
CONVINCING MANAGEMENT OF THE VALUE OF PR

More often than not, the practice of PR as a corporate function does not get any respect. Part of the reason is that top management rarely understands the nature of the PR function. "PR? What is that?" is the common management lament. In light of this unfortunate but regrettably true reality, the PR professional, in addition to performing his function well, faces the added burden of convincing top management of his or her worth to the organisation.

Acknowledging the importance of public relations in organisational decision-making is one thing. Ensuring that public relations is part of the management mainstream is quite another. To make public relations an effective part of an organisation's decision-making process and to be taken seriously in a decision-making role, the public relations practitioner must observe the following five interrelated steps:

1. Gain management support and understanding.

Early in their career every public relations practitioner will be surprised to find that they must ...communicate... with those key centres of influence and power within their own organisation. Management is one of the key publics for public relations. Like those of any other public, the support of management must be earned. Like those of any other audience, management's needs, wants attitudes, values and perceptions must be considered.

The public relations function cannot be taken as a given by those who practice it, for management generally does not view the communications function in that light. Traditionally, public relations has been first on the budgetary chopping block, precisely because management has not perceived it as essential to long-term organisational health.

Like all other staff specialists within organisations, public relations practitioners must be prepared to explain and justify their existence to managers and to convince them that public relations is an investment in the privilege to operate...perhaps more an investment in the future than an operating expenditure for the present. Most important, public relations can influence organisational action by demonstrating the ability to produce results in accordance with the organisation's goal.

2. Being more than a technician

Many communicators regard themselves as communicators first, last, and always. They think of their relationship to management in terms of "Tell me what you want to say and I'll tell you how to say it." Communication skills are essential to effective public relations. An attitude like that just described, though, simply encourages management to think

of public relations as a tool with which to implement policy rather than as a crucial part of the planning process.

Whether holding the title "staff writer," "editor" "speech writer" or "audio-visual specialist," a public relations practitioner must learn to think of the role as more than that of a technician and the job as more than that of a communication medium. A writer writes, but a public relations practitioner helps solve problems. An editor reacts to management requests, but a public relations practitioner helps diagnose problems and opportunities while planning solutions and strategies. Writers and editors are typically concerned with the content and techniques of communication; public relations practitioners are concerned with the results. As one public relations professional put it, " Be an architect, not a bricklayer".

The two differing perspectives will lead individuals working in public relations jobs to ask different questions in the performance of their duties, to seek different insights, and ultimately, to offer different kinds of programmes and solutions. One reacts, the other anticipates. One responds to decisions after they are made, the other is an essential part of decision making. Being more than a technician earns the public relations practitioner management's respect.

3. Broadening knowledge

To be valuable to management in a decision making role, the public relations practitioners must have the appropriate knowledge, background, interest, and perspectives. Public relations practitioners, no matter what their training or background, must learn everything they can about business and government in general; the specific industry (or areas) in which their corporation (or agency) operates; and the organisation itself. To be successful, public relations practitioners should know the functions, viewpoints and problems of all parts of the organisation. They should know its products, markets, internal structures and external social, economic and political pressures

More than any other executives except the chief executive officer; public relations people must understand what is going on inside the organisation and how all activities and functions interrelate. They must do their homework and know the why, who, what, where, when and how of whatever comes up for managerial consideration. They should also be prepared to present and evaluate a variety of alternatives and contingencies related to organisational problems and opportunities.

Increasingly, practitioners must learn about discipline that would have seemed unrelated to public relations a few years ago. Required reading may include anything from archaeology to zoology. Drawing on such knowledge, the public relations practitioners is in a position to contribute

creative ideas and sound judgment in clarifying and accomplishing organisational objectives.

4. Thinking like a manager

To influence management, public relations practitioners must learn to understand the managerial point of view, realising at the same time that the greatest asset for public relations in decision making is its access to viewpoints not traditionally included in managerial deliberations. In other words, the public relations practitioners must think in terms of results, accountability and accomplishments necessary to achieve organisational objective while retaining a broader perspective that considers social as well as economic variables.

As a result-oriented perspective is particularly important in competitive organisations that have moved away from the classic pyramid management style, those who "advise, counsel or coordinate" are seen less and less crucial. Those who demonstrably contribute to organisational success retain their positions and gain power and rewards. Many corporations now let operating managers decide what corporate service to pay for out of their own budgets. If the corporate public relations staff fails to convince line managers that its service are valuable, it will fail to attract the resources to keep it operating.

