THE PRINCIPLES OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

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Preface

With good reason those who work in public relations are called practitioners: public relations is a practice. But it is not a haphazard practice, it is planned. Plans are based on principles which, in this book, are taken to be generalities derived from observation and assumed to be true.

The emphasis of this book is on the priorities of public relations and the principles that underlie them. Thus it is a clear step removed from the level of how-to-do-it. There are therefore no tables of statistical data, no checklists, no references to current costs or existing technologies. These things change continually; priorities and principles are relatively stable. The author has also tried to distance himself from the social and cultural specifics of any particular country. However, principles are largely derived from practice and practice inevitably takes place in a social and cultural context. No doubt therefore, the author's Canadian-English-American background shows through in the illustrative material. Nevertheless, the main thrust is on a higher level of generality.

Ethical principles are not dealt with. The book is limited to the operational principles that underlie standard public relations practice. The ethical principles of public relations are stated explicitly in various national and international codes of conduct. The operational principles, however, generally have to be inferred either from the way practitioners operate or from textbook descriptions of their approach. When one does that and then carefully examines the exposed principles, most seem clearly reasonable but some appear to need refinement and a few seem opposed to those of other disciplines.

The first purpose of this book is to make explicit the main principles of standard practice. To do this, the nature of public relations is examined, then each of its operational phases—situation analysis, setting objectives, planning and evaluation—is analysed separately. In the final two chapters the same style of examination focuses on two other principle-guided aspects of public

relations—specialized public relations and training for public relations. As the underlying principles are successively made explicit, the defensible ones are supported, those that need refinement get some, and those that seem misguided are questioned without apology.

The principles themselves appear in italics, each in its context within the body of the text. They are listed in full in Appendix 1.

The book is intended primarily for practitioners and students of public relations. It should also prove helpful to people engaged in public relations either casually or temporarily. Some familiarity with the fundamentals of public relations would be helpful but is not necessary to an understanding of the text.

Contents

1. The Nature of Public Relations

Public Relations—Science or Technology?

'We are very sorry but we cannot guarantee results.' It would be legitimate, I think, to read this apology into Clause 9 of the British Institute of Public Relations' *Code of Conduct*:

> **'A member shall not negotiate or agree terms with a prospective employer or client on the basis of payment contingent upon specific future public relations achievements.'**

The defence of this clause usually hinges on three arguments:

(1) public relations performance cannot be evaluated by results achieved over a given period of time, for example, the duration of a contract;
(2) public relations achievement cannot be evaluated solely by measurable results;
(3) extraneous factors can affect the attainment of public relations objectives.

A fourth defence should be considered: public relations deals more often with probabilities than with certainties, but guarantees can be based only on certainties.

As a rule, the most a practitioner can say on launching a project is, 'I hope this works. I think it will, but I can't be sure.' Public relations is not simply the cut-and-dry application of a set of foolproof principles, it is an exploration of human relationships. The practitioner is guided by what he knows but every time he faces a new situation he also faces the possibility and necessity of learning more. The continuing search to learn more can be guided only by a combination of known certainties and interesting probabilities. It is not that the practitioner puts his client at risk by indulging his own curiosity rather than banking on what can't miss; there are simply not enough certainties to eliminate all the risks. The practitioner works to eliminate uncertainties, but he can do that only by pursuing probabilities. It is an approach with

respectable credentials in the sciences and it is one that makes very good sense.

A scientific approach

One can draw a parallel with a medical researcher trying to find a cure for a disease. He begins by studying the situations in which the disease exists, and those who suffer from it, in order to form an understanding of its origins and the factors that sustain or aggravate it. He then proposes an explanation. He is not sure of it; it is a well informed, respectable guess. He must therefore test it by applying a possible remedy which, if his understanding of the disease is correct, should cure it. If the disease remains he will at least have learned that his explanation must be questioned—an important lesson. If the disease disappears he will have more confidence in his explanation. He still cannot be sure of it; perhaps something else accounted for the disappearance of the disease but at least his proposed explanation will have gained strength through the test. He may think of several ways to test his explanation. If it survives each test he might get to the point where he has enough confidence in it to accept it without further testing. This would not be a confirmation of its absolute truth, but a declaration of respect for its probable truth. From then on he could concentrate on developing ever-more-effective cures for the disease. In this way, slowly but surely his understanding of the disease and its control would grow.

