

In Motion

Or, What Teddy Roosevelt, Marcus Aurelius, PR People, and All Good Citizens Have In Common

We who practice public relations see in our work every day how leaders act to move their organizations forward. The person who works in public relations is often caught up, most often behind the scenes, in those moments of tension between thought and action, between decision-making and movement. We help implement an action, but we also help the organization talk about it.

It is an odd place to be. Sometimes hired to help a manager know "What to say," we end up being participant in the discussions of "What to do." Other times, excluded from the discussion of "What to do," we are presented with the challenge of "Now, how should we say this? To make it acceptable, understood, palatable." In any case, this work cannot help but make one reflective about how things move forward.

Move! In the right direction

The compelling aspect of this magazine's title, *Move!* is that exclamation point. The graphic symbol conveys urgency, energy. The word says, "Change your place. Rearrange the relationship of yourself with the universe." The exclamation point demands, "Now." In another era, this publication might have been titled *carpe diem* (Seize the day!). Such is the thrust of the management roles and communication acts that constitute what's called public relations.

It's Rooseveltian. Edmund Morris in *Theodore Rex* (Random House, 2001) recounts an incident, late in Theodore Roosevelt's second administration, when he had to come to the rescue of his son Quentin, who in a scrap with a band of other ten year olds had taken the White House fire ax to the garden house on the South Lawn, with predictable results. Guiltily soaking, confronted by the presidential father, Quentin replied (probably anticipating he'd get a sympathetic hearing from the Rough Rider):

Q: I did it, because something had to be done, immejit-ly -

TR: That's exactly it! The point is always to do *something* quickly, because if you don't, the other fellow will. You may be wrong - you were here - but you have, at least, initiated action. When the action is wrong, you must admit it, and correct it by some further action.

A little cavalier, but there it is - that bias toward action and the bully pulpit.

David Finn, co-founder of the Ruder Finn Group and editor of *Move!*, often reminds us that the bias toward action is not sufficient. He asserts that the public relations person in encouraging action must also act as the conscience of an organization. A conscience is that internal debate that goes on, the angel whispering in one ear and the devil whispering in the other. The conscience is not coercive; it can be overruled by the will. The conscience is motivated by values and consideration of others - the common good, not only by self-interest. The conscience comes into play before and while one acts - it is not just a matter of thinking or feeling but embedded in the action itself. Right action.

The phrase, "to do the right thing," sounds banal after a generation of total quality management consultants has had the use of it. But "to do the right thing" is, after all, the motive force of the conscience and - should be -- of the public relations person. Other than the chairman and the board members, often it is only the public relations person who has the mandate to consider the impact of an action on all the constituencies of an organization.

Move n. 1a: the act of moving a piece (as in chess). 1b: the turn of a player to move. 2a: a step taken so as to gain an objective, syn: a maneuver. 2b: the action of moving from a motionless position.

The word "move" is also a noun; it means the next strategic step that you take in order to gain a long-term objective. The practice of public relations forces one continually to look purposefully ahead to the next move and to the next series of moves. It is a line of work, and a mindset, that demands forward thinking and holds little value in nostalgia.

Before one makes a move in chess, the contestant examines the whole board and considers every piece in play - where each one is where it might move in the near term and in the future. The context and relationships shift with each move. A public relations person must agonize over all of the organization's relationships, where they are now and where they're going. And then move!

Moving the Earth: talking to strangers...and friends

Recently, when talking with a friend, James Wilk, an Oxford Ph.D. philosopher, who is an unlikely hired gun and secret weapon advisor to a few Global 100 corporations, we came up with the best definition of marketing either of us had yet heard: "'Marketing' is talking to strangers." For James this sums it up, because he is a believer in fundamental, minimalist interventions: problems, of all kinds, can be solved with a minor adjustment at just the right place, a minimal intervention. It's rather like the old Aristotelian claim of "Give me a lever, and I can move the earth." James believes that if you know the right thing to do - the right *little* thing to do - all subsequent

actions will cascade out of it to the ultimate solution. So for this philosopher, successful marketing is a matter of finding out exactly the right thing to say to a stranger.

Never one to disagree with Oxonians, I would still yet contend that the public relations person has an even bigger challenge. Public relations people also talk to friends and family, too, not just strangers. Since the public relations person must account for all constituencies, we are often talking to people who know us well, sometimes too well, and have heard from us before.

Through decades of practice of public relations I continue to be dumbfounded by the number of managers who think that communicating to employees, shareholders, and neighbors is a matter of marketing. Employees, shareholders, and neighbors know (at least some of) our shortcomings, our history. They are not passive receptacles for advertisement and promotion but active judgment-makers, with lots of context. Often, with much incredulity. This is not to say, however, that what we communicate to friends and family is what we should communicate to strangers. The dialogue with someone familiar is nuanced, full of half-articulated references, nods and winks, echoes of previous discussions. A stranger wouldn't get it.

