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**First of the Year Issue**

**PUBLIC PARTICIPATION: ANTITHESIS OF POLITICAL CORRECTNESS?**

Holiday card from pr/adv'g firm Duval Woglom Brueckner Partners (Boston) humorously attempts to find a politically correct greeting:

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Merry Christmas  
*No! Too Denominational!*

Season's Greetings  
*It's not for a whole season, just a couple of days.*

Happy Hanukkah  
*Same problem as Merry Christmas.*

Noel  
*Is this the right spelling?  
Anyway, too ethnic.*

A Yuletide Greeting  
*Reference too obscure; too ethnic.*

Happy Holidays  
*What about the homeless? They never have a nice day.  
There are serious problems in the world  
and this just makes light of them.*

A big HI from Santa  
*Sounds too pompous  
Too male-oriented & the ASPCA will have a  
problem with the way Santa treats the reindeer.*

Hi.

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That's a light poke at a growing phenomenon. One whose ramifications can negatively affect how organizations operate & build relationships. **How can any organization participate fully in the court of public opinion while tiptoeing over land mines?**

To protect itself, LATimes has issued "Guidelines on Ethnic & Racial Identification" (copy available from [pr](#)). But as Jim Spencer, Newport News Daily Press writes, "Without a philosophical context, words don't produce heresy any more than they produce racism, homophobia, misogyny or any of the other societal ills that the Los Angeles Times thinks it can help eliminate by refusing to print certain terms."



**WILL A PROBLEM GO AWAY IF GIVEN AN ACCEPTABLE NAME?**

PC movement seems to be a symptom of an underlying issue -- people's sense of powerlessness.

If I can't affect change, I feel powerless.	Powerlessness affects my internal identity; loss of control brings discomfort, anger.	To assuage anger & discomfort, I may gain seeming power by controlling words.
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If, instead, people felt *empowered* (as consumers, in their workplaces, by local & federal gov't) would there be less concern for PC terminology? Would our fragmented society be more inclined to "hash out ideas" using whatever words describe their thinking/feeling at the time, secure in their own worth & ability to attain their needs or affect change?

**STUDY SHOWS PEOPLE AREN'T APATHETIC**

They care, Kettering Fdn found, but they don't know how

to affect policy (pr 9/2/91). A recent Kettering study shows that people get involved with public concerns thru discussions & interactions with friends, relatives, neighbors -- classic participation psychology (pr 10/25/93).

- **Can greater public participation by organizations** help arrest the insidious infiltration of political correctness -- a placebo that feeds anger & disempowerment?
- **Is public relations' role** to fight against the natural inclination to appease publics at the expense of a less appealing reality -- i.e. candor & honesty -- even if it means taking hits from some?

**IS THE PUBLIC TIRED OF BEING TOLD WHAT TO DO?  
GROUPTHINK & THE NEW McCARTHYISM POSE PR CONUNDRUMS**

Don't say that! You can't eat this! Better not do that! Watch out for this! Don't think like that!

Then, the next irrational step: People who *do* do these things are clearly out to get you, trying to harm you -- they're not treating you fairly & their motives are obviously nefarious.

Ann Barkelew's prediction the 90s would be The Unforgiving Decade (pr 11/11/91) has proven true. What does this imply for organizational policies & operations? For public relations strategies?

- Does it mean **pandering** to political correctness?
- Since media & politicians are the main drivers of this groupthink, is going around them **directly to key publics** now more vital than ever -- if you want to be taken at face value & let people make up their own minds about you?

- Does it become the responsibility of public relations professionals to **speak out** against this totalitarianism in order to preserve a functioning court of public opinion?

### **CROSSTREND: EMPOWERMENT & ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE WORKPLACE**

The workplace -- that all-encompassing master -- may be a liberating factor now. Its trend toward empowering individuals, making them responsible & accountable, puts people in charge of their own destinies. That means thinking for oneself & taking risks -- the antithesis of PC. But there are complications:

- **Downsizing can be a cruel survival of the fittest**, often a test of a different kind of political correctness: slavish commitment to the current organizational philosophy.
- **Employers are increasingly the designated enforcers** of our legislated groupthink, from no-smoking policies to relations between the sexes to (maybe) healthcare.

