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## **The Cobbler's Children**

I am near certain most of you know the simple story which is central to the text of my talk. It's about the cobbler's children who had no shoes. They had no shoes because the cobbler was so busy making shoes for his customers that he had no time to make shoes for his own children.

Some of you, undoubtedly, have figured out where I'm taking you, and you're on the mark. It's that we public relations professionals – and I speak particularly to those of us in the business of selling public relations services – we are like the cobbler's children. We have been so busy doing public relations for our clients that we have neglected doing “Public Relations for Public Relations,” doing public relations for ourselves.

You should know where I am coming from. I am not speaking as an officer of Burson-Marsteller, nor for our parent company WPP. I speak only for myself. If you find it necessary to identify me, do so by referring to me as Harold Burson, public relations octogenarian. I am sharing my own personal views with you.

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The good news is that I can recall no time in sixty years of practice when our clients and employers have considered public relations (or its misnomer “communications”) more important. This is not merely my intuitive gut feeling. Hard evidence supports such a claim, contrary to how disparagingly the media often depict public relations. While my argument is U.S.-centric, I believe the trend applies to most developed countries.

First, Fortune global 100 chief public relations officers nowadays usually sit on company management committees. That would have been unlikely twenty years ago.

Second, the chief public relations officer's title at many, if not most, Fortune 500 companies has escalated to senior vice president – at some to executive vice president.

Third, compensation for senior public relations officers has increased dramatically.

Fourth, CEOs and chief public relations officers now work increasingly as a team. A new CEO frequently comes to his/her new job with his/her personally-anointed chief public relations executive. While it's not good for the person who was allied with the departing CEO, it's a positive metric for measuring the relevance of public relations.

The reality that CEOs often place greater priority on short term rather than long term goals is a subject for another speech. The fact is that today's CEO values competent public relations advice and counsel – and wants it close at hand, what my younger colleagues call 24/7. This represents both a threat and an opportunity for those of us in the public relations consulting business.

CEOs once depended heavily on outside public relations consultants for advice they now more often seek from their internal professional staff. The situation parallels what has happened in a kindred area, law, where legal advice on critical issues once came mainly from outside law firms. As in public relations, much of the general counsel function has moved in-house.

Does this mean there is a curtailed role in the C-suite for public relations firms short of a major crisis or a merger or acquisition? Certainly not! But to merit participation at the highest level, we who offer public relations services must demonstrate we have quality talent who can relate to the CEO; and second, we must convince potential C-suite clients of the importance of an independent perspective on issues-at-hand. Even the most competent and best-informed internal professional staff cannot overcome the parochial influences that shape one's focus when it is totally on the company that employs them. My observation is that the larger and more successful companies become, the more they tend to believe in their own infallibility. I well remember my deceased friend, Coca-Cola's Roberto Goizueta, saying "I start worrying about our managers' judgment when our financial reports beat expectations three straight quarters."

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There's nothing new about advocating "Public Relations for Public Relations" –the first time I heard it was forty years ago when the Public Relations Society of America formed what it then called the Counselors Section. Though organizations like those that gather together under the umbrella of ICCO have existed for varying periods of time, none, to my knowledge, has made palpable inroads in gaining greater public understanding of either the role of public relations in society or the business of public relations.

Let me start by sharing with you my definition of public relations. Mine tracks Edward Bernay's view set forth in his classic work, "Crystallizing Public Opinion," published in 1923.

"Public relations is that function which influences a course of behavior that reconciles the client's objectives with the public interest, which, when communicated, influences and motivates a targeted audience to a specific attitude or action."

(Repeat)

My model of public relations is in two parts. The first relates to behavior -- the policy and decision making that results in action. The second deals with communications – in short, disseminating information that reflects that action or behavior. In 21<sup>st</sup> Century rapper terminology, it goes like this: "You can't talk-the-talk unless you walk-the-walk." Also, in my model, information flows two ways. The client must know the public will. The public must know the client's will. And the job of the public relations professional is to help reconcile the two in a manner that serves the public interest.

Denny Griswold, the deceased founder of Public Relations News, came up with this concise definition: "Public relations is doing good and getting credit for it." I have seen nothing that better describes what we do.

In recent years, the popular frame of reference relating to public relations has centered on communications. In fact, "communications," has all but supplanted public relations in identifying what we – you and I – do. I think this is unfortunate because "communications" as a descriptor for public

relations fails to recognize our advisory role in the policy and decision making process. It plays into the hands of those who choose to think of us as “spinners,” “flacks” and other manipulative names that portray us, at best, as obfuscators and barriers to our bosses and, at worst, as liars and cover-up artists .