The communications of organizations are plagued by this dual imperative to talk to strangers and friends. The U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, in part, exists to regulate the communications of public corporations with strangers and friends, the public and insiders. Martha Stewart's personal investing travails in the summer and fall of 2002 grow simply out of a matter of purported improper communication with a friend. Many of the other corporate scandals we've recently witnessed have a common theme of the insiders knowing something that the outsiders don't, and acting on that knowledge.

The deluge of media attention and public concern over the sexual abuse of children by Roman Catholic priests has created more than one problem for the bishops of American dioceses and the Roman Catholic Church. One of their dilemmas is communication: what does the bishop as teacher and pastor in the diocese communicate to friends and family, the loyal Catholics who embrace Church teaching, who know the personalities, and are members of the community? And what does that same bishop as administrator of the secular assets of the Church in a particular geographic area say to the journalists, the lawyers, the police, and the politicians, most of whom are not Catholic, do not understand or have sympathy with the culture and history and context, are not members of the Catholic community? A word or phrase in one communication sounds preposterous in the other context. "Forgive an abuser? Yes. Jesus, on the cross, forgave the thief who was being executed at his side." To one audience it makes total sense; to another it is incomprehensible.

Moves on the grandest scale

As I write in September 2002, the President of the United States, George W. Bush, has embarked on a campaign to rally as many nations of the world as he and his emissaries

can to join the U.S. in effecting a "regime change" in Iraq. Emerging as a corollary to the U.S.-led War on Terror following the attacks on Washington, DC and New York City in September 2001, the impending move against Iraq may be the history-defining act of this generation.

Mr. Bush apparently is of Teddy Roosevelt's mindset: "The point is always to do *something* quickly, because if you don't, the other fellow will." Undoubtedly, this resurgence of Rooseveltism is one of the legacies of September 11, 2001.

Harvard professor and high profile trial lawyer, Alan M. Dershowitz, argues in his recent book, *Why Terrorism Works* (Yale, 2002), that terrorism is "propaganda . . . by violent and deadly deeds, often against the most vulnerable and innocent of victims, and often only as an initial step in a multifaceted program of violence." Terrorism does work. It inevitably attracts public attention, directly and through the media, to the cause of the perpetrators through dramatic acts of violence. Dershowitz quotes Zehdi Labib Terzi, the Palestine Liberation Organization's chief observer to the United Nations: "The first several hijackings [in the late 1960s] aroused the consciousness of the world and awakened the media and the world opinion much more - and more effectively - than twenty years of pleading at the United Nations." Probably so, considering that the Palestinians' grievances are at the center of the world's stage in a way that Armenians' and Kurds' longstanding, some would argue more profound, grievances are not.

The Times of London, September 16, 2002, reports "Iraq could produce nuclear weapons within months using pirated German equipment and uranium smuggled from Brazil, according to a dissident Iraqi nuclear scientist." If *The Times* is estimating nuclear weaponry for Iraq before the end of the year, one can imagine Washington, London, Moscow, Riyadh, Cairo, Jerusalem, Tehran and other world capitals are poised to move into action - that may be underway by the time you read this. A new global war may be waged, but the autumn of 2002 is a peculiar time of public and private debate about what is the right thing to do.

The global War on Terror began on September 12, 2001, but there has recently been a quiet period for the weaponry (like the Phony War of October 1939 to April 1940?). These days, Mr. Bush is talking urgently to both strangers and friends about what he thinks is the right thing to do. Not perhaps since the Cuban missile crisis in 1962 have talk and action been so perilous. Every speech he gives (and I've heard most of them, being a devotee of 24-hour TV cable news networks) has the same refrain: the case against Saddam; there is the president talking to the strangers. We also see Colin Powell and others shuttling from prime minister to ambassador, talking to the insiders. In the 21st century, as in no other time in history, the façade of all this unfolds in front us in the media, each day an episode, with competing networks' dueling headlines.

Moving faster

During the Internet boom of the late 1990s business management theory discovered speed. Bill Gates enlightened us about *Business @ the Speed of Thought* (Warner

Books, 1999). Forrester Research's Mary Modahl told us it was *Now or Never: How Companies Must Change Today to Win the Battle for Internet Consumers* (Harper Business, 2000). Ernst & Young's Center for Business Innovation pressed the accelerator with *Blur: The Speed of Change in the Connected Economy* (Warner Books, 1998) (which was praised, on its cover, as "Fast, smart, and useful . . ." by Alan Webber, founding editor of the magazine, *Fast Company*).

In a sobering moment we recently reviewed our agency's client list from a few years ago. More than half of the companies on our list at that time no longer exist. (They, indeed, were fast.) Like many public relations, advertising, and marketing strategy agencies, our services were aggressively sought by the numerous start-ups and spin-offs. A new article of faith evolved that press releases and announcements, weekly, twice weekly were as necessary as financing and oxygen. If you didn't have a new product, a line extension, a new upgrade, a new office, a new customer, then you didn't exist.

