

*Vernon C. Schranz Distinguished Lecture in Public Relations  
Kerryn King – 1985*

I am deeply honored to have been chosen to deliver the Vern C. Schranz lecture for 1985. Although this lectureship has been in existence only since 1979, it has gained a reputation not only for the prominence of the speakers it has brought here to Ball State University, but also for the significance of the topics the lectures have dealt with. This evening I am going to try to live up to that reputation.

It may not be easy, for what I want to discuss is the entire subject of public relations-what it is, what it does, where it belongs in the corporate table of organization, what it attempts to achieve and what kind of future it has. This is a tall order-but as you know, I am from Texas, and we Texans thrive on tall orders. Furthermore, the format of these lectures gives me time enough-I hope-to deal rather fully with this broad topic.

In the course of preparing for my talk here, I had the opportunity to read the remarks delivered by my predecessors in this lectureship, and I found that, as a Frenchman named Alphonse Karr said back in 1849, "the more things change the more they stay the same."

For the past quarter century, and indeed for longer than that, one of the on-going debates concerning public relations has had to do with its proper nomenclature and definition, and with where its practitioners belong on the table of organization. As with most questions that are subjects for debate, there are no simple answers. If there were, they would have adopted long ago.

What intrigues me, and I hope you, is why this situation persists-why the debate seems to go on endlessly, with no resolution. It's not as if we were talking about something new-public relations has been practiced on a professional level for the better part of this century. And it's not as if public relations were enormously complicated or esoteric. Does the continuing debate mean that basic questions about public relations have no answers-that, like the problems of Beirut or Northern Ireland, they are simple insoluble? I don't believe that for a minute, and that's why I want to take a fresh look at these questions.

Let's begin with the subject of definition and nomenclature. One of the simplest and most pragmatic definitions is that of my mentor, the late John Wiley Hill. He said, "Have a good story to tell and then tell it well." My associate Doug Hearle analyzed those few words extremely well when he spoke from the same platform some five years ago-and I recommend that you go back and read his talk if you want to see how much can be expressed in 11 words.

Then there is the classic definition propounded by Denny Griswold and her publication *PR News*: "Public relations is the management function which evaluates public attitudes, identifies the policies and procedures of an individual or an organization with the public interest and plans and executes a program of action to earn public understanding and acceptance."

More recently, the board of directors of the Public Relations Society of America grappled with the problem of a definition of public relations, and came up with one that took more than 500 words to express. In my view, anything that needs that many words to define it is really not definable.

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And in fact, there seem to be so many possible definitions, and so little agreement as to which is exactly the right one, that it may seem at times impossible to arrive at an exact definition of public relations. The fact that an exact definition is hard to arrive at, however, should not lead us to the conclusion that there may be little or nothing to define. We have only to think of other terms like "character," or "leadership" or "excellence." For example, to realize some of the most important concepts in our thinking are difficult to pin down in a simple definition.

But I think we can find a common denominator in all the various definitions of public relations and it's one that we all need to grasp and hold on to. And that is the fact that public relations involves not what you say but what you do. This is an important distinction, because so many people outside the field of public relations seem to believe just the opposite. Even people who should know better-people in business, in government, in the news media-people who rely on good public relations and who should understand it-even these people tend to use the term as if it refers to something that no substance.

The all-important point is that public relations has to do with actions, not words-with substance, no image-raises some questions that I want to return to in a few minutes.

What I want to note here is that misperceptions about what public relations is are among the factors that have led to the adoption of other terms that mean the same thing-so that nowadays we can not only define public relations, but we don't even know what for sure to call it. Public affairs-corporate communication-public information-external relations-all of these terms, as well as public relations itself, are in widespread use today. All of them are right, and all are wrong, depending on each individual's and each organization's knowledge and perception of the process.

Now, what are we to make of all this? If we are dealing with something we can't define and don't know what to call, how does it happen that the ranks of public relations practitioners are growing every day, and that hundreds, and even thousands, of bright young people like you here at Ball State University are being attracted to this practice.

The fact is that public relations as is practiced today presents to the beginning practitioner a life-long series of challenges, and a lifelong opportunity to grow as experience and knowledge increase.

Young people just coming out of Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communications accredited public relations curricula-such as the public relations sequence here at Ball State-tend to think of public relations as the application of basic communication skills. On their first job, they are likely to find themselves handling press releases, most likely in the area of product publicity. They may also be called upon to write for house organs, to script video news segments and to do similar chores.

This is the basic groundwork-theitty-gritty, if you will-of public relations. It is not, as we shall see, what public relations is about. But it lies at the heart of everything we do, and it provides the basic training that all of us must have. It remains as the heart of our work, no matter how far we may move ahead as practitioners. It is comparable with basic training in the armed services-even the most

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seasoned commanders went through it, and would not have survived-much less succeeded-without it.