Unfortunately, the nature of our advisory or counseling roles is such that, because of confidentiality considerations, we cannot talk about it publicly. Our visible role is almost totally what we communicate. Public relations has come to be defined by “dirtiest kids” and “singing dogs” competitions that make good local television content.

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I believe it is also important to share with you what I can best describe as the “nucleus” of public relations. In chemistry it’s the atom; in biology it’s the cell. In public relations, it’s public opinion. Our challenge is to leverage public opinion to motivate a target audience to a specific course of action. I believe it was the respected American journalist/scholar Walter Lippmann who in the early 1920s observed that we can impact public opinion in three ways.

We can seek to create opinion when none now exists;

We can seek to change an existing opinion;

We can seek to reinforce an existing opinion.

That, my friends, is what we, as public relations professionals do -- though few of us ever give thought to the intellectual process that drives us when brainstorming new ideas, when planning events, when writing news releases and speeches.

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It seems to me that any “Public Relations program for Public Relations” must first deal with what we would explain to a client is “positioning.” Is public relations a profession? Is it a business discipline? An art? A science? A trade? Put another way, are our historical, philosophical and legal roots ever taken into account by those who would describe us in

pejorative terms? I am bothered by this ambivalence in identity. We have allowed it to persist too long. It has negative effects on how we are perceived and, I believe it is a barrier to attracting the best and the brightest of our young people to public relations.

The long term goal I envision for public relations is to be recognized as an “applied social science” which could give us both legal and de facto status as a profession. That may sound like a big leap, but let me share with you the dictionary definition of a social science:

Social science (n) 1785 1: a branch of science that deals with the institutions and functioning of human society and with the interpersonal relationships of individuals as members of society 2: a science (as economics or political science) dealing with a particular phase or aspect of human society

Let me repeat that definition.

(Repeat)

By definition, it seems indisputable to me that public relations meets the test of a social science. The practice of public relations embraces a knowledge of history, psychology, sociology, cultural anthropology, geography, philosophy, even a rudimentary knowledge of the law. The legitimacy of public relations is recognized in all democratic nations whose constitutions guarantee their citizens the exercise of free speech, the right to petition elected officials and freedom of assembly.

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But if we are to regard public relations as a profession, as professions are legally defined, there are numerous hurdles which we have not yet jumped. They include institutionalizing a body of knowledge; a specified educational curriculum; an enforceable code of ethics, and some form of licensing that calls for recertification at periodic intervals.

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Now, licensing, which, admittedly, is controversial. I raise the issue because I cannot think of a profession that is not government licensed. Medicine, law, accountancy, engineering, architecture – all are licensed. I know that a few countries even now license public relations. In fact, licensing was a lively topic among U.S. public relations practitioners in the 60s, 70s and 80s. The Edward Bernays I mentioned earlier, was its most vocal proponent. Though then young and largely unknown, I was opposed to licensing – which would have been limited, rightly I think, to public relations professionals who sold their services to clients. In general, after serving a five-year apprenticeship, employees of public relations firms would be required to take and pass the equivalent of a bar exam to obtain a license to practice.

I opposed licensing because I felt public relations and the firm I headed would be better served without any form of government oversight. Through the years, however, I have often wondered if the status of public relations would now be different had it been licensed twenty or so years ago. While I am not yet at the point of endorsing a licensing initiative, my present attitude is that bodies such as ICCO and its constituent organizations should put the issue on their agendas for serious study. The trade off is clear: public relations will likely not gain the professional status it wants and deserves unless it embraces licensing. Unfortunately, I have doubts that self-licensing will meet the test. It is an issue your generation of public relations professionals will have to decide:

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There's little doubt that we must institutionalize public relations as recognized professions have done. We have not documented or articulated its historical, philosophical and legal antecedents. For all practical purposes public relations has no institutional memory. Today's practitioners have scant awareness of the public relations greats who preceded them or of their long-forgotten seminal programs and campaigns that are being emulated and reported currently as original award-winning ideas.

Actually, public relations has a long history. It is as old as when the human specie first began communicating and interacting with one another, older than the Egyptian hieroglyphics or the Dead Sea Scrolls or the cave drawings in Spain. Roman legions didn't march down the broad boulevards of ancient Rome because they needed the exercise. Nor were those

boulevards so wide because Rome's rulers wanted to avoid traffic jams. The boulevards communicated the grandeur of Rome; the marching legionnaires communicated the power of Rome. By any definition, public relations was at work.

