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# Positive Public Relations: A Very British Approach

Michael Ball

**B**etter communication with the community we serve is, surely, one of the essential building blocks for successful public service management in the 1990s. It is all very well to recognize that there is real scope to increase the flow of information to the community to encourage informed participation in public affairs and to increase the overall balance of the reporting of council affairs in the media. It is another thing to do something about it. The traditional way in the U.K. is to appoint an in-house public relations manager to herald the dawn of a new empire of assistants, support staff, and escalating publications budgets. Having been closely involved in the inception of a more pro-active approach to public relations with two councils, I am sure that there are other ways of achieving the same result without a big increase in central overheads.

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My approach is based on initial work in Cambridge (university city, population 100,000) and developed in Worthing (coastal town, population 100,000, staff 840). It proceeds from the simple proposition that all staff should be involved in publicising their services, and it should be a part of the job of all local government managers (not just top managers) to develop pro-active PR skills as part of their core jobs. It is too easy for managers to compartmentalise their jobs by concentrating on service delivery and leaving wider communication with the community to the "PR people" elsewhere in the organisation. The big problem with public service PR is mobilizing the organisation to identify and exploit PR opportunities. Having learned the techniques of effective PR, I concluded that

they were simple, so simple in fact that everyone in the organisation could and should contribute to a more pro-active, self-reliant, outgoing approach to PR. It's hard work, but it can be done! Here is how.

## Positive PR—The Works

The approach requires a mixture of managerial evangelism, courage, and tenacity, plus simple advice on what is needed. There are six main elements:

- Commitment to the principle at member level
- Managerial willingness to pass on potentially sensitive responsibility
- A staff leaflet
- A manager's PR guide
- Training for managers on the techniques of PR and the limits of their authority
- Vigorous reinforcement of the message to managers.

*Commitment:* On this question, I have found that there is widespread recognition of the need to improve media coverage of council affairs linked with a frustration about the way in which the media sometimes goes about its business. Particular concerns center on the sensationalisation and trivialisation of some issues and the unbalanced or non-reporting of important issues. Given the problems, members have three options: learn to live with it, set up a PR department to do something about it, or try it the Worthing way.

*Responsibility—Relax!* The delicate issue of managerial courage to pass on responsibility for pro-active PR should not be a problem. That is provided the limits for authority and the consultation requirements for media releases on politically or managerially sensitive subjects are spelt out to managers. What is essential, though, is that real authority is delegated so that managers can own and apply their new skills. Overview and feedback on the results of efforts should be exercised, but not at the expense of encouragement of initiative and self-reliance.

*Staff Announcement:* The staff leaflet her-

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alds the simple message, "Please help to identify possible good news or other service success or problem stories for your manager." Staff are asked to keep an eye out for successes of achievements or problems that might be of interest to the public. If staff feed PR opportunities to their managers, they are assured that both they and the public will see their service in a fresh, positive light.

*Managers' Guide to PR:* Okay, the message is through to staff, but how do you equip service managers with basic PR skills? The answer is a *Managers' Guide to the Media* and the preparation and distribution of media releases. The Cambridge *Guide* was illustrated with cartoons. *Mark 2 Worthing Guide* had its humor edited out in the interests of brevity (a key PR principle). The *Guide* tells managers how to identify PR opportunities and how to take advantage of these by drafting snappy media releases. It explains the simple rules for effective release drafting, and the rules for clearing their lines with senior managers or members or both. It includes a standard release circulation list.

*Training:* The help of a very experienced former newspaper reporter and television current affairs presenter was enlisted to get the basic message across, to help managers to identify opportunities, and to give feedback on their efforts. The message was reinforced by writing pro-active PR responsibilities into the job descriptions of all top managers.

All that said, the principal problem encountered has been the predictable response of managers, "Yes, the idea is good and we really will make a point of doing something about it—sometime. But not now, and definitely not me!" It certainly requires tenacity at the heart of the initiative to break through organisation inertia, which I see to be the sponge-like ability of an active organisation to soak up new ideas like this without visible signs of rejection or any movement at all.

### Success Speaks for Itself

There are encouraging signs that the message is spreading. There has been a sustained major increase in the number and variety of media releases issued, virtually all of which have been used in one or more of the local media. The local press have welcomed the new approach. One paper commented on the vast improvement in the quality and quantity of releases, and the editor indicated that direct access to service managers was particularly welcome. The respected chief reporter of another paper commented that the information he gets is "the best of all local authorities in the area." Councillors too are pleased with the results.

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What of the managers? I quote, "Me? Do a press release? Could I write one, let alone find something of interest to write about? When I prepared what I considered to be a light-hearted release aimed at reminding the public about the need for a license to run a raffle, little did I foresee that it would result in a live radio interview. They do say everyone is famous for five minutes."

### Today Worthing, Tomorrow the States?

If you want to know more or see the leaflets, *Guide*, (and the follow-up *Guide to Dealing with the Media, Arranging Press Conferences, and Public Meetings*), get in touch with me at the Town Hall, Worthing, West Sussex, England BN11 1HA. I will be pleased to see the message spread to the States. Perhaps the very British way could work in your town? **PM**

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