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PUBLIC RELATIONS

MAKING up definitions of "Public Relations" seems to be the favourite hobby of people in the public relations business. There are scores of them, ranging from a short slogan to a bill of rights with many paragraphs. However, they all boil down to a few words well known to every literate person, words which, if put into universal practice, would change the face of the world.

Public relations is about nine-tenths doing and one-tenth talking, though its philosophy is made up of many ingredients: sociology, economics, psychology, communication and other knowledges. All these should combine to form a system of human understanding. Alas! although men have developed sciences which enable them to accomplish many great achievements, they have not yet found the catalyst that will fuse these knowledges into a science of human relations.

Except for belligerent people, public relations is necessary to enjoyment of life. Xenophon, who was a Greek general and an historian of around 400 B.C., remarked sagely that it is far easier to march up a steep hill without fighting than along a level road with enemies on each side. An environment made up of good friends is beyond price. As Lincoln put it: the best way to destroy enemies is to make them your friends.

Instincts and Emotions

Our society is civilized, we like to think. But civilization is a very recent phenomenon in human history. Arnold J. Toynbee remarks in his *Study of History* that the earliest civilization originated no more than 6,000 years ago.

For all practical purposes, the material of human nature within our civilization is the same as that with which the Stone Age men and women had to work. Our environment is different, but basically we are primitive people in a modern world. It is dangerous, as well as advantageous, to be heirs of all the past insofar as material things are concerned, and to carry with us still the urges and impulses of ancient days.

There are three things we can do with our instincts in trying to conform to the requirements of civilization: we may follow our primal impulses, we may deny their existence, or we may use them for ends which are in harmony with our most ardent wishes.

The third is, of course, desirable. It is an outcome of self-control. And, says George Bernard Shaw, "The survival of the fittest means finally the survival of the self-controlled, because they alone can adapt themselves to the perpetual shifting of conditions."

If we recognize the need of self-control in our public relations, and the need to regulate instincts and emotions by self-discipline, we have passed the first hurdle. But there is more to it than that.

Intelligent public relations must be built upon a solid foundation of knowledge. Children may take life as frankly beyond them. They do not feel the need to fit their environment or the things that happen to them into patterns of meaning. But grown-ups govern their lives by reason, and the fuel behind all effective reasoning is knowledge.

We may have to school ourselves to think things out in their relations to other things; we may have to train ourselves to walk all around questions. The person of culture must know both sides before he can judge or talk or act with wisdom.

A Few Dim Characters

Most of the scoffers at our idea of public relations will be egocentric people who are convinced that the only sensible way to go through life is by getting their own way, getting the best of every bargain, grabbing credit for everything they or their fellow-workers do, getting ahead at the expense of other people.

They are the people who absorb like sponges all the compliments you give them; people who always let you reach for the check; people who criticize, but resent criticism; people who demand attention but never volunteer a service. They are wrapped up in themselves and their wants. When fortune smiles on them and their colleagues and neighbours perform in a satisfactory "giving" way, they are urbane and boastful.

The self-centred person is an unpleasant personality, quite unfitted for public relations. To paraphrase Nietzsche, he is a slave to himself, so cannot be a friend to others; he is a tyrant over his neighbours, so cannot have friends.

The fault-seeing person is another warped character. His excessive criticism creates tension and builds unhappiness. The fault-finder harps so much on what is wrong with his acquaintances that they avoid him; he criticizes the state of the universe without doing anything effectively to better it. He may not be dishonest, or stupid, or shallow-minded, but he certainly is going the wrong way about bettering his public relations.

The envious man is not in much better position. The habit of thinking in comparisons is a fatal one. When something pleasant occurs it should be enjoyed to the full, without souring it by thinking that it is not so pleasant as the experience so-and-so had. If you desire glory, you may envy Napoleon, but Napoleon envied Caesar, Caesar envied Alexander the Great, and likely Alexander envied Hercules, who never existed. That is why only foolish people are envious, because no matter how great your success there will always be in history or legend someone more successful than you are.