The Boston Tea Party likewise was orchestrated to deliver a message – one tile in a mosaic intended to communicate the aspirations of a people who demanded the same rights as their English brethren across the North Atlantic. It took place two years before the start of actual warfare between the colonists and the English – and was followed by other pre-planned initiatives that formed what we would today call a public relations campaign. It even included what we now call a “grass roots” organization comprising “Committees of Correspondence” in each of the thirteen colonies. They provided input on attitudes of local colonists vis a vis separation from the mother country and disseminated information from a central source.

I cite these events as manifestations of public relations long before public relations was recognized as a somewhat predictable methodology to persuade and motivate an audience to a desired point of view.

As a business, public relations, like most service businesses, has a relatively short history. The first known public relations firm called The Publicity Bureau opened in Boston in 1900 with a professional staff of five. Harvard University was its first client at a monthly fee of US\$200 plus out-of-pocket expenses.

It was a former journalist, Ivy Lee, who brought credibility to what he referred to as his publicity agency. Many early 20<sup>th</sup> Century newspapers banned publication of press releases as attempts to obtain free advertising. Lee attacked this policy head-on. In articles and speeches, he pledged to provide news media truthful information that would inform readers on matters of importance to them (as well as to his clients). His premise was that the public is entitled to know what is happening in the world of business. The payoff was that his firm's news releases – the first one issued in 1906 -- were accepted by editors. He set the integrity standard public relations practitioners follow today in media relations.

Bernays was another seminal person in the evolving public relations business. He was first to define public relations as something more than

press relations. His hypothesis was that communication must reflect behavior and behavior must be in the public interest to succeed over the long term. In an ad in Editor & Publisher in 1927, he defined the job of a public relations counsel – a term he invented -- in this way:

“A counsel on public relations directs, advises upon and supervises those activities which affect or interest the public. He interprets the client to the public and the public to the client.”

I have dwelt on the origins of public relations because I believe it is a subject we have neglected. We can and should be proud of our heritage. It exists as a foundation on which to build for the future.

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Public relations is not a hard science like mathematics or chemistry; nor are we an art like painting or music -- even though we are often both artful and somewhat scientific in what we do. As set forth earlier, I believe we are an “applied social science” – in the same genre as teaching or the ministry, both long recognized as professions.

If my premise is valid, a starting point is an educational curriculum that incorporates more formal study of the social sciences we now draw on intuitively. This new curriculum must also recognize that today’s public relations professional must possess a knowledge base beyond public relations. Our clients and employers look to us for information applicable to their business or to their specific problem or issue. If one is to succeed in the world of technology, s/he must be able to speak the language of technology. If the assignment is helping a pharmaceutical company defend a challenge to the efficacy or safety of a specific drug, s/he must have grounding in pharmaceutical marketing.

My purpose here today is not to specify the content of a program that leads to a university degree in public relations. Rather, it’s to say that education must play a substantive role in any “Public Relations for Public Relations” program. And I would add that we public relations professionals, especially those of us whose business is public relations, should work more closely with those in academia who are educating the next generation of public

relations leaders. We should also support and even engage in research into the opinion formation process and other subjects pertinent to our business.. Few of us give enough of our time or enough of our treasure in support of education for our successors.

Continuing education is another requisite for recognition as a profession. Such programs are already offered in some countries. But I feel a need for a more structured approach to professional development. This kind of training represents a substantial opportunity to schools of public relations, especially if licensing ever takes hold and makes re-certification a requisite of continued good standing. Just as in medicine and law and accountancy, we need a mechanism that keeps public relations professionals aware of advances in technology, in the law affecting our clients businesses and in new findings from research in opinion formation and human behavior.

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Returning to my “cobbler’s children” theme, I want to discuss briefly a shorter term effort that applies to public relations counseling firms. It is so simple and elementary that I debated whether I should include it in my remarks today. It is based on a premise that we who sell public relations services have failed miserably in educating the audience we depend on for our existence on how our business works. I’m talking about our clients and new business prospects. I know – this sounds crazy! Ludicrous! But I believe it’s true and there’s a real need.

For sure, our clients know and generally have high regard for us as individuals, but only partially in an institutional sense. They know as individual professionals, but they have minimal understanding of either the dynamics or the economics of our business or the many ways we can help them achieve their objectives. And shame on us for depriving them of that understanding.