After a year or two spent this way, learning the fundamentals of public relations practice, the young practitioner may move into a minor supervisory role. he or she may also begin to specialize in some particular phase of the business, such as financial relations or community relations . Specialization has been increasingly necessary as public relations has grown to embrace more disciplines and its practice has become more complex. But the specialist always runs the risk of becoming over-specialized. He or she should always retain the broad outlook of the generalist.

Then, after five or six years of learning well two or three specialties, and to becoming skilled in the management of specific functions, the practitioner begins to move into the more demanding aspects of the public relations business. he or she now becomes a part of middle management and must direct staff operations.

At this stage, if they have not already done so, practitioners must learn both the planning and budgeting processes, and budgets well. In addition, they need to learn the important function of research and evaluation.

To round out this little scenario, let us then look at the practitioner who has mastered the fundamentals, gained expertise in the activities most important to the organization and demonstrated ability to manage, plan , budget, research and evaluate. At this stage this practitioner has also learned a great deal about the business, industry, or other type of endeavor in which he or she works, and can "talk shop" with people from other departments-whether they are in manufacturing, marketing or the legal or financial departments.

Practitioners, who have progressed this far, mastering every step along the way, are now ready to take their place in the ranks of top management. They must, however, perceive their role as being active participants in the formulation of public policy-and not as merely passive technicians ready to go into action only when the chairman, president, general counsel or chief financial officer pushes the button.

This is a crucial point. One of the major problems with public relations in the past-and I am happy to say that it has become less of a problem today-is that the public relations practitioner has been solely looked upon as a communicator, as one who carries and transmits a message that has been formulated by someone else. That is a very narrow view, and it has been fostered by public relations people themselves. If we look upon public relations simply as communications, and upon ourselves as simply communicators, then we cannot blame others-board chairmen, presidents and other members of top management, for example-if they see us the same way.

We have, however, come a long way from this narrow view of the job of the public relations practitioner. Today, the senior public relations officer not only has the job of running the department, but of acting as an adviser and counselor to other senior officers of the organization, particularly those in the fields in which the practitioner has expertise.

That is one of the reasons I think that the approach you are taking here at Ball State University to develop an interdisciplinary professional level program in public relations is so important. This is something that the profession needs and needs badly, and I'm delighted to see Ball State taking the initiative on this.

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The opinion of the public relations officer is sought when the organization deals with matters that are generally regarded as involving public policy, public affairs, public opinion, issues management and other related areas. And that opinion is readily forthcoming from the fully trained and highly competent public relations practitioner. It is the job of the senior public relations officer to tell management when its policies or organization's products and services are not in harmony with public expectations.

This is public relations at its highest and best level, where it makes a maximum contribution to the ability of the organization not only to survive, but to thrive within its environment.

Where the public relations officer belongs on the table of organization, however, is a question that we have to regard as far from solved. I have seen some odd situations—and the oddest thing about some of them was that they worked. In one major company, for example, the senior public relations executive was simply a personal counsel to the chief executive officer, and everything worked through him. In another, there was no formal public relations department, but memos came down from the chairman's office with great regularity, detailing how management should perceive its responsibilities.

It seems to follow that exact placement of the public relations officer in the table of organization is less important than the recognition of the value and function of that officer and of the public relations department—whatever it may be called.

But is the value and function of public relations recognized, as it should be within the organization, particularly by the chief executive officer? Perhaps one of the most enlightening surveys undertaken to determine the answer to his question was conducted just a few years ago by the venerable Edward L. Bernays. He wrote to a number of CEOs and leading educators, seeking their appraisal of the social significance of public relations. Here are some excerpts from replies, as published in *Public Relations Quarterly*.

The chairman and president of a large manufacturing company: "Since the essence of public relations that we must earn public confidence by sound policies and direct positive action, the chief executive officer of the modern corporation...must become more and more immersed in public relations policy determination and activity. In our corporation, public relations is one of the principal functions of the chief executive officer himself—as the 'publics' we seek to influence become more numerous and more powerful.

The chairman and chief executive officer of a major corporation in the service area: "...No significant institution can survive, much less flourish, if its policies and practices (or its products or services) fail to meet—or are perceived as failing to meet—the legitimate expectations of the 'publics' it seeks to serve. Therefore, an institution's public relations must be regarded as a corporate-wide responsibility."

The chairman of a major oil company: "The health and progress of a democratic society clearly depend upon free competition among ideas. The purpose of public relations...is to facilitate communication of such ideas in order to secure public understanding and support. This is true whether we are speaking of government, political parties, professional organizations, or business corporations. All must communicate effectively or run the risk of public rejection. No one understands this better than the header of a major corporation...Candor and openness are the order of the day, good for business, and good for our democratic system."

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The chairman and CEO of a leading maker of agricultural equipment: "Good public relations...is a basic essential for a business enterprise...If a business concern is to do enjoy good public relations, it is apparent that the effort goes far beyond organized activities. Public relations considerations must play a role in the decisions made and carried out daily at all levels of the company. ...In the end, the measure of effective performance in public relations...is public understanding and approval of the organization's policies and its contributions to society."