Dislike and hatred are passions which vitally affect our physical life and corrupt our humanity. They exist in some persons as a kind of folkway prejudice, a kind of "general feeling of againstness".

Fear is a powerful enemy of good public relations. We may be afraid to do our best for fear our best will not be good enough. Or we may avoid people for fear they may disturb our tranquillity. The way to conquer such feelings is to analyse the fears coldly and critically, and then obey Napoleon's exhortation: always take the first step toward your enemies and put on a good countenance.

Last among these factors which militate against good public relations is dependence upon people. We are, whether we like it or not, dependent upon our environment in our quest for happiness, but not in the sense of "leaning." The character of our civilization makes absolute self-reliance impossible, but the wise man accepts protection and a crutch only to the extent that they help him toward re-establishment of his self-reliance.

Don't expect, for example, a totalitarian country with all its promises of security to give you good public relations. Parasitic dependence, leaning on the state, have always carried with them police forces, secret denunciations, suspicion of one's friends and even, as in Hitler's Germany, fear of one's family.

On Judging People

Out of this roll-call of some of the positives and negatives of public relations there arise a few principles: to judge people generously, to bear with other people's ideas, and to build fellow-feeling with our neighbours — all of which add up to getting along with people.

An honourable man will be generous in his judgments of men and women. We are all ready to say that if people knew the truth behind our lives they certainly would judge us more charitably, so let's look at the other side. If we knew what is going on behind the scenes in others' lives, we, too, should be slower to judge harshly. A Sioux Indian once prayed: "Great Spirit, help me never to judge another man until I have walked two weeks in his moccasins."

What are our bases of judgment? We may consider worthiness, or success, or consistency, among others, but all our judgments arise from our own standards. The pity is that we require that our friends should be formed by a more perfect model than we are able or willing to imitate. We try to impel them to live up to an image we have formed of them, and blame them if they fail.

When it comes to judging people by success or failure we are employing an unfair method. We are evaluating them according to the consequences of their actions, and how would we like that judgment applied to our best efforts, some of which went astray because of factors over which we had no control?

We might adopt instead the basis of judgment given on an office motto that was common twenty years ago: "When the One Great Scorer comes to write against your name, He writes not that you won or lost, but how you played the game."

As to the demand for consistency in our public, this is the most foolish of all points of judgment. People just are not consistent. People are different as individuals and as members of groups and under varying circumstances and at different times.

If we are going to judge people in their businesses and professions by what we know of the way they vote, or in any field by what we know of them in another field, the judgment is not going to be very good. Mr. A. having confidence in Dr. J. as a physician, would be asking too much to have Dr. J. conform to Mr. A's political and religious ideals.

Beware of Prejudice

What really does make public relations difficult is prejudice and intolerance. These twins close the doors to truth and knowledge about people.

Prejudice may be a belief based on repeated hearsay or tradition. Voltaire called it "The reason of fools." Bigotry is blind and obstinate adherence to one's own opinions, with intolerance toward those who have other views. As a result we unconsciously select examples favourable to our view, and simply fail to notice anything that tells against it.

Civilization is lopsided in its development. We are more skilful with our hands than in our thinking. Only when we reach the place where we can face facts without emotion can we achieve perfect tolerance.

As it is now, we are uncomfortably like the African tribe which believes that crocodiles devour only men who have done evil. Thus two unpleasant things

happen to the victim. First, he is eaten up; second he is destroyed morally, for the crocodile has eaten him "because" he did or thought some evil. We, too, try to maintain the respectable appearance of life by laying it down as a rule that people get what they deserve.

Unconsciously, perhaps, we work it out as Anatole France did the fate of Pyrot in *Penguin Island*: "Pyrot has been convicted. If he has not been convicted because he is guilty, he is guilty because he has been convicted; it comes to the same thing."

