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Today the practice of public relations is experiencing a Renaissance.

One that is driving the profession to new levels of competence, and responsibility.

As often happens in public relations, this resurgence is linked to change. We have always been needed the most, and been at our best, when change was occurring. For people in public relations, change represents challenge.

We are at no loss for challenge today.

Dramatic change is reshaping all aspects of our society. In business, in the workplace, within our institutions, in government, and perhaps most importantly, in testing the set of values that have guided us in the past.

With increasing frequency, the skills and the judgment of public relations professionals are influencing major decisions in all of these areas.

The critical importance of factoring public opinion and public reaction into these decisions has added new importance -- and new responsibility -- to the role we play.

The public relations factor has been moved ever higher on the list of considerations confronting the decision makers.

The most successful chief executives are those who believe that it is essential to involve themselves in important public relations decisions. Those CEO's who do not recognize the need for their involvement often find their company reputations suffering, and some of the luster of their leadership fading.

As the recognition of what we can bring to the process grows, so do the demands on us.

It is one thing to be invited to the Board Room to participate. It is another to make an important contribution to the deliberations.

We have learned to play the role of "Loyal Opposition" when important decisions are being discussed and debated -- a voice that helps others focus on what is in the public's or the customer's best interest, as opposed to what may be seen as a more expedient course of action. As we have come to learn, what is in the best interest of the public and customer is ultimately in the best interest of the company.

It takes courage to take a stand against the rising tide of management opinion, and we will not always be right. But presenting an opposite view often opens the door to alternative solutions, and that is an important contribution to the process and to the result.

When the decision turns to values, our input should be especially valuable.

By its very nature, and when practiced at its very best, public relations is about values.

We help separate good from bad, right from wrong. What is fair, and what is unfair. What is in the public interest, and what isn't. And while we are neither the creator nor the keeper of values, we know how to define them, and we know how to communicate them to others.

And if we are to do this responsibly, our own values must be in order.

Some of the brightest, clearest thinking people I know -- people with excellent judgment and high integrity -- are in the public relations field. And the best of today are every bit as good as the best of the past.

Many in the field of public relations will not play a role in Board Room decisions. They will be doing other types of PR assignments. But if the professionalism of public relations is to grow -- if we are to continue to gain stature -- everyone has to be counted when it comes to credibility and integrity.

Public Relations can and should be an honorable pursuit, with its professional status determined by individual performance.

I entered the field some 37 years ago by way of journalism, which at the time was the preferred route. As a reporter, bureau chief and night editor on what was then New Jersey's largest daily, The Newark News, I had come in contact with people from Johnson & Johnson.

Luck always plays a part in our lives. A while later Johnson & Johnson, then a relatively small company in New Brunswick, N.J., decided to form its first public relations department, and offered me the opportunity to help shape it, and perhaps manage it if I performed well.

When I arrived at Johnson & Johnson in early 1957, the company had sales of \$250 million a year. When I left 33 years later, it had grown to be an \$11 billion company.

From the beginning, public relations at Johnson & Johnson reported to the Chairman and CEO. During my time there I reported to three different Chairmen, and each of them made important contributions to our public relations policy and programs.

The entire business, along with our public relations, was guided by the philosophy outlined in the Johnson & Johnson Credo.

This one-page document, written by Robert Wood Johnson more than 50 years ago, outlined the company's responsibilities in four areas, first to customers, then to employees, to the communities where we work and live, and finally to the stockholders.

Once when asked why he put the stockholder last, Johnson replied: "If we perform the other responsibilities well, the stockholder will be well served." He then added: "And, I might remind you, I am the largest stockholder."

(To Johnson's credit he left his vast stock holdings to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation in Princeton, which is the nation's largest philanthropy devoted to improving health care. I am privileged to serve on the Foundation's Board of Trustees.)

Johnson was keenly aware of the company's responsibility to the public interest. In his introduction to the Credo he wrote:

"Institutions, both public and private, exist because the people want them, believe in them, or at least are willing to tolerate them. The day has passed when business was a private matter -- if it ever really was. In a business society, every act of business has social consequences and may arouse public interest. Every time business hires, builds, sells, or buys, it is acting for the . . . people as well as for itself, and it must be prepared to accept full responsibility for its acts . . ."

There is a similarity between the Credo philosophy and the principles espoused by the Arthur Page Society. That is one reason why, in 1990, I welcomed the opportunity to become the first president of the Page Society from outside the Bell System.

Our goal was to recruit leading practitioners from corporations and agencies, add a select number of educators, and position the Society as a major force within public relations at the national level. Using these beliefs that we shared as stepping stones, we worked to strengthen the role of public relations and to create a new awareness of our professional values and ethics.

Most people committed to a career in public relations devote some time to one or more professional organizations. But very little is done among the various PR organizations in a collaborative way. And I think that is unfortunate. We grapple with the same problems, and share the same goals. But we don't communicate very effectively among ourselves.

It is time for us to sit down together -- the leadership of the major public relations groups -- and see how we can further our goals and objectives by working cooperatively.

One goal should be to enhance the public's perception of the practice of public relations, and the role it plays in our society. Another goal should be to encourage bright, young people to enter the profession.

I can think of no public relations organization better qualified than the Arthur Page Society to call a meeting of public relations leaders, and to help set the agenda for a collaborative effort.

Today our nation has another pressing problem that the skills of communicators could help address. And that is the need for us to redefine the values that seem to be slipping away from us.

Three out of every four Americans think we are in moral and spiritual decline.

Two out of three think the country is seriously off track.

Crime and drug abuse are rampant.

Segments of our education system are in disarray.

A disturbing number of young people are on a dangerous and uncertain path to adulthood.

The traditional concept of family, once this nation's binding force, is rapidly dissolving.

We are afraid to talk about God for fear of offending others.

I believe there is a role to be played by public relations professionals who see the need to reshape America's agenda and redefine its values.

If and when the leaders in the profession convene, I would hope they might also consider involving themselves in this larger task.

Some national leaders and organizations have sounded this alarm, and some attention has been devoted to it in the national news media. But to my knowledge, there has been no effort to define the issues and suggest forums where these important questions can be discussed by responsible people.

I believe that the various public relations organizations, including the Public Relations Society of America, can serve as a catalyst in bringing national attention to this important subject of concern to us all.

I am convinced that public relations is not only experiencing a Renaissance, but that we now have new opportunities to lead and to elevate.

There is no better way that we could serve the public interest.

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