One takes the same approach to solving public relations problems. The practitioner begins by analysing the situation to get a comprehensive view of the problem. What seems to have caused it? What aggravates it? What are its ramifications? Eventually he develops a plausible explanation for it. Unless it appears to be a problem in every way identical to one he has seen before (which is very unlikely) he finds himself in the position of the medical scientist: he has to test his explanation. To do this he proposes a solution—a public relations project of some kind. However, since his explanation is tentative he cannot at this point be sure that his proposed solution will eliminate the problem. He should have enough confidence in it to defend his proposal but if you put the straight question to him: 'Are you 100 per cent certain that this project will succeed?', he would have to admit that its total success was only probable. The suggested explanation is therefore a hypothesis and the proposed solution is designed to test its validity.

Assuming that the project was well designed and carefully implemented, if it fails to eliminate the problem the practitioner

will have good reason to question his understanding of the situation. If on the other hand the problem is eliminated at the end of the project, he will have more confidence in his explanation but will still not be absolutely sure of it. He will be able to say only that his efforts probably solved the problem. It remains possible that it was eliminated by factors of which he was unaware.

The point must be made here that not all public relations activities are directed to solving problems. Continuing programmes are more often designed to maintain favourable relationships already established between organizations and their publics. However, the approach does not change. The practitioner is forever testing either his comprehension of the existing relationships or how he tries to preserve them. And in either case, as with problem-solving, he is dealing only with probabilities. But if he persists, gradually the probabilities will strengthen and eventually they will lead him to the discovery of principles.

Public relations and science

The public relations practitioner clearly has less control over his experiments than a researcher in a laboratory but his method is essentially the same. It is a systematic approach to acquiring and evaluating information. It is a method that searches for explanations derived from observable evidence, and although based on probabilities, it tries to establish firm bases for prediction. However, the fact that the public relations practitioner uses a scientific method is not enough to classify him as a scientist. Science is characterized by two main elements: one is its systematic method, the other is its goal. The goal of science is to identify the principles which govern the subject being studied, in particular, previously unknown principles. It is in this sense that science tries to expand the horizons of human knowledge. To discover the principles that underlie a phenomenon is to enrich one's comprehension of the phenomenon itself and to open the way for further exploration. If one has grasped the principles one can apply them to new situations, delimiting their scope and testing their strength. This is why scientific statements (principles, assertions, hypotheses, theories etc) must always be testable. No matter how plausible a statement may seem, if it cannot be tested there is no way to determine its possible contribution to science. What is more, the results of scientific tests must be reliable. That is to say, the outcome of a test must be such that it could be obtained by anyone, anytime, anywhere, as long as the test was carried out under prescribed conditions. If the observed result has to be qualified, the qualification must be made explicit.

For example, it is not scientifically accurate to say that water boils at 100 degrees Celcius. One should add that it boils at that temperature only at sea level and then only if it is pure water.

Notice that science is not restricted to any particular subject matter, for example the physical universe which interests physicists and chemists. Science can just as legitimately deal with cultural phenomena or human and social behaviour. Since the subject matter is not the determining factor, the study of physics can be unscientific and the study of mysticism scientific. It depends on the goal pursued and the method employed. What about public relations, then? Could it be considered a science? Certainly its subject matter—the relationships between organizations and their publics (those groups of people with whom organizations interact)—would be a legitimate scientific interest, and the approach taken by practitioners in their work could, as we have seen, be interpreted as a scientific method. But it is not clear that public relations has a scientific goal. The practitioner is primarily interested in establishing and maintaining a sort of congeniality between his organization and its publics. Since this, as a planned activity, depends on the application of principles, the practitioner is of course interested in principles. But whereas a scientist is primarily interested in the discovery of principles, the public relations practitioner is more concerned with their application.

Public relations and technology

Given that the application of scientific knowledge to practical ends is technology rather than science it would seem that, based on current practice, public relations would more accurately be called a technology than a science. But should it be so? Think again of the medical profession. A medical practitioner is one whose main concern is the application of scientific principles to the benefit of his patients. He is therefore a technologist. The medical researcher, on the other hand, occupies himself with the discovery of principles which will later be applied in the practice of medicine. The necessary link between practice and research is as clear as the distinction between them. In the case of medicine the distinction is emphasized by the fact that the two functions are often performed by different people. In public relations the situation is different. The practitioner occupies himself with the application of principles, but where does he get them? Many of them he finds in other disciplines, for example psychology, mass communication, sociology, political science or business administration. But significantly, they are *other* disciplines. Whatever

principles they have to offer to public relations were derived from different fields of study. The danger in borrowing them is not that they might prove second-rate but that even collectively they will not serve public relations adequately.

