

THE SANITARIAN AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

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The concept of public relations in sanitation is very much delimited by the often repeated, but erroneous definition of a sanitarian as one who deals with the environment. This leads government officials, personnel leaders and the lay public to believe a person skilled in human relations is not needed for a job of inspecting facilities, dealing with things and solving the problems of inanimate objects. This situation has made it difficult to set desirable pre-employment standards for recruiting. This erroneous concept has also restricted the effective work of some sanitarians. When asked what their work is, all too frequently we get the usual answer . . . they deal with the environment; their work has to do with community house-keeping. In other words, the public is left out of a sanitarian's job.

A professional public health sanitarian is one whose work does not deal with things, with the inanimate environment as is so commonly stated, but rather he deals with people in their environment. The public health sanitarian does not deal with water wells, septic tanks, dishwashing machines, insecticides and bulk milk coolers. He deals with the rural school principal who has a safe water supply problem; with the suburban home owner who is building a private sewage disposal system; with the restaurant operator who is unable to get clean, film-free utensils. The sanitarian deals with the housewife troubled with a cockroach infestation or with a dairy farmer who has high bacterial counts in his milk.

The sanitarian works not with the environment but with the people and their environment. He must not only solve the environmental problem, but the interpersonal problem as well. The public health sanitarian more nearly works in the field of ecology than in sanitation as it is usually defined. Human ecology, being the science dealing with the mutual relationships of man and the environment, puts the "public" in the sanitation picture. Perhaps the sanitarian should be called an ecologist.

This public relations and ecological concept of a sanitarian is more in harmony with his actual function, and sheds a truer light on the kind of man needed to do the job. One further barrier to an understanding of the relationship of sanitation and public relations is a clear understanding of the latter.



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A few people have the mistaken idea that public relations is a cheap or slick scheme to get the best of someone to gain an advantage for oneself. They see it as high pressuring methods, or the smooth ability to talk people into something they don't want. This concept of PR, as public relations is frequently called, is seen in the story of the tourist that stopped in front of a little country store. He was dumbfounded at the sight of an enormous display of salt. Stack after stack of salt could be seen. Boxes, barrels, bags—tons of salt both inside and outside the store. The curious tourist said to the store owner, "You must sell a lot of salt." The country gentlemen replied, "No, I don't sell much. But you shoulda seen the guy that came here last week. He could really sell salt." This obviously is not the point in public relations.

A more common misconception of PR puts it synonymous with soft-soaping or buttering-up. This is

a deceitful, short-lived approach to creating a false front. It is something you can do today and not tomorrow as the need may indicate. Again, this is not a description of public relations which is a more consistent and purposeful practice.

Actually, public relations is a perfectly good word which sums up one's dealings with people. In its simplest sense, public relations for a sanitarian is the things he does to get along with other people, both within and outside his professional work. Public health sanitarians have public relations whether they want it or not, simply because they are in constant communication with people. Everyone but a hermit has public relations. True, those relations may be either good or bad, but they have them. This brings us again to the concept of public relations in sanitation. The sanitarian knows the technicalities of a food poisoning problem, for example. He must also know how to deal with the human problem. This is public relations dealing with people.

One might look at PR as the point of contact from which all public health effort proceeds. If the relations between a sanitarian and a client is good; if they have a mutual respect and trust; if each understands the other person's viewpoint, philosophy, ambition and purpose; if their relation is such that they have the same goal but can differ graciously about the detail; if this sort of wholesome, solid interpersonal connection has been welded, the basis for the efficient solving of health problems and the promoting of health programs is assured.

PR, like an electrical connection, is the joint between two people or two groups of people that permits an ungarbled, unbiased flow of communication, both oral and felt. If the sanitarian has established this first step, he can find success in presenting the information or knowledge necessary for public health action. Without this first step, the sanitarian cannot hope his teaching, advice or counsel will be understood or followed. When the client knows what to do, and because of good public relations accepts it as reasonable and correct, the sanitarian may then proceed in the final step of motivation to achieve action. Thus we see public relations has achieved its true position of necessity in sanitation. It is the foundation upon which lasting and far-reaching public health accomplishment is built.

Now for a look into the basics of public relations. We have established that the professional sanitarian must carry a skill of dealing with people . . . must have good public relations. This means he must

develop a greater abundance of the human virtues than is found in many people. The sanitarian need not be endowed with these virtues, but they must be developed. Most individuals can enhance and improve the qualities and skills necessary in successful interpersonal relationships.

