

## **Where were the strategic policy advisers in the BBC?**

... their highly paid public relations professionals!

The public relations industry should hang its head in shame. Yet again we have an organisation with senior public relations professionals on fat salaries who seem to have had no relationships at the top, no involvement in policy and no understanding of the issues that shape public opinion. The BBC will not be the last to confirm that PR people probably are not fit to help shape strategy – what the organisation does – and are only suited to a minor tactical communications role – what the organisation says.

The Nick Pollard report has rightly included the communications team in its damning criticism of BBC management in their poor handling of key issues relating to the news programmes on Jimmy Savile. But surely, it was not all about what they said about it but how they allowed it to happen?

Public relations professionals should be stopping organisations running into trouble, not just working at the periphery on communications and certainly not trying to cover up errors or acting as apologists for weak management. The problems with the BBC's public relations are too common across major corporations. The simple reality is that what is called 'public relations' often is not PR but is just communications and, frequently, little more than media relations. This is even confirmed in the title that the head of this function carries in the BBC - communications director. No one who believes they are in public relations should ever accept such a title. Communications (even media relations) is but one technique within public relations and not even the most important. Our central role should be in helping management develop strategies and the related policies that will win public support and goodwill. The communications efforts can only come after that vital stage and not as a substitute for effective corporate planning.

So why do supposed-PR people accept a tactical role when the job demands strategic responsibilities? In the case of the BBC, it may be the prestige and the salary. If the BBC insisted on have a communications or media relations professional that would be fine so long as he or she reported to a boss who was head of public relations. Imagine this attitude in other management disciplines. Would a senior marketing person accept a job as sales or packaging or brand director?

This timid thinking is common across the whole business and is not being challenged even by serious and relevant organisations like PR Week, the CIPR, the PRCA and others.

The broader role we should be performing is weakened by the emphasis on media and communications rather than the fuller management of all relations and, therefore, reputation. This focus has developed because the importance of media influence on the public; organisations have realised they need a professional to manage their side of the debate. Some

years ago, this narrow view of PR was reflected in the tendency of corporations to recruit journalists to fill this role, though bosses have gradually learned that such people only have a few of the skills that the job demands.

In developing the corporate strategy, the chairman, chief executive and senior executives across many organisations simply do not consider the role of public relations in policy. A recent survey showed that the PR person in top organisations was unlikely to be on management committees with hardly any on main boards. If we are not viewed as serious strategic professionals it may be because we do not have the capabilities for the role. And we never will if we accept that our job is to communicate and promote policies that sometimes simply do not stand up or, as in the case of the BBC where the PR professionals had no involvement in forming policy nor any role until things went off the rails. They must have been happy to take the money and not put in the effort, the intellectual thinking and the muscle to do the proper job. On the evidence, BBC bosses simply viewed PR as a way of dressing up the good news or, at worst, minimising the damage of bad news.

However public relations is NOT communications as it must be all about what the organisation does and not just what it says. The public relations professionals should be working at board level and helping the organisation to develop strategies and policies that win the support and the approval of those audiences that the organisation depends upon for goodwill, reputation and success. With the BBC, it seems that the senior public relations professionals did not have access to the chairman, did not sit on the board, nor even the senior management committees. Public relations failed to prevent disaster because it had no knowledge of what was happening and was only called in when others had decided that they might have a role to play. Either that, or they suffered from severe timidity.

A simple analogy would be to compare the discipline of public relations with the financial profession. Can you imagine an organisation of any size that did not have somebody responsible for finance on the board, reporting directly to the chairman? Can you imagine any issue that the board might be discussing that did not have a financial angle? Therefore, the finance director has to be sitting around the board table with the other heads of the professional functions. But where is the public relations professional? Usually, he or she is down the corridor shoving out news releases!

Can you imagine any issue that the board is discussing that does not have a public relations dimension? Clearly there are none. Yet the public relations professional is very often two or even three levels lower down and is not considered to be relevant to decision-making.

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