We must recognize the change in the client/agency relationship. Seldom are there the strong institutional bonds that existed for most of the thirty-five years I was CEO of Burson-Marsteller. Only infrequently nowadays are we regarded by a client as a long term partner –an extension of the company’s own public relations staff, a frequent and welcome voice at board level.

Rather, we are too often positioned as vendors hired to implement a well-defined program or to serve a specific business unit or brand in one or more geographies. Taking solace in knowing the same is happening in advertising and law does us little good.

We are not likely, in the near term, to regain our once near-exclusive relationships with clients. But we agency people should recognize that we are not the only losers in this new environment. The loss to clients is at least as great, and I believe we are obliged to work harder educating them on what they are missing. We have, for example, not been sufficiently forceful persuading clients that our most valuable service is the independent point of view we bring to their table – based on our broad experience resolving comparable issues with other clients and unfettered by bonds to a previously held point of view.

Similarly, we have failed to educate clients on the economics and dynamics of our business. Our larger clients are unaware that, unlike most businesses, economy of scale does not apply to public relations services. On the contrary, the larger the budget – especially when the task involves multi-country assignments, usually the higher the rate of overhead. That's a little known fact and we face it frequently in negotiations with new clients.

Even sophisticated clients have little appreciation of the amount of capital required to finance a public relations business – especially one that operates globally. They are not generally aware how careful we are safeguarding confidentiality of client information. Many don't know we have policies on accepting new clients – internal tests we apply to determine whether or not we want to work for a particular entity or on a particular issue –or about the internal debates on whether we should invest in responding to RFPs. Nor are they aware of how zealously we protect our reputations with the media and other third parties -- or our sensitivity avoiding clients that would be embarrassing to existing clients or otherwise out-of-place on our client list. Instead, client executives all too frequently are exposed to media coverage that describes us as “spinners,” “cover up artists” and barriers to highly-placed corporate officers -- which invariably goes unchallenged.

Having said this, I feel some clients have greater commitment to what we deliver under the rubric of public relations than those of us whose lives are fully dedicated to the business. Like the cobbler, we have been so busy tending client needs we have forgotten that our own business – like that of

our clients – requires a continuing dialogue with our customers not only about specific services but also about our firms as institutions or, in today’s parlance, as brands. Nor is it out of order to suggest we can never expend too much effort telling our colleagues – those with whom we work every day – who we are and what we stand for.

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In summary, let me repeat that public relations has a rich history. The charge given us by our clients and employers is often the leverage that determines their success. In a sense, we are akin to Pogo in his observation, “I have seen the enemy and he is us.” We allow ourselves to be seen more as promoters of dirty kid contests than to our vital role in a democratic society with a market economy. We content ourselves knowing that, by and large, clients and employers value what we do even as we are pilloried in the media. We are slow to point out that we and our clients and employers are fully accountable to the publics we serve; if a product or service we advocate fails to meet expectations, the customer or client abandons it.

Positioning ourselves as we would want to be positioned will take more than more positive media coverage or catchy advertising. Our primary audience is our own people. We must make them more knowledgeable about the discipline to which they have committed themselves. We in the business of public relations must also develop closer ties to the colleges and universities that educate our entry level employees and we should support their research. We should strive also to convince graduate schools of business to incorporate into their curriculum courses that prepare future corporate leaders to communicate with their broad array of future stakeholders.

We must educate future public relations practitioners in the social sciences basic to so much of what we do and have them realize that a specific knowledge base will make them more valuable to their clients and employers. We must give careful consideration to whether licensing will enhance our professional status and whether that will better help us fulfill our client service mission. And we must never stop learning – adding to our body of experience by keeping abreast of new strategies, new tactics and the ever changing environments in which we do business.

Journeying half way around the world to be with you – professional colleagues of many nationalities -- has been a special treat for me. In a real

sense, my visit to India illustrates vividly how the world is changing. For most of my lifetime, I have been in a perpetual travel mode. Based in New York throughout my professional career, I calculated recently that I visited Chicago more than 500 times. I have visited the UK and Western Europe more than 100 times; Asia more than fifty times. Last year, at age 84, I made my very first visit to India; a year later, I am here again -- assuredly a reflection of the new role India has in the world of global business. My hope is that I will make at least a dozen more visits to this great country.

My thanks to my ICCO hosts, to each of you who have listened so patiently, to the 200 public relations professionals who are my recent Burson-Marsteller colleagues in India and, especially, to my personal physician who continues to prescribe the right pills.

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