The public relations practitioners who think like managers seek the same goals of openness and honesty, but takes a different approach. Instead of preaching, he or she helps management weigh the pragmatic risks of communicating or not communicating. By pointing out the costs and benefit that could result, this practitioners is much more likely to provide constructive and acceptable advice, to retain credibility in a decision-making role, and to steer the organisation toward the course of openness and honesty.

All of this suggests that effective public relations practitioners who take part in the organisational decision making must frequently tell their executives what they do not want to hear. They must ask hard, probing questions and raise points that may not have been considered. To do so takes a certain amount of assertiveness and guts. It is a role that, while essential, may certainly lead to alienation and ineffectiveness if it is not tempered by understanding of managerial thinking and commitment to organisational goals.

5. Becoming issue oriented

Developing a broadened base of knowledge and perspective helps elevate public relations to a central role in identifying and managing the key issues that confront an organisation. Issue management is an important means of integrating public relations into organisational planning and

operations. The management of issues involves identifying controversies early, ranking issues in terms of importance to the organisation, developing policy related to issues, developing programmes to carry out policies, implementing programmes, communicating with appropriate publics about organisational policies and programmes, and evaluating the results of such effort. Issues may range from ethical standards for organisational behaviour to energy conservations, from solid waste disposal to immigration policy.

Here's a seven-step formula for accomplishing that challenging objective.

- **First, know your institution**

If you are a lawyer, all you must master is the law. If you're an economist, all you must know is the economy and the factors that drive it. But if you're a PR professional, it's not enough to know how to communicate. Since management does not have a clue as to what you do, you must first convince your superiors that you understand what they do. This means if you work in a computer company, you understand high-tech; in a college, you understand educational issues, and so on. The point is that management won't respect you as a communicator until they accept that you know their business.

- **Second, know your management**

The CEO is your "meal ticket." Study him – or her – learn what drives him and what he considers important. What does he read? Whom does he admire? What does he hate? Stated another way, "go to school" on your top management. Once you achieve this, increase your access. Volunteer to travel to the airport with the CEO to discuss an upcoming speech. Schedule meetings to review press policy. Shoot for "face time." In any organisation, "access is power." And if you're a PR professional, top management access is your lifeline.

- **Third, tap your internal network**

Top management never knows what's going on below them. Top managers need surrogates to learn what's on the minds of the employees and to anticipate and pre-empt problems. The more extensive your internal network, the more valuable you will be to top management. Few subordinates ever tell management "like it is." That's your job. And the only way to find out the truth is to be "plugged in" with employees at all levels.

- **Fourth, know the man – or woman – on the beat**

You must know the reporters who cover your organisation. Top managers may want to have nothing to do with the media, but that doesn't mean they aren't eager to learn what reporters are thinking. A good PR professional, therefore, will always keep in touch with the reporter on the beat. That way, the PR person can keep management informed about the most pressing

industry issues, at least in the minds of those who report on the business to the public. Regrettably, many PR directors – at the top of the organisational communications pile – are reluctant to even speak with the press, for fear of getting in trouble. This is a great shame for themselves and the function they purport to represent.

- **Fifth, hire good backup**

In PR, there is strength in numbers. A savvy cadre of PR professionals will help convince top managers of the value of the function. That's why it is incumbent on PR directors to hire subordinates who are better than they are. A strong PR pipeline guarantees a respected PR function.

- **Sixth, don't just sit there, do something**

PR is a function of "implementation." PR people write releases, give speeches, create web sites, conduct focus groups, monitor journalists, and so on. In other words, they are "doers." Planning and strategizing are, of course, important PR functions. But what really counts is performance and results. Communications head hunters all acknowledge that the number one criticism of high-ranking PR professionals by top managers is "they don't seem to ever do any work."

- **Seventh, don't get carried away with yourself**

In the old days, PR people were anonymous – always the faceless "spokesman" representing the organisation. Today, with more pervasive and invasive communications, anonymity is no longer possible. PR people are quoted in the papers, appear on talk shows, and everybody knows who the Foreign Minister's press secretary is. Nonetheless, the PR professional must never forget that his or her role is always secondary to that of top management. It is management's speech, management's idea, and management's company. Practicing humility and preaching humanity are imperative requisites for competent PR practitioners.

Taken together, these seven principles may be all any PR professional needs to secure – and strengthen – top management support.

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