Public relations research

Public relations research does go on in universities but how much of it is pure research of a type that discovers new principles? Some of it is directly related to the problems of organizations that have commissioned it and a lot is library research of principles already discovered. Moreover, very little of it is solely related to public relations. It could just as well be considered research in mass communications, business administration, sociology or some other discipline. This is not to denigrate such research; it is extremely important but it is not enough. Yet there is not a distinct and recognizable body of public relations professionals whose first responsibility is to discover the special principles related to their field of interest. In other words, there are no pure scientists in public relations, only applied scientists—technologists—practitioners. By default it is left to them to discover whatever unique principles underlie their work. If there is such discovery it is a secondary outcome of their practice, something that most often occurs in the evaluative stage of a project. Pure scientific research would be carried out in advance of project planning, indeed independently of it. It must therefore be said that the current practice reflects a principle that *public relations functions as a technology rather than a science*. The scientific knowledge it applies in its practice is gleaned from other disciplines and public relations practice rather than from independent research.

This principle might very well be called into question in the near future. The impact of new technologies (cf Chapter 7) on social and industrial structures will put unprecedented demands on those responsible for the relationships between organizations and their publics, and conceivably we could see the forced emergence of what would amount to a new field of scientific inquiry—public relations. The process of scientific inquiry can be triggered by any number of stimuli—an unforeseen side effect or even the failure of an experiment, a consequence of some form of behaviour, an implication of an already verified principle, or (as perhaps in public relations) the pressure of changing circumstances. In any case, the response is more important than the stimulus.

Systematic, Intuitive and Creative Public Relations

Of the numerous definitions of public relations currently in circulation, none is universally accepted. Most came into being as statements of what practitioners actually do. Later the more durable of them became statements of what practitioners should do. However, since none of them is supported by sanctions, even the most widely accepted ones are in fact nothing more than statements of what public relations practitioners sometimes do, could do, would find it helpful to do, are advised to do or expected to do (by whom?). The practitioner, therefore, is more precisely directed in his work by the terms of his contract than by academic definitions of public relations. He might, however, benefit from considering some of the definitions if only to provide himself with a fresh point of reference. A definition which is someone else's view of how the job could or should be done can be sparkling enlightenment to a practitioner immersed in the urgencies of his practice.

The public relations practitioner

The public relations practitioner functions between the management of the organization which employs him and all other internal and external groups or individuals with which his organization has anything to do. The organization may be a commercial business, a public service, a voluntary organization, a football team, a trade union, a rock group or even an individual person. Those with whom the organization deals—an equally diverse assembly—are usually termed 'publics', no matter how many or few people each of them comprises. One person could be a public. It is the job of the practitioner to help things go well between his organization and its publics. He is either a fully employed member of his organization or an external consultant working on contract. Understandably therefore, in spite of his intermediary function between the organization and its publics he is inevitably more closely identified with the organization. He frequently, in fact, becomes its spokesman. He therefore makes it his business to thoroughly understand its structure, objectives, policies, practices, strengths and weaknesses. To the degree that it is considered by management to be necessary, he then makes this information publicly known. He is not thereby functioning as a leak; rather, he serves as a respectable informant. At the same time, he tries in whatever ways he can, to get to know the publics with which he is dealing. He is interested in anything which might bear on their relationships with the organization—their

composition, living and working conditions, beliefs, attitudes, hopes, fears, expectations, behaviour etc. Here again, he evaluates this information and makes relevant items known to his employer. In this way, without compromising his role as a representative of the organization, he functions at the same time as an unofficial delegate of the organization's publics. At times this second function even leads him to recommend policy changes in the organization to the benefit of the publics. His purpose in serving both the organization and its publics is to create a base of mutual understanding on which the two parties can build a solid and positive relationship. Not surprisingly, the pursuit and maintenance of mutual understanding figures prominently in many definitions of public relations.