A Simple Mistake

The universality of men's aversion for one another is a shocking feature of today's world, and it arises from a simple mistake. We start, in our thinking and in our idealistic manifestos by public bodies, with the false assumption that "people are essentially alike." Then, when we find by experience that they are unlike, we confuse the issues and denounce and persecute each other because we are different. We should, instead, try to find out in what way we are different, then proceed to learn why.

Sometimes, of course, intolerance shows itself as inability to forgive and forget some particular wrong. The grudge-bearer cherishes his ill-will, fans the flame of memory, never permits himself to forget.

No one suggests that we should be worms, cherishing the foot that steps on us, but little fountains of bitterness should not be allowed to poison our relations with those with whom we must live.

It is not easy to remove a prejudice quickly. A man has to try with the idea that there is fun in succeeding in being open-minded, and that his life will be fuller and sweeter. All the prejudices that beset mankind are allergic to truth; the mark of an educated man is his willingness to expose pet prejudices to it. Anyhow, the other side of a subject always has points of interest.

No one has the right to expect to enjoy good public relations unless he can listen to both sides of an argument, tolerate things which are distasteful to him personally, and take the gentle, the favourable and the indulgent side of most questions.

Social Feeling

Much of what has been said may appear far removed from the practice of public relations. Business men attending a public relations seminar expect to be told things they should do. But before the "doing" stage there must be an "understanding" stage. Public relations is the sum total of the effect we have on other people, and that cannot be turned on and off like a lawn sprinkler. Just as soon as we try to build public relations by calculated astuteness we score a complete failure.

Many a business man could improve his public relations overnight by getting first hand contact with his public and finding out what he has been overlooking. Those who are fishermen will readily admit that it is not by their own taste, but by the taste of the fish, that they determine the choice of bait.

Sympathy is the purest expression of social sentiment, when it is thought of in its primary meaning: "Fellow-feeling." It is a great neutralizer of hard thoughts, it builds up a man's opinion of himself, it identifies a man with his community. But let it be real sympathy. Contrast the practical sympathy of the crippled poet Byron, who, unable to fight, offered to take half the blows a bully was giving another boy, with the selfish "sympathy" of Pepys, who wrote in his diary: "borrowed a coat of a man for 6d and so he rode all the way, poor man, without any." Think, too, of the Scandinavian legend about empty sympathy: "Idūna was waited upon by smiling women. She found they were hollow behind . . . Ellevomen who have no heart, and can never pity anyone."

Closely allied to practical sympathy is praise. Everyone responds better to approval than to censure. It pays in public relations to seek out praiseworthy attributes, even (or perhaps particularly) in persons we dislike. There is nothing negative in this; it is not enough to refrain from making unkind comments, we must try to find something pleasant to say in their place.

Analysing a Question

If we are really eager to improve our public relations, and run up against a problem whose solution does not appear readily, let us analyse it.

Suppose it is a matter affecting Allen and Jones. There are three approaches. We need to set down the answers to these questions:

How does this matter look to Allen? What significance has it for him personally?

How does it look to Jones? What is its significance to him?

How does it look to me, an outside observer, when I compare the way it looks to Allen with the way it looks to Jones?

And then, having judged the matter and reached a decision, act with dignity. Even the most serious difficulty in human relations can be solved if we are willing to keep ourselves out of the conflict and avoid angry debate.

Persuasion is better public relations than compulsion. The man who is persuaded feels he has gained something; the man who is compelled believes he has been despoiled of something.

And remember that wounded vanity is one of the greatest causes of all the trouble and hard feeling in the world, the great disrupter of public relations.

Good Manners

Human relations, individual, community, and international, would be improved if people would only mend their manners.

There is no law in the sphere of manners, and following the etiquette book however slavishly will not give us what is needed. Charming manners are sub-

conscious. They mean regard for the other fellow's feelings. They make you treat every man with such consideration that his memory of you will be pleasant — and isn't that good public relations?

