitudes and opinion and to motivate people to a desired course of action. That's the net-net of what our jobs are all about.

That we are doing it well is indicated by the demand for our collective services.

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