

TOMORROW'S Public Relations

Today's practitioners need to
advance their skills
to meet present and
future world changes.

Patrick Jackson

TODAY'S encompassing issue is whether humanity will eradicate itself—through nuclear weapons, chemical warfare, or perhaps genetic mis-engineering. Of the disciplines available for dealing with this ultimate problem, the one that is directly relevant here is the science and art we know as public relations.

Denis Gabor put it forthrightly in 1964: "Until now, the problems of mankind have been ones of nature. From now on they will be ones of *human nature*." Solutions are no longer in technology, but in taking account of actual human behavior. Indeed the wonders of computer-age technology more often create social problems than solve them.

Speaking in 1976 at the World Congress in Boston, Sanat Lahiri of India, the president of the International Public Relations Association (IPRA) made the linkage. "We must be more than public relations technicians," Lahiri said, "We must be *public relations humanists*. For the goal of public relations is to reach and touch the hearts and minds of men and women."

For years, Edward L. Bernays has been defining practitioners as "societal technicians with the skills to bring about accommodation in the court of public opinion."

Edward Robinson wrote in the foreword to his 1966 book, *Communications & Public Relations*, "Whenever a public relations situation is analyzed, it inevitably boils down to some sort of attitude and behavior change or maintenance problem. That is, the practitioner is either trying to change or maintain someone's or some group's behavior and atti-

tudes. That is why I have defined the public relations practitioner as an *applied social and behavioral scientist*."

Are We Slow Learners?

These commentators see public relations dealing effectively with even the most difficult world problems. Their messages reached us years ago. Were professionals listening? On one hand, there's little concrete evidence that we were, or even are. Too many practitioners still act and talk as if communications were an end in itself, with magical powers to change attitudes and motivate behavior. Scholars punctured these assumptions decades ago.

On the other hand, practitioners do know the power—and the social responsibility—of our profession. The difficulty has been in applying these lofty principles to daily practice in hospitals, schools, corporations, government, and associations.

Few professionals will ever have world peace as a client. But, just as public opinion consists of an agglomeration of individual opinions, so widespread human behavior depends on the attitude expressed in every workplace, marketplace, and social grouping. We *can* influence the policies and actions of *our* organizations in the direction of public relations philosophy. I am convinced public relations is a philosophy more than anything else. It is a belief that human dignity is invaluable, that people are capable of governing themselves, and that they are entitled to a voice in decisions that affect their lives.

The Near-Term Future

The need is for each of us to provide clients/employers with programs and skills that recognize these realities. We are playing catch up, but I believe we can pull it off. Here is what I predict professionals will be doing very soon:

- *Raising our sights.* A maxim of practice postulates that to change others' attitudes, we must first examine our own. So we had better ask what our attitudes about public relations are. Topical issues like whether we should call it public relations or public affairs, whether it is a profession or a vocation, are insignificant beside the query: Do I truly believe this field has an underlying body of knowledge based in the behavioral sciences and the humanities? More to the point, do I know the science of public relations? Am I able to apply it to my work?

- *Learning without end.* This body of knowledge is growing so fast that continuing education is becoming a necessity. (If you dislike continuing professional development, leave the field. You'll be a drag on your colleagues.) In addition to basics like diffusion process, two-step flow, group psychology, communications modeling, methods of persuasion, and applied semantics, here are some subjects to be studied. You might call them "new product development" for the profession:

- Organization Development: How to be an effective agent of change
- Policy Sciences: How to make consensus decisions
- Diplomacy: How to say no without stiffening resistance
- Arbitration: How to effect compromises and accommodation
- Learning Theory: How to educate instead of just "talking at" people
- Visual Literacy and Graphic Psychology: How to reach and motivate people beyond words
- Systems Dynamics: How the socio-political economy really works
- Strategic Planning and Futures Forecasting: Anticipating problems and opportunities instead of being surprised.

(I hear some of you saying we should know all of this already, but remember we are playing catch up.)

- *Embracing research.* All sound public relations begins with research and ends with evaluation. The most potent word in our practice is "evidence." Research provides it. We should master informal research techniques as well as use the blind statistical sample. Would you want your doctor prescribing medication without making a careful diagnosis? Your lawyer going into court without touching law books? Those activities are often uncomplicated in comparison to what we do when venturing into the court of public opinion.

The Longer-Term Future

By adopting a can-do attitude and powerful skills of the "New Public Relations," these are among the things professionals will be doing before too long:

- *Becoming "managers of change"* rather than "defenders of the faith." No more reactively apologizing but actively gaining approval of plans that anticipate issues and events.

- *Going by the book.* Presenting recommendations to our management colleagues within frameworks that explicitly demonstrate the body of knowledge and our ability to apply it. "I think" will give way to "Here are the options and what

we can predict for each from research and prov concepts."

- *Avoiding the victory syndrome.* Building public has no room for winners and losers. Yet our me victor and vanquished. Now our goal is success . . . because losers rise again. We will seek co least compromise.

- *Learning to trust the people.* Less telling them for them, more listening to what they really c organizations. Going into the court of public op with it the risk of failing to win consent. We w time and money in protracted, enormously exp like those over nuclear power, efficient aut releasing pollution into the environment—whe ety is the loser because a few recalcitrant exec understand the court of public opinion. Particip to the public relations philosophy.

- *A two-track reward system* whereby you can profession or even a specialty within it and income and honors now reserved for those willi full-time managers. And, like accountants in th ranks will swell from one or a few per organiz staffs. Organizations exist by public consent, just begun to realize the many ways that winni influence the bottom line—whatever it is for y we will put more manpower into the challenge practitioners with excellent pre-professional ed

- *Policy not publicity.* Most important of all, will learn the true role and power of the mass n they will recognize that publicity lacks the powe most public relations problems. Then we will s the media to do our job for us and get out th relationships, not one-way communications. Te will think more about organizational policy, rati licity.

The Uncertainty

In a world changing as swiftly as ours, public survival skill for organizations and the ideas of The future of public relations is thus assured. for present day practitioners and our obsole less certain.

But destiny is a matter of choice, not chance attain our potential role in society—or perhaps we survive—depends on our will to create quickly—along lines similar to those outlined a

One more point: I hope you agree or disagree what I've written to take issue. Debating our f far more likely that we will demand owner action. ■

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