It is not the purpose of this discussion to describe the elements of good public relations practice. They have been described and illustrated many times. Neither is it the purpose to define the structure of public relations organization in reaching various publics, whether they be large groups or single individuals. Rather, emphasis is placed on the underlying philosophy that will motivate us to greater PR skill.

Basically, a public health sanitarian must like people. He must like to work with them. He must find something good and likeable in all of them. There is no room for hate or for passive tolerance. The sanitarian must know how to get along with people even when at first they don't want to get along with him. He must honestly want to help the farmer or restaurant operator, for example, achieve a profitable and successful business as well as a safe and sanitary operation. We accomplish nothing if we make it so difficult to accomplish the latter that he is unable to operate his business which the community needs to obtain milk or food.

One of the greatest public relations virtues a sanitarian can have is that of patience. It seems that public health workers demand that they have their way all the time. To them, understandably, health is the most important aspect of daily concern. They don't realize, however, that our ideas, the public health we are selling, is in competition with other demands upon people.

Public health is in competition whether we like it or not (and even whether or not it is right) from the standpoint of time, money, interest and need. Sometimes a client may actually have a more pressing problem than a particular health problem with which we confront him. If our public relations sense permits us to truly understand this client and see his problems as they bear upon him, we may have the courtesy to suggest our special health problem be the second item on his agenda. It is likely that our patience would accomplish the health change more quickly than if we demanded or coerced his immediate action.

Of course, we recognize that some public health problems are of such immediate and far-reaching

significance that immediate action is necessary and we cannot allow time to lapse. Good public relations, previously established, will help the client to understand our sense of urgency in such problems.

The core of this PR picture is the attitude of the sanitarian toward his work and toward the people he meets. A client's hostile and uncooperative attitude may be but the mirror of the sanitarian's negative and demanding emotions. The professional sanitarian might well be asked the question: are people glad to see you when you come to their home or establishment? What is the first reaction of a client when he sees you step into his place of business? Does he give you an enthusiastic smile and welcome, or is his reaction something less than that? If it is less, then you need better look into your public relations. Too often it's, "Here comes the bad news man! Wonder what he'll find to complain about this time?"

The negative, despairing attitude of a sanitarian will always find something wrong, something to degrade, without at the same time pointing out something good, something accomplished, something which will provide recognition and appreciation and a further basis upon which good personal relations can continue.

When the reaction of a client to our appearance on the scene is something less than cordial it's time we take a look at ourselves through the other man's eyes. Did we bring him encouragement or discouragement? Were we helping him or promoting something? Did we help him solve his problems or did we leave him problems to solve? Did we listen patiently or did we have so much to sell that we did most of the talking?

"We are interested in others when they are truly interested in us" is an ancient statement that is equally true when it is reversed to become applicable to our purpose. Others are interested in us when are truly interested in them.

A sanitarian radiates what he really is. By his attitude he may radiate hope, despair, calmness, pettiness or dignity and by these constantly affect the

quality of the sanitation in his community. The affect of attitude is seen in the story told of two men, who upon being presented a long-stemmed rose, saw it in opposite views. The first on taking the rose in his hand commented on the delicate aroma, the perfectness of the shape and the beauty of the color. The second man saw not the rose but the thorns and cautioned care in being handed the rose that he might not be pricked. How do you see the daily contacts in your work: as roses or as thorns?

The story is also told of the two boys who each received a half bag of peanuts. The first remarked, "Oh boy, my bag is half full." Said the second, Gee whiz, mine is half empty!" Again, how does your attitude help you see life; half full or half empty?

In summary, the sanitarian, because he deals with people in their environment, must have the skills of public relations. The heart of this skill lies in the attitude, among other virtues, the sanitarian has toward people and toward his work. The skills of public relations can be increased through desire, knowledge and practice.

This subject has been discussed many times before. Most of us recognize the truth of it. Many of us are moved to a feeling that we will try to put the public in sanitation. We sense the need to gain a knowledge of human relations and human behavior so we can really make public relations a part of our work. It seems, however, that we are all prone to say, "Inasmuch as I've really got a full load of work today, I'll get to that tomorrow." Once again we face the challenge of personal progress. If not now, when?

After all, there are three kinds of people in the world. There are those who watch things happen. There are those who make things happen. And finally there are those who sit around and wonder what happened. Professional public health sanitarians should be the sort of people who make things happen. They can do so when skilled public relations properly becomes a part of their competent sanitation practice.