Thus, 2 massive ironies are in play:

- 1) **A society trying to remove barriers between its members & give everyone an equal chance ... appears to many to be impinging on the personal freedoms & privacy that have been its hallmarks.**
- 2) **The workplace, that "enslaver of us all" ... offers a glimmer of hope for restoring a balance between Rights & Responsibilities -- which has been lost in society at large, where only Rights seem to matter.**

### **✓ TRANSPARENT COMMUNICATION + PARTICIPATION + POLICY = ANSWER?**

Reams are being written now about this topic. This pr issue could easily be filled with recitation of various PC & "don't" activities. But the question is: what can practitioners do about it beside wring their hands? Suggestions:

1. **Get serious about adopting truly participative dialogue & downplaying 1-way communication**

Most give this lip service. But when you look at actual programs, publications & other communications "products" & media relations form the bulk. Consider the multiplicity of opportunities:

#### Checklist of 1-on-1 Participative Activities

- Face-to-face employee programs involving supervisors/managers
- Meeting networks inside the organization
- Skip level meetings to overcome gatekeeping, Town Hall sessions
- Targeted speakers bureaus

- House meetings in supporters' homes
- Formal constituency relations programs
- Ambassador programs
- Hotlines, 800 numbers & similar
- Opinion leader advisory boards
- Membership networks where employees formally join organizations
- Open houses & tours
- Allowing use of facilities for meetings & events
- Customer satisfaction matrixes

## 2. **Make all communications transparent**

Open is no longer enough, as Bruce Harrison notes (pr 9/21/92). Better is to be transparent -- i.e. showing the reasoning behind statements & decisions, so people can participate in the thought patterns.

To gain trust, this sometimes means letting stakeholders in on the options *before* decisions are made.

## 3. **Establish a policy on what is politically correct for your organization**

Do it participatively, of course. Then continually communicate it, transparently. Questions to be addressed include:

- When does necessary advocacy cross the line into McCarthyism?
- If you have a smoking policy, explain that the old rule applies: one person's rights end at the tip of the next person's nose. Since the smoke & smell from tobacco cannot be stopped from going beyond those limits, banning them is not Big Brotherism or taking away freedom. (Perfume is next for such a policy)
- If you believe PC is a good intention gone wrong, say so to let activists know it isn't their goals you deny, just their methods.
- State strongly your support of inclusion, respect for individuals & anti-discrimination, but define what diversity means *in your organization*

**Example of the last point.** Obesity is the latest condition to have its loud advocates. But if you're a healthcare provider, or have a wellness policy, doesn't having obese people in the organization amount to not walking the talk? Isn't it like the doctor who urges patients to quit smoking while puffing away? Doesn't this mean *diversity is situational*: a university offers inclusion to an administrator or teacher who's overweight (non-medically); but a hospital doesn't?

Or is this another example of enforced behavior -- like laws about wearing seatbelts or bikers' helmets

**Another diversity problem:** enlightened employers often encourage support groups among special interests -- black caucuses, gay rights forums etc. Now "Christian" support groups battle the gay support groups -- publicly. The Latino support group demands to make statements about municipal policy they don't like & march in parades -- using the organization's name & authority.

**The battle between the sexes.** Experience suggests stating emphatically that while sexual harassment is taboo & will be punished, using harassment policies to get even or advance one's cause will also be punished. [Then, having wordsmithed that one, go the next step and settle the problem of juvenile oversqueamishness on sexual matters: "We're adults here, right? Sex is a natural part of life, right?"]

