

Bonding: Relationships and Communication

by Al Czarnecki, APR

WHEN DID YOU LAST step back and take a hard look at the messages — intentional and unintentional — that your organization is sending out? Communication affects relationships, and how people feel about your organization is an important factor in their giving. This feeling is forged and tested on a day-to-day basis, in countless moments of truth.

Everyone within your organization represents your agency, to each other and to others outside. Your vision, performance, the way things happen within your organization and between it and others, are all involved. This runs wider and deeper than marketing. It involves leadership, culture, and public relations.

Leadership

Organizational culture — the way things are done — starts at the top and filters its way down. Changing an organization's culture takes time. It needs the commitment of the entire senior management team. Internal communication is important for developing the culture within your organization. External communication is important for managing your relationships with various stakeholder groups.

Questions

Asking the right questions is important. Hard times have caused everyone to search for the magic required for durable donor support. Part of the answer lies in our presuppositions. The questions we ask in the first place have a powerful influence on the answers we ultimately get. A question is both a spotlight and a set of blinders — it highlights one area for inquiry, but at the same time cuts off areas that

otherwise might provide answers.

In the aftermath of the Great Depression, the instinctive question was simply, "How do we increase sales?" This resulted in the hard sell, an approach that turned out in the long run to be counterproductive. It can be tempting to pose the problem of generating donations as one of promotion and publicity. But like the hard sell, this is a one-way approach to communication. It ignores the other side in the relationship.

The operating concepts in today's successful corporations are total quality, social responsibility, and relationship selling. The two important questions that effective organizations ask are:

- "How do we manage our interdependence with the community?"
- "How do we develop excellence within our organization?"

Experience

People trust their experience. What you actually are is as obvious as what you say you are. Public relations is not a matter of wheeling out an image at convenient times. Relating is a matter of interacting with people around issues that are of consequence to them. Public relations simply manages this process on an organizational level.

Listening

Being sensitive to what people are concerned about is as important for organizations as it is in personal life. Once a group feels it's been heard, it's more ready to hear you. Then it becomes a matter of exploring solutions that might work for both of you. This process draws on organizational attitude and is a matter of actively generating discussions that are in the public interest. The best organizations are open systems — they are larger than themselves.

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If someone drew a caricature of your organization, would it have ears? There are many techniques for getting input from people. People need feedback from you to know they're being heard. The most impressive feedback is change that reflects respect for their experience.

Culture

Dialogue involves cycles. It takes time to go back and forth, identifying issues and stakeholders, getting feedback on policies and performance, setting priorities, refining the details, repeating the cycle. What will set the tone for communication is the philosophy and care evident in your internal and external newsletters, your annual report and public speaking engagements. These "controlled media" influence attitude and also serve as pegs for contact with the mass media. It can take two or three years for things to become sorted out and stabilized, where actively sought mutual relationships have taken their place within the culture of your organization.

Analysis

Put together a matrix of stakeholders and issues involving your organization. This is just a grid, with stakeholder groups running down the left side and issues running across the

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Communication continued . . .

top. Some issues will suggest new stakeholder groups. An existing stakeholder group will suggest a new issue. Exhaust the possibilities. Finally, review each stakeholder group in relation to each issue and mark it with one asterisk if relevant, two if important. This exercise is best done by each manager and then shared as a group — the process and discussion are as important as the result.

Both departmental and organizational perspectives will emerge. Issues will suggest areas for policy development, performance improvement and two-way communication.

Direction

The matrix exercise should suggest editorial direction for your newsletters and speaking engagements. During the course of a two-year period you should cover all the important issues, and by the third year you should be revisiting some. The three hallmarks of a great story are content, readability, and impact. These last two qualities abound in dealing with current issues and action. Researching an article can serve as an opportunity for two-way communication with stakeholder groups. A balanced and insightful article will be topical for your readership. If the stakeholder group involved is not on your regular mailing list, you can offer them copies in bulk for their own mailing or they can give you a set of mailing labels.

Messages

Messages come through in non-verbal ways. A student pianist and Glenn Gould both play the same Mozart sonata, but the message is clearly different. Like musical notes, words have merely the capacity for meaning. A good part of any message is carried by its setting and the way it's delivered. Body language and qualities of voice reflect the meaning for the speaker.

Take person-to-person fundraising, for example. Someone

who has made a meaningful donation to your agency will come across differently when canvassing, compared with someone who is merely volunteering their time. The same holds true for a speaking engagement. Someone who is speaking from experience will communicate in a special way. Your staff and volunteers interact with people in the course of their work. Their orientation and appreciation for the relationship comes through.

Ownership carries a tangible quality with it. This is why it's important for your entire senior management team to be truly committed to the value of partnership. Only then will this attitude permeate your organization.

Strategy

Strategy focuses on the important and the possible. At the scene of an air crash, there are overwhelming injuries. Emergency personnel classify survivors into three groups: those who will die regardless, those who will live regardless, and those who can survive, but only with immediate medical attention. This last group is treated first.

Putting limited resources where they'll do the most good is important. Your first priority should be to establish communication with your important stakeholder groups and move this in the direction of dialogue. This should be a collaborative effort of your communications staff and your senior management team. It should not be limited to formal communications, but should address day-to-day interactions with your agency. Unless you mend the holes in your rain barrel, more water will do you little good.

To the extent that relationships are strategic to your organization's mission, excellence in communication management is an investment in your agency's effectiveness and survival. The "goods" in public relations are stable relationships characterized by openness, trust and cooperation. Board, staff, volunteers, persons-served and their families and friends,

donors, neighbours, employers, federations, coalitions, politicians, foundations, the media, civil servants, unions, activist groups — all are strategic to various degrees on various issues for not-for-profit organizations.

Public relations manages the communication aspect of the interdependence between an organization and its environment. It is a profession with internationally recognized accreditation, the APR, conferred by the Canadian Public Relations Society. While implementation often employs the creative arts, the planning and direction of communication programs is a management function.

This past winter the most extensive study in the history of communications was published. *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management*, edited by James E. Grunig, was the result of a seven-year study by the International Association of Business Communicators Research Foundation. Among its findings were:

- Effective organizations treat public relations as a management function involving issues and strategic communication.
- The most effective model for public relations involves establishing dialogue with stakeholders and finding mutual solutions.
- Two critical factors are the commitment of the entire senior management team and asking the right questions to begin with.

Excellence in public relations helps to create an excellent organization. This has everything to do with loyalty, imagination and charisma. And support.

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