

"PUBLIC RELATIONS AT THE LOCAL LEVELS"

BOB COX

Director, Public Relations
Kentucky Department of Highways

It is a pleasure and an honor to participate in your proceedings. I must confess, tho, that I feel a good bit like the fellow who came back to town after an absence of ten years.

His friend said, "Andy, where *have* you been? I haven't seen you in pretty near ten years. Where have you been hiding?"

"Prison!" said Andy.

"Prison!" said his friend. "What for?"

"Swindling," said Andy.

"Swindling! Why you never swindled anyone in your whole life!"

"I know," said Andy, "but the district attorney made me out so smart, I just couldn't bring myself to contradict him!"

I felt very much like Andy when Mr. Haley asked me to talk with you folks . . . I just couldn't contradict him and inform him that *you* should be telling *me* about public relations . . . not the other way around.

You gentlemen occupy the strongest public position in history . . . likewise you are in a position to apply public relations at the local level in a manner that will more than repay the effort made.

Let me begin with a confession. I am not very proficient in public relations semantics. The profession has hardly attained the stature of others and we do not yet have any impressive paraphernalia. The engineer has the mysterious contraption, the slide rule; the accountant has his calculator. Doctor and dentist have formidable assortments of weapons, while the lawyer can cite obscure cases from forbidding shelves of musty volumes.

We have no accessories in our trade, and I think this is one reason for the tendency I have noticed to surround public relations with a mumbo-jumbo of mysterious phraseology . . . "the engineering of consent" . . . "perceptual context" . . . the "soft sell" are just words as far as I am concerned.

My concept of public relations is somewhat more down to earth. To me it means primarily—

Getting along with people!

A good public relations man has the ability to get along with people . . . people individually and people in groups. Unfortunately, some public relations men mistake the first for the second. They think, if you get along with people individually, over a martini for instance, the rest comes easy.

Actually, the second is more important . . . getting along with people in a group . . . especially that biggest and most indefinite of all groups . . . the public.

Governor Robert D. Holmes of Oregon told a group of county officials last year that there is a great loneliness in the hearts of the American people because of the size of government. He said, "We must not delude ourselves that the machinery of government is more important than *what* we should accomplish. Government at the local level must stay close to the security, health, and welfare of its people!"

We use the phrase "public relations" to describe two separate things . . . a state of being and an activity.

As a plural noun, public relations means an organization's relations with the public . . . in other words how it stands with the public . . . whether people like or dislike its method of operation . . . or, if the net results are as desired.

In a singular sense public relations also means the things an organization does in a formalized activity to *influence* its relations with the public.

All groups have "public relations" spelled with a small "p" and a small "r". Whether we like it or not, whether we want to or not, you and I *have* relations with the public or a public. But, whether these relations are good or bad can depend in substantial degree on what we do about them in a conscious way.

This is Public Relations . . . the organized activity . . . with a capital "P" and capital "R".

I think it is important that we make this distinction. Otherwise, we become bogged down in a morass of words . . . it is important to know from the start.

Reminds me of the story of the young man who took a young lady out for a ride in his car . . . came the inevitable parking, followed by several kisses on the cheek . . . he explained, "This is called spooning."

"Okay," she said, "but I think I'd rather Shovel!"

Public relations has to start with a foundation of good deeds. This is what we have in mind when we say that the *job done* is an essential prerequisite to public acceptance. *Do* a good job, *live* right, *treat* your employees well, be a competent manager, and so on, and you have laid a good foundation for good public relations.

Big business in our country has seen the handwriting on the wall . . . these folks do their public relations work right from the ground up.

Doing a good job in the right way means, among other things, giving consideration to its public relations aspects at the very start. It is a management function . . . a top management function. Every policy decision, every administrative action all down the line, has a P. R. aspect to which consideration must be given. And, this consideration must come *before* the decision is made or the action taken . . . not after.

When we know our action will have a *good* public reaction, it is important to publicize the action. Doing a good job in the best way possible is not enough. A good deed doesn't necessarily speak for itself. There is no beaten path to the door of the better moustrap builder who hides his light under a bushel.

For the individual, modesty may be a virtue . . . but few communities can afford this luxury for long.

It is important to let people know, to explain, even when a contemplated action is sure to have a bad public reaction.

It has been said that from the standpoint of public relations the important thing is not what you do or are but what the public thinks you do or are. Without subscribing to this rather cynical philosophy, the fact must nevertheless be accepted that for us the shadow often looms larger than the substance. And if the shadow happens to be reflected off a . . . shall we say . . . oblique surface . . . one that is not four-square, the result may well be a quite distorted image of the substance.