Great men have been good-mannered men. Despite the fact that several friends had been dining with Frederick the Great for years, he always sent them a politely-worded invitation for each meal; he did not wish them to think that he took their company for granted. Gladstone was humble and deferential, even to his intellectual inferiors. Walter Hines Page, eminent United States ambassador to Great Britain, never treated an idea, even a grotesque one, with contempt; he always had time to discuss it, to argue it out, and no one ever left his presence thinking that he had made an absurd proposal. Theodore Roosevelt sat up late the night before a visit reading a subject in which he knew his guest was particularly interested.

Many executives attribute their success to a happy union of authority and companionship. They are void of arrogance; they are affable, magnanimous, and quiet.

It is in little things that our predisposition to good public relations shows itself. Courtesy may be the small change of public relations, but it adds up to a huge sum.

The man who writes a letter appreciative of another's promotion is performing good public relations. Prominent businessmen are proud to carry and show to their friends letters from strangers in humble walks of life commenting favourably on ideas they have expressed in speeches, in published articles, or in their advertisements.

Every Day — All Day

But it is on the street and in public contacts everywhere that most of us have our best chance to build good public relations. To find out just what can be improved upon in our daily encounters with people, nearly a hundred men and women were asked to name the most common breaches of good manners. Here is a summary:

Pedestrians failing to wait for the green light; jay-walking; walking on sidewalks more than two abreast, or zigzagging, or dawdling, or rushing, or daydreaming, or gathering in groups to talk.

Motorists racing the lights; honking horns; splashing; disregarding pedestrians; stopping astride the intersection white line; jockeying for an advantage over other drivers.

In stores: the disinterest of sales clerks; crowding by customers; refusal of clerks to see a customer near closing time; fumbling by customers who don't know what they want.

On street cars: pushing; spreading out over more seat than is necessary; lack of courtesy; blocking the steps and the entrance.

In elevators: smoking; refusing to move to let people off.

On the telephone: inaudible voices; mumbling; talking with pipe or cigarette in mouth; abruptness; lack of information; delay in answering when the call is put through.

In offices: unnecessary noise; dictating while smoking; borrowing and not returning; holding up work until late in the day.

In theatres: talking; cracking gum; eating; wearing big hats; shuffling feet; taking up both arm rests; breaking into a line-up.

In restaurants: holding table space while others wait; smoking; combing hair and applying make-up.

Now, there is a list that every reader will approve as a bill of complaints. Every item on it is a trifling thing that can be put right at the expenditure of only a little thought. What to do, of course, is for everyone interested in improving his public relations to go back over the list and tick off the items in which he offends, and in which he hopes to improve himself.

Humour and Patience

To a thoroughly civilized person all human endeavour will appear at times slightly comic. We need a sense of humour in good working order if we are to have the best public relations.

But humour must be handled lightly. Every joke must have a truth, and that truth must not hurt. A joke on yourself is an effective way of disarming hostility. It is, in fact the safest kind of joke. Next is the joke that conveys a compliment. Beyond that, it is wise to use imaginary people or people who are entirely out of range.

Patience is much needed. No great thing came suddenly into being, and we can't expect our public relations to blossom overnight. It takes time, but a little "thank you" here and a small service there, a courtesy on the street car, a thoughtful expression in mail and on the telephone: all these add up to something important in the way of a contribution to good public relations.

One way to advance quickly is to eliminate sources of friction before they occur. And be sincere. Good public relations can't be built on make-believe. The foundation of confidence is sincerity, and confidence in us is necessary if we are to be acceptable to our neighbours.

If a broad plan of improving the public's relations with itself were followed throughout the world, what kind of place would it be in which to live? Why, we could build the most gracious age in history, an age in which we should all like to live.

And, as was said in the first paragraph, that kind of public relations is built on a few well-known words. They make up the Golden Rule: "As ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise." Or, as we say it in our shorter way: *Do as you would be done by.*