And, though I could go on at great length, one final quote from the chairman and chief executive officer of another major oil company: "...The modern corporation is no longer perceived solely in economic terms, but as an institution, which contributes to society as a whole. These changes in public expectations and in the perception of business are transforming public relations from an ancillary role in the corporation to an essential one. Likewise, they are stimulating greater personal involvement by the chief executive officer in his company's public relations activities. ...The tone and pace of company's public relations must be set by the CEO. It is his responsibility to be involved. He cannot wholly delegate this important function..."

It is evident from these quotations gathered by Eddie Bernays that public relations today plays a leading role in the thinking, planning and actions of the very top officers of the modern corporation. And I think it goes without saying that this holds true of every other institution and organization in our society, including government itself.

What does this tell us about the future of public relations, and about your own future as practitioners-about your own expectations and the expectations that others will have for you?

I believe that public relations has great prospects for the future-if we can turn out the kind of men and women needed for this job. Of the four levels of public relations practice that I just described earlier, we are producing people that function well on the first two, and a fair number of what we might call level III's. What is missing is the fourth level-particularly the person who can move into the role of public policy advocate.

My good friend W. Howard Chase is now at an age where some people might regard him as a senior senior citizen, but he remains in the forefront of public relations theory and practice, and never tires of taking up new causes. Since 1973, he has been preaching the gospel of managing issues and influencing public policy, having launched a publication called *Corporate Public Issues* in 1975 and founded the Issue Management Association in 1981. Howard Chase bridges the gap between "public relations and public affairs," and provides speeches, charts and even a book to back his theory that issue management and public policy formulation are what public relations is really all about. The theory is being adopted by many leading practitioners, although there are still those that quarrel with his semantics.

Richard A. Crable and Steven L. Vibbert, both teachers at Purdue University, writing in the summer 1985 issue of *Public Relations Review*, offer some refinement of the Howard Chase theory. They identify as having five stages-potential, imminent, current, critical and dormant-and they emphasize that while their status may change from one stage to another, issues remain issues. They place particular stress on their contention that issue management is a fundamental way of influencing policies before they become policies.

The most important thing about public issue is not whether they can be "managed"-that is the term that people quarrel with. No, the most important thing about public issue is that they can be identified in advance by those who are alert to changes, developments and expectations in society

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as a whole. Once an issue has been identified-ideally, in its potential or imminent stage, before it becomes current or critical-than a pro-active plan can be developed to deal with it. We do not and must not wait to react.

Waiting for a crisis to occur, or for a public issue to reach a critical stage, is more than just a failure of public relations. It can mean nothing less than disaster for a corporation or institution in our society. Once things have been allowed to reach a critical stage, public relations can do little more than a firefighting job, and carry out crisis communications. It is our job, therefore, to be prepared-to be alert to developing situations, to emerging issues, to changes in the economy in the structure of society-and to have in place a well conceived plan for dealing with whatever may arise.

Companies and organizations that do proper planning define their organizational desires and get them on the public policy agenda. To put it another way, they develop an organizational "wish list" and then set about making the wishes come true. The strategy they use is positive, rather than negative. They strive to create policy opportunities, rather than trying to defeat those that they regard as undesirable.

The future of public relations rests upon its ability-and that means our ability-yours and mine-to help make the wheels of society turn more smoothly. It is human nature unfortunately, to be selfish, greedy, intolerant and aggressive. Journalists learned long ago that the way to create a headline is to develop antagonism-real or imagined-between two entities. Conflict is the basic seed for a news story. After all, labor fights management, criminals fight the police, the "haves" are assaulted by the "have nots"-and so it goes.

In a free, democratic pluralistic society such as our own, there is a constant effort to determine what public policy should be on scores of issues that range from the survival of the snail darter to nuclear disarmament, from the rights of animals to relations with the Third World. Our primary responsibility as public relations people is to make genuine, continuing contributions to the formulation of public policy-not, to be sure, on every subject, but those that affect the organizations we work for. As our host here today, Professor Melvin L. Sharpe, said recently before a PRSA district conference in Indianapolis; "If professionals of the future are to be prepared for the task of aiding government organizational structures in our multinational corporations to harmonize within their complex worldwide environments, they must thoroughly understand human behavior and human needs within social structures and organizations."

Educational institutions have a special opportunity to contribute to continuing educational needs of public relations practitioners. I'll be happy when the day comes when PRSA requires CEUS (continuing education unites) for accreditation. To become accredited in the year 1985 and continue to be accredited in the year 2005 because you've done the same thing for 20 years is crazy. We need to progress. We need to move forward and people who are interested in public relations as a lifetime career need to learn every year. In this business you become obsolete in two years. You've got to keep at it.

In our society, those who want to be leaders, must influence the making of public policies. The forces creating and fostering antagonism are many. We who are engaged in the practice of public relations are among the forces of reconciliation, as we seek consensus in public policy recommendations. If we are successful-if we can enlist the cooperation of business, government, labor, the politicians and all those in leadership roles-not only in the United States but elsewhere as well-we will find ourselves leading the way to peace in the world.