Not too long ago, one of our department heads was invited to appear before a civic-minded group to explain our system of new Federal Highways. He delayed his acceptance because he was not in possession of enough facts to make a good appearance. A couple of months went by and he still hadn't accepted. One day, on the street, a member of the committee chewed him out for not giving them the courtesy of an acknowledgment. The committeeman followed this up with a letter to a high-up . . . he was burned and rightly so.

This simple incident threw a bad light on our whole department and the shadow cast was our fault . . . our man had good reasons for delaying his talk but didn't stop to think what other construction would be put upon his failure to reply.

If you will permit me to change metaphors in midstream, it is my belief that public relations has an obligation to chart a course thru these treacherous reefs and shoals of misinterpretation and misrepresentation. It is not enough to be prepared to man the life-boats. We must call attention to the danger of running aground.

Because we have no psycho-sonic depth finders with which to detect the submerged rocks and sandbars of public misunderstanding that may lie ahead, this calls for judgement of a high order . . . judgement based on experience and compounded with imagination. Imagination is most important because it is only by the use of imagination that we can assess the act of today in terms of the repercussions of tomorrow. In the case of the missed meeting I am afraid we were guilty of lack of imagination.

I'd better sum all of this up in one sentence:—

Good relations with the public derive from doing a good job, doing it well, doing it in the right way (beginning with the initial top-level decision) and seeing to it that people are properly aware of the job by means of a good Public Relations activity.

That's too long and involved . . . let's try again:

Good public relations (with small "p" and small "r") result from sound decisions effectively carried out and implemented by good Public Relations (with a capital "P" and "R").

How does one know when one's relations with the public are good?

As of any particular moment, the evidence is not so clear. It is almost as difficult to interpret the pressures of public opinion as those who make our weather. We do, however, have certain barometers, weather vanes, cloud formations and other signs available. But putting them all together, we get some sort of a weather map of public opinion.

In our case, we keep tabs on what people are saying and reporters are writing. News media and newsmen reflect public opinion and they also *affect* it.

Our representatives in the field serve as effective listening posts in their respective communities. Their reports are valuable indicators of what is developing in the "grass roots" of public thinking.

We take advantage of every opportunity to talk with civic, fraternal, and any other available groups . . . in fact any group of more than two people gathered in one place is fair game for our one man opinion poll.

Now, let's talk of techniques very briefly:—

We can call them precision, punch, and people.

First, "precision" . . . by precision I mean acting at precisely the right moment. In public relations, knowing *when* is almost as important as knowing *what*. Bad timing can all but cancel out the effects of a good policy. On the other hand, proper timing can greatly increase the public impact of any action.

Next is "punch" . . . I mean by that putting the extra zip into a project to lift it out of the ordinary and make it catch and hold public imagination. Punch calls for a flair for the dramatic and the unusual.

For example, last fall the Commissioner wanted some means of getting the message over to the public about the good usage of the Road Bond Issue. We compiled a special 18 page brochure in color, full of construction pictures and factual data presented in a dramatic manner. The result? An informative piece that touched off a rocket-charged discussion from one corner of the state to the other. BUT, it was factual information presented to the public in a manner never-before-attempted.

The third technique I want to call to your attention I have labeled "people." An organization is judged more by the personal contracts of its people than by any other one thing. Because of this, Public Relations as an activity cannot be carried on exclusively by a single staff, department or section. Its effectiveness is measured largely by the extent to which *all* of the people in the organization understand its objectives and participate in carrying them out.

Ideally, all contracts with the public should be on a personal, a person-to-person basis. This is, of course, an unattainable goal, but it should ever be kept in mind. The objective should be for every person in the organization to constitute himself or herself an ambassador of good will.

At the top level in most local government we find those with an instinctive

knack for good P. R. Others have acquired the skill in hard campaigning. This means of expression by public speaking and closer contacts afterwards is invaluable.

I must sum up here by saying that I consider this participation of the people of an organization in its Public Relations so important that I would almost go so far as to say that an organized staff can accomplish little without it. We may write the score, supply the uniforms, furnish the instruments and handle the baton but it is the musicians in the band who furnish the music.

I have dealt in generalities thus far . . . now allow me to present for your consideration a series of pertinent points that should be considered very nearly a "must" series. I will divide them into three sections again and term them, "you", "yours" and "them"!

First, "you" . . . I have tried you fairly well as to the duties of leaders and managers to public relations but let me add a couple of points:—

1. Identify mutual problems and interests of your organization and the community.

2. Identify key publics in the community . . . collectively your public consists of many groups . . . each group has its own interests, and should be approached in terms of those interests, not yours. Every communication you make should be a two-way communication, in which you learn something from the other fellow as you hope he will learn something from you.