But the practitioner's job rarely stops there. He is frequently required to promote the organization's interests through campaigns of one kind or another. This sometimes leads to confusion between the roles of public relations and advertising or marketing in commercial organizations. A key difference is that while advertising and marketing are directly concerned with the sale of products and services, public relations seeks to create the public dispositions that will make sales promotion effective. In public relations, more than in advertising and sometimes more than in marketing, two-way communications is therefore the rule. Furthermore, the public relations practitioner takes a broader approach in his work than do those whose principal concern is the flow of products or services. It can happen that a public relations problem exists while the demand for an organization's goods or services remains strong. For example, in communities where the police are vilified for brutality or discrimination (definitely a public relations problem), the demand for their services does not weaken. Any breakdown in the rapport between an organization and its publics is a public relations problem whether or not it directly affects the organization's observable functions. The problem may be linked to social or cultural traditions, environmental conditions, ethical systems, aesthetic tastes or historical tensions. It may relate to public beliefs or ideologies, the repercussions of public experience, or simply stubborn and irrational behaviour. All of which suggests the complexity of public relations and explains the practitioner's organized approach to his job: if complexity is not managed in an organized way it becomes chaotic.

The public relations process

The practitioner begins, as already pointed out, by analysing the

situation to discover its positive and negative aspects, the direction of its evolution, the circumstances impinging on it, its ramifications, the degree to which it is amenable to change and the possibility of its being preserved or strengthened. This can demand a lot of sophisticated research but should not be skimped: situation analysis is too important.

On the basis of his analysis he then decides whether or not to intervene. Sometimes the most advisable course is to leave things alone. If he chooses to take action he first identifies the final objectives he hopes to achieve. To simply wade in and play it by ear is not acceptable practice. In Chapter 3 we will examine in full the setting of objectives; in Chapter 4 each of the planning stages mentioned here will be elaborated. For the moment we will simply sketch the practitioner's systematic approach to carrying out a project.

Guided by his final objectives, he begins detailed planning. This includes identifying all of the publics who will be either affected by the project or involved in it. Since the nature and function of each of these publics will be particular, the practitioner identifies as intermediate objectives what he hopes to achieve in approaching each of them. Clearly, one intermediate objective—an inevitable one—will be to maintain effective communication with each public. As might be expected therefore, 'creating messages', 'selecting communication channels' and 'working with the media' are invariably given high priority in contractual terms of reference and textbook treatments of project planning. What receives far less attention, oddly, is the next step—the justification of intermediate objectives. At this stage the practitioner makes explicit the logical links between his proposed intermediate objectives and the previously established final objectives. Practitioners who overlook this stage sometimes find that they have unwittingly set themselves intermediate objectives that contribute little or nothing to the final purpose of the project.

Then follows a description of precisely how the plan is to be carried out. Things that look impressive in a formal presentation sometimes prove to be impracticable because of the omission of details like 'Who is going to be responsible for this mailing?' or 'How will materials be transported from A to B?'. The practitioner makes all such details clear in his description as well as the scheduling and phasing of each stage of the project. Then the project is costed—in minute detail. Somebody has to pay for it and that person or department naturally wants to know how much is being asked for and why. This is seldom a straightforward task; among other complications, public relations activities

are sometimes distributed across a number of different departments.

If the plan in its entirety is approved by all those with authority to pass judgement on it, the project is then implemented. From that point on, the plan becomes a guideline, but not inflexible. Long-running projects must be appraised regularly throughout their implementation. If these periodic evaluations point to a need for revisions, the plan will be appropriately modified in the course of the project. This 'formative evaluation' is distinct from the 'summative evaluation' carried out after the project has been completed.

Continuing programmes

The systematic approach is most succinctly illustrated in the case of a single public relations project, but it applies as well to continuing programmes. In well organized establishments the continuing programme is usually spelled out in two plans—a Strategic Plan, which is somewhat tentative, generally covering a period of three or five years, and a firm Operational Plan for the coming twelve months. As each Operational Plan is approved and budgets allocated the Strategic Plan is re-examined and projected for an additional year so that it always extends a fixed period beyond the Operational Plan. The Operational Plan is naturally the more detailed of the two but both are characterized by the same logical, systematic approach.

The insistence on this approach both in public relations practice and textbook descriptions of it reflects the importance accorded to it. It is considered important for two reasons:

(1) The rationality of the approach, its logical coherence, is considered the surest guarantee of effective performance. This is ultimately a philosophical defence, an affirmation that man works best when he works rationally.
(2) The sequential structuring of standardized phases in the planning and execution of programmes provides a basis for measuring progress, and possibly for assessing performance against that of other organizations.

These two arguments could be slightly recast to express two principles which underlie current public relations practice:

(1) *A rational approach to public relations planning provides the strongest assurance of effectiveness;*
(2) *A systematic approach to public relations planning lends itself to measuring progress.*