From the perspective of 2002 it all seems a bit frantic, but, in fact, that momentum was real. The "bubble" analogy isn't as accurate as the "boom." It's fashionable today to be judgmental about the '90s excesses. But that perspective ignores the facts that there were enormous technological advances and, whether or not they all made money, the surge of new enterprises created a huge amount of learning and experience. Those who did not work with the boom and invest in the boom were literally on the sidelines. They were not in the running. The real winners were those who at least found some way to keep up.

Uncertain moves

Some years ago I was working for one of the global pharmaceutical companies. This company manufactured and marketed a particular antibiotic that was sold to producers of animal feed products; the antibiotic was incorporated into the feed for poultry, pork, and beef, and there was longstanding evidence that it was effective in making the animals more efficient in producing meat. While the most advanced scientists in the field weren't altogether sure just why and how it works, there is much evidence to show that animals produced with this feed stay healthier and gain muscle weight more quickly. The feed additive antibiotic is essentially a commodity product. Most of the large pharmaceutical companies that produce an array of antibiotics have had comparable feed-additive antibiotics as part of their animal health product portfolio for decades.

While there is no controversy over the effectiveness of feed additive antibiotics, there periodically has been considerable controversy (more so in Europe than in the U.S.) as to whether or not there are adverse side effects for humans who eventually eat the meat produced from the animals that have been raised with such feed. Humans are acquiring antibiotic resistance, and antibiotic resistance is increasing and evolving. The question arises, "Does meat produced with feed-additive antibiotics contribute in any way to humans' acquiring antibiotic resistance?"

The last thing in the world that corporate producers of antibiotics want is for people to become resistant to antibiotics. The company I worked for, as well as its competitors, individually and through university- and association-sponsored research programs aggressively and continuously undertook monitoring projects, on both animals and humans, to detect any negative impact of their feed-additive product. The situation was one of those classic examples of dueling scientists. One study suggested negative impact; another did not. One country (Sweden) banned feed-additive antibiotics in 1998; most countries have not, though some still debate the move.

Inside the company the debate was no less contentious. The managers, the scientists, the lawyers, and the public relations people avidly followed and disputed every development in the science, the market response, public opinion, and legislative, regulatory, and political pronouncements. While the company was not about to abandon precipitously a longstanding, profitable product line (it would be a breach of their fiduciary responsibility to shareholders and their implicit pact with employees and customers), at the same time the company did not want, for a minute, to produce a substance if it indeed were harmful to animals, people, or business.

The definitive science has not been forthcoming. The most recent summary of the situation is provided in the Progress Report on Antimicrobial Resistance, Visby, Sweden, June 2001. The conference organized by the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare (not at all likely to be an industry-sympathetic source) under European Union auspices concluded: "Although the evidence for transmission of resistance from animals to man has increased during recent years, the impact of such transfer on human health has not yet been fully clarified." Which, from a public affairs perspective, is not much of a change over the past decade.

What is a public relations person to do? What is a company to do? What is a person, who honestly wants to do the right thing, to do? Many years ago in graduate school, we used to say that all decisions were made on BAD data ("BAD" being an acronym for "best available data"). That's all the animal health industry has had on the topic of feed additive antibiotics, and it is all Mr. Bush has, and the Catholic bishops, and all Quentin Roosevelt had back there on the South Lawn of the White House.

Freedom to move

The Stoic movement was born out of the teaching and writing of a group of Athenian philosophers in the fourth and third centuries BCE. Above all else Stoics believe that the world is organized in a coherent and rational way. Their universe is permeated by the *logos*, a rational and purposeful connectedness, an unbreakable chain of causes and effects embracing everything, everyone. Yet the Stoics are still able to make an argument for free will.

A human, according to the Stoics, is like a dog tied to the back of a moving wagon (history). The wagon moves on indifferent as to whether the dog is reluctantly pulled, dragged on its belly, or trotting alongside. Behind the wagon the dog can't see where

the wagon is heading; the dog nevertheless has the freedom to act, to change its behavior in ways that affect the quality of its life, its movement through the world. The wagon moves forward; the dog has the free will to choose how it will move forward with the wagon. Such is how the Stoic sees the predicament of time, and such is also the classic public relations dilemma. Given today's situation, "how things are moving," what should I do?

Marcus Aurelius, 121 - 180 AD, Roman Emperor (that is, CEO of a global enterprise), Stoic philosopher himself, provided good advice to public relations people: "Undertake nothing at random or without a purpose, nor for any reason but the common good" (*Meditations*, 12:20, Modern Library, 2002). I would guess that that thought is about the best we have to go on before making the next move.