3. Survey channels of communication to specific publics . . . use means of reaching mass audiences, radio and newspaper, but don't use a shotgun to do a rifle job . . . for example, a news release to reach only the members of a Junior Chamber of Commerce.

4. Draft a proposed program . . . sponsor an employee publication; try a newsletter mailed to community *thought* leaders arrange in-service training courses with schools; partake of special community events . . . originate these where possible.

5. Inform your key personnel about the program and provide for their active participation. Let them express their views and strive to get the message across to their own people.

6. Follow thru. Supervision of the program may not require full time, but the program should receive regular attention. Community relations are never static. The state of community relations may change from day to day, depending on many influences.

Now, for "Yours" . . . by this I mean probably the most important facet of this entire discussion! *Public Relations thru employees!* The mere fact that an organization is efficiently operated is not sufficient to sell the citizen on its worth. The most effective avenue thru which the public can be reached is the employee, regardless of where the contact is made. Remember, if you have 100 employees, 200 ears are listening every time their mouths open!

1. Impress the public with the efficiency, forthrightness, and capability of every department. In highways particularly, drivers should be careful and courteous . . . flagmen polite in their directions . . . engineers careful in their treatment of the property of others to mention just a few.

2. The public employee is considered the "insider" and his friends expect him to know just what is happening. It is therefore important that all employees do their utmost to become fully informed about their units . . . to answer questions . . . to correct mistaken impressions. Ignorance or Knowledge, satisfaction or dissatisfaction, will create the picture their friends have of the entire setup.

3. Citizen's visits . . . one of the most frustrating experiences to the public is being sent from office to office . . . usually because your employees will not take the time to learn, or, because you have failed to have them instructed in the first place! Set up a simple system starting with the first person the public is likely to see and watch the growls change to smiles.

4. Create good will on the telephone . . . teach your people how to correctly

answer a phone, take messages, make call-backs, and follow simple telephone courtesy. Your local telephone company will be more than happy to assist you in promoting good telephone habits with your staff. I must add here that it won't hurt too much to let a bit of it rub off on you, too!

5. Take time out to evaluate your employee-public relations . . . measure it by means of a one-man-poll, if you wish . . . you'll soon find out that the general impression being given is causing comment. Really, a formal evaluation system is unnecessary . . . folks are quick to report the bad conditions . . . the other kind you never hear about!

Lastly, (and I'm very nearly thru with all this) I have titled "them". Besides being a poor grammarian I am a firm believer in a definite program of effective press relations . . . and I include the radio commentators in the same group.

The public is entitled to know what government is about. It is your responsibility to see that it is informed thru the press and radio. In order to get the most mileage out of your news it should be handled expediently and well.

1. Familiarize yourself with the newspaper's problems.

a. Deadlines—every paper has its deadlines and you should try to break your news to meet them.

b. Timing—certain days of the week are less desirable than others for the release of stories (I am speaking of towns with daily papers, of course). Monday is usually the best day of the week for good size and position because of the lack of week-end news on wire services. Sometimes give out a story on Friday for Monday release which gives an extra day to develop the story.

c. If you have two papers, you naturally favor the one "on your side". However, give thought to throwing them a bone now and again . . . they might just happen to give you a break to get more out of you! If both papers are favorable (where does that happen?) try to time releases to fit the matters they are plugging.

2. If you don't already, know *all* of your newspapermen well . . . know the boys in the composing room just as well . . . they can position a story for or against you!

3. Make yourself available . . . you make work only from 9 to 5 but the news gathers work around the clock. You should not consider a phone call from the newspaper to your home an invasion of your privacy. It is always to your advantage when you are given an opportunity to get your side of the story across.

4. Be an educator. Much local news is complex. Don't assume that because you understand it, everybody will. I have heard Commissioner Ward Oates spend many, many extra minutes explaining a news release in simple a-b-c terms, answering all questions, and leaving reporters feeling that they could accurately convey the information to their readers. The result: Commissioner Oates has received excellent coverage on highway news. I might add that the same technique can be used with civic groups and others segments of the public.

5. Don't quarrel with the newspapers! You can't win . . . you may feel that a story has been unjust to you, but that is a cross, that you, as a public official must learn to bear. Sometimes you can set a paper straight on facts but don't quarrel! They always have the last word and can end the discussion at any time.

6. Free and open access to the news. It is only in rare instances that local news cannot be made public. By holding back from the press, you are inviting criticism and goading reporters to dig further. The "open-door" policy is a must in dealing with newspapers. Attempts at suppressing the news will often backfire.

Let me close with this little story . . . one day a lion came upon a bull wandering in the jungle. He pounced upon the bull, killed, and ate him. He felt so good afterwards that he began to roar. He roared so loud a hunter heard him and came into the jungle and killed the lion. MORAL: When you're full of bull, keep your mouth shut!