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TO: Executive Addressed

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RE: Strategic Thinking

The buzzword of the year among public relations practitioners is "strategy." "We want to be in on the corporation's strategic decision making." "We give strategic advice." "We are strategic thinkers."

When America's largest corporations and organizations deal in their worst nightmares and problems, reputational life or death depends on strategic thinking. But often the public relations practitioners within these organizations, and especially the agencies who advise them, mistake activity for strategy. This lack of strategic ability is a great barrier to credibility, reputation, and impact within the organization. So, let's talk about strategy and strategic thinking.

Strategy is the science or, more appropriately, the art of identifying and applying the correct resources and components and resolving issues or problems. That's, in fact, how an operating manager within an organization would define the term. Strategy is based on subjective, objective, and pragmatic situation analysis. What are the components of a problem? What are the phases, the steps, the parts? The military strategist might tell you that strategy is the art of employing the appropriate mix of political, economic, psychological, and military force of a nation, or group of nations, in support of policy objectives. But this still boils down to analyzing the components of the problem and the elements of potential solutions.

Public relations strategists have to go two steps beyond analysis. First, strategic elements must be reconfigured into options management can select. That means understanding the military/industrial/managerial applications of strategy (how the business really works). Second, these elements have to be communicated effectively and persuasively, with perspective and balance. Jerry L. Bryan, director of corporate communications for Sverdrup Corporation, in a speech earlier this year to the World Industrial Advertising Congress gave a really sparkling definition of strategic planning. Here's what he said, ". . . Strategic planning . . . stems from communications. It requires the analysis of abstract thoughts, the shaping of concepts, using the power of words to make notions real, giving voice to a clear, logical path that leads to powerful conclusions."

The power of words. Abstract thoughts. The shaping of concepts. Powerful conclusions.

All too often the first reaction, the first advice (unfortunately, sometimes the only reaction) is to talk about press kits, news releases, setting up front organizations (so that we can hood-wink the public) -- activity, not strategy. In other words, to do something, almost anything, right away.

Strategic thinkers and planners tend to deal in patterns of analytical elements as they work toward the specific action steps they will take. There are four crucial processes in the patterns:

1. Timelines: Dissect problems and restructure them on minute-to-minute timelines for more in depth analysis. There may be separate timelines for critical components of problems -- court action, government action, employee response, opposition action, competitive pressure, etc. Events occur over time. Budget responses over time.
2. Vulnerability/Maximum Exposure Identification: Once a situation is diagramed over time, the points of maximum vulnerability and maximum exposure become more obvious. This analysis leads to the development of scenarios which can be used to further test ideas and strategies.
3. Combine Fact-based Information With Intuitive Power: I often think public relations is the most inexact intellectual and practical activity known to man. There is a constant struggle to develop fact-based foundations for our recommendations through polls, focus groups, and other fact gathering techniques. Ultimately, though, what we are really paid to do is to make things happen. The strategic answers come from unspecifiable squishy, mushy, abstract concepts like "gut feelings" applied along with the facts and data. It's this combination of facts and intuitive approaches which really define and become your strategy. The greatest errors I've seen in managing problems occur when intuition is suppressed, denied, or ignored.
4. Think Managerially: Strategists learn to use managerial decision making. Here's a simple, easy, five-step model which illustrates how management makes strategic decisions.

Step 1: Description -- describe the problem.

Step 2: Analysis -- what does the problem mean; what are it's implications?

Step 3: Option identification -- there's always more than one option. Doing nothing, of course, is always on the list.

Step 4: Recommendations -- in other words, putting yourself in your boss's or client's shoes and telling them what you would do if you owned the business.

Step 5: Identify unintended consequences -- every action we take has some reaction which can be forecast. Often, it's the lowest number of unintended consequences which determines the best recommendation to follow -- a strategic decision.

For some interesting further reading on the subject, see "*Delayed action allows informed response*," A.C. Croft, APR, Public Relations Journal, May 1992, pages 30-32 and "*Strategic Communications Thinking, The Tactical Ingenuity Pyramid*," © 1990, available through The Lukaszewski Group Inc., Ten Bank Street, Suite 530, White Plains, NY 10606-1933.

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