## OTHER STEPS TO TAKE, WAYS TO STAY INFORMED

### BOOK ADDRESSES POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT

People are angry at being shut out of the political system. They have a low opinion of politics-as-usual. Yet many look for ways to "take back the system" & work with others to solve problems. *Politics for People*, by Kettering Fdn pres David Mathews, is about creating a politics that is relevant to citizens' everyday concerns, where they do more than vote: e.g., reviving town meetings in their neighborhoods (not on tv) where political debate is turned into public dialogue -- "an open, exploratory, civil deliberation that can help the public define the public's interest. Who else should do that?"

Book also responds to critics who either doubt that the public exists or believe citizens have neither the intellectual nor moral capacity for self-government. It's not a call for direct democracy or what used to be called "citizen participation." Rather, it resurrects the missing link in democracy -- the politics that lies between direct citizen control & representative government. A politics that is public in character & deliberative in practice. (\$9.95 paperback, \$24.95 cloth; U of Illinois Press, P.O. Box 4856, Hampden Post Office, Baltimore 21211)

### EMPOWERMENT THRU FINANCIAL DECISIONS

Individuals can affect change by where they invest or spend their money. In '93, "investors with a conscience" invested over \$650 billion in socially-screened portfolios or utilized their leverage as investors to advocate social responsibility, according to Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility. Its newsletter, *The Corporate Examiner* (Vol.22, No.5, 1993) lists socially responsible mutual & money market funds and investment services. And their returns are as good if not better as un-screened investments.

Customers can choose where they buy based on their convictions. Look at all the green marketing, attempting to woo environmentally concerned customers -- which illustrates the potential power of convinced customers. According to research by Green Seal (a nonprofit environmental labeling & consumer education org'n), 4 of 5 consumers are more likely to purchase a product with the Green Seal logo when choosing between competing brands of equal quality & price.

**Boycotts are back.** Want to stamp out smoking? Supposing the powerful anti-smoking coalition (led by Heart Assn, Lung Assn, Cancer Society) mounted a full-press boycott against cigarette companies' food units, e.g. RJR's Nabisco & Phillip Morris' Kraft & General Foods? Coop America feels this is the pr weapon of choice now.

**PUBLIC PARTICIPATION  
HAS ITS OWN ASS'N**

Established in '90, **International Ass'n of Public Participation Practitioners (IAP3)** offers networking opportunities & practical info on designing & conducting public involvement programs. "We realized there wasn't much of a place for those of us committed to participation. Public relations organizations didn't fit the bill. Neither did groups of business communicators. We weren't necessarily mediators or negotiators.

"It was time to develop **a professional organization devoted solely to the participation of the public in decisions being made by government & industry all over the world.** We are practitioners. While we may learn from theory, we're most interested in talking about actual experiences, designing & conducting public participation programs. We have stopped talking about whether opportunities for participation should be offered, and now focus our time on how to do it best." (17505-QQ NW Sauvie Island Rd, Portland, Ore 97231; phone & fax 503/621-3376; \$75 mbrship; \$13 for copy of proceedings from '93 conference.)

**SUMMARY: TIME FOR THE PROFESSION TO STEP UP TO THE PLATE**

- A. **Perception is powerful but...** in a democratic society, its views are enforceable only when an *overwhelming majority* have overtly agreed to enact them as *public policy*.
- B. **It is true that whatever an organization does today, someone will attack the action.** In pr's 1st of the Year issue '92, we suggested that all pr activities & messages today be formulated according to the rules of risk management: hazard + perception = risk. There seems every reason to repeat that counsel.
- C. **The problem with PC & all the "don'ts" is its McCarthyism aspect:** many, often most, people don't agree either with the goal or the method of attaining it -- but are afraid to speak up for fear of being attacked. This doesn't mean everyone is a coward. Many just don't have the time or energy to invest in fighting off zealots, or don't want to clutter other issues they are involved in.
- D. **Thus, we have turned over policy to the loudest zealots.** Often tiny minorities in an organization or community run things -- the antithesis of democracy.
- E. **Is this largely the fault of pr practitioners,** who either advise capitulating for fear of "bad press"; or don't train fellow managers in how to push zealots aside in order to let others be heard? When the court of public opinion & communications channels are polluted, the group most at risk is practitioners....

