

# Communications and Public Relations — Our Dilemma

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Following are some thoughts and some concerns about our profession and about our past track record in dealing with current issues. While some comments relate specifically to the traffic and transportation profession, my message relates to you as an individual, to you as a professional and to the entire profession. The bottom line, however, is if you have communicated with someone during the last 24 hours, then there is a message for you.

Look at where the profession has been these past few years. Are the problems the profession faced five and ten years ago much the same as they are today? What did we learn from the past and are we making the same mistakes today? And following a look at the past, and some of the strategies that were considered to address the problems that existed, perhaps we will find that those same strategies are as relevant today as they were then. We'll reference the current efforts in addressing the needs of the profession today and conclude with a challenge for tomorrow.

A current question of many transportation officials, is what's happening to the traffic engineering function in many city, county, and state governments throughout the country? It's all too real that during the past few years major cities such as Wichita, Oklahoma City, San Antonio, Baton Rouge and Dallas, along with many more smaller cities, have or are going through department breakups. In the State of Iowa alone the number of traffic engineers and departments has been reduced by approximately 45 percent with those specific duties now being handled in other departments. And just this past month, a neighbor city of ¼ million population, Dayton, Ohio, proposed separation of traffic engineering responsibilities in a department that has been and currently is a leader in the transportation engineering field.

Traffic engineering units aren't the only discipline within the highway profession where departments have been dissolved. Less than a year ago the City of Wichita abolished the city's department of engineering. The design function transferred to planning and the surveying and construction inspection to traffic operations. It was reported, "The

city manager eliminated the city's engineering department so rapidly that no one had an opportunity to organize a protest".

Considerations for the downgrading of well established professional units continues in many jurisdictions today. The stature of the professional, indicated by his authority, responsibility, organizational placement and compensation continues to be whittled away at an alarming rate. While we say that these actions occur ostensibly in the name of fiscal responsibility, can they result in any direction but lower efficiency and greater economic losses in terms of time, energy and safety?

And, as a profession should we attack this aggressively, providing information that affected members can use to attain appropriate recognition and responsibility with an intent that assures engineering decisions being made by professionals on sound engineering basis and transportation principles and not by pure administrative judgments.

There are different viewpoints as to the net results of these changes and what has caused them.

One viewpoint is that the growth in the number of traffic engineering units occurred about the time of the original TOPICS program when a traffic engineer was required to implement projects with some positions funded by federal funds. And is it not a natural cycle that if something has to go, it is going to occur at the location where the last growth was experienced? Can all of these changes be justified purely because of the financial dilemma of some of our cities and states, or is there a combination of conditions that generated this reaction? Some feel quite strongly that no single condition caused it, or can any single action correct it. Let's take a look at another viewpoint which references the professional himself, and his part in the current conditions.

Some years ago I received a letter from a Dr. John Baerwald requesting our participation in a research project at the University of Illinois titled "A Model of the Traffic Engineering Decision Making Process". The project referenced a growing concern with the manner in which transportation decisions are being made in urban areas. At all levels of government, agencies with extensive transportation decision making responsibilities, had experienced difficulties in obtaining approval for implementing improvement projects and in gaining acceptance of their programs.

One possible explanation for this dilemma was that the environment in which transportation decisions are made in urban government had become so complex that engineers and other professionals did not fully understand the workings of the decision making process.

The project examined the decision making process by which engineering decisions are made, and identified the decision making system as consisting of three elements: engineering functions, decision making participants; and the decision making process.

One of the conclusions from this study indicated that a restrictive organizational structure can seriously impair the performance of engineering functions, and that engineers who were aware of the importance of maintaining *good communications* with businessmen, elected officials, and community leaders tended to be successful in implementing change.

When engineers get out of college, they are hired for their technical expertise. Few young engineers realize the grade point average is seldom remembered beyond the hiring process and that possibly is the reason why many technically competent engineers are not able to sell their programs or why other departments are getting the increased staff. Nine times out of ten if those conditions prevail, the answer is, they have not learned to be a communicator.

Let's not begin by blaming the educator because he didn't teach us better communication. But let's recognize that this isn't the land of plenty anymore, is it? All men aren't necessarily created equal, are they? You can't put your shoulder to the wheel and your nose to the grindstone and expect to get ahead anymore, can you? It's getting harder and harder to get a catalog order right at Sears, isn't it? Kids don't listen to Mom and Pop like they used to, do they? Mom and Pop don't even listen to each other like they used to, do we?

Last year in this country there were two million marriages and one million divorces. Back home in some of our more populous counties we average two divorces for every three marriages.

Have we failed to communicate in our homes?

A recent study done in Germany involving 5,000 husbands and wives, pretty much concluded that married couples have nothing more to say to each other after eight years. The study indicated that after two years of marriage, most of them managed two or three minutes of chat over breakfast, not more than 20 minutes over the evening meal and a few more minutes in bed. By the 6th year that was down to ten minutes a day. A state of "almost total speechlessness" and lack of communications was reached by the eighth year of marriage. . . . . The postscript to that study was quite suitable in saying; "You've got to remember, however, that the German language is tough".

Let's continue for a moment and talk about communication in the home. If I were to ask you, how many of you had some form of a communication problem at home, I'd wager half of you would raise your hand, and the other half would probably be lying. I'm beginning to believe that we've taken our communication problems from home, piled them on our desks at the office, and are using those same habits at work and in the profession as we are at home.

How does marriage affect our ability to communicate? Based on information compiled here at Purdue, communications becomes more

difficult when you get married, with the worst communication habits developed during marriage. It was suggested that when we are emotionally invested, it is harder to stay calm and people are frequently afraid to be honest for fear of losing the partner. We too often tend to think they won't love us if we say what we really think.

The report goes on to say, in an attempt to communicate better, some couples communicate too much. "Don't tell your spouse every momentary impulse" says Professor Black. "For instance, you may be temporarily bored, attracted to someone else, or even wish you were not married. Most people have these feelings at one time or another, but if they are basically untrue, it is probably best not to reveal them to your spouse. They might be unnecessarily damaging". End of quote. But if your thoughts are true, and you really wish you weren't married, or that you were married to someone else, I leave it entirely up to you, what you tell your spouse.

The same study confirms that children are often better communicators than adults, being generally more direct and candid. They haven't learned to be "tactful or courteous" both of which can be blocks to honest and open communications.

On the other hand, if children are better communicators than adults, where does the blame lie, when in America last year we experienced an all time high in the rate of our troubled young's involvement in delinquency, drugs and suicides.

Teenage suicide is the third leading death of teenagers in American with 5,000 a year occurring between the age of 15 to 19 and that doesn't include a 38% increase in suicide from age 10 to 14. Some of the most affluent communities have the highest rates in the nation. A teenager characterized teenage suicide as "We are handed everything on a platter, but something is missing. The things parents don't communicate is love, understanding, and acceptance of us as a person".

It is estimated there are 100,000 runaways each year from homes across this nation. Teenage alcohol usage is estimated at the 40% level with marijuana at 17%. There are one million teenage pregnancies each year and 600,000 births with the sharpest increase with those under 14 years of age.

David Elkind in his book "The Hurried Child" cites the chief pressure on middle class children is the parent's demand for early intellectual attainment. The child of today has become the unwilling, unintended victim of overwhelming stress, born of rapid, bewildering social change and constantly rising expectations. They are under extraordinary pressure to achieve, to succeed, to please. Somewhere we seem to have forgotten that childhood is the most basic human right of children.

Have we failed to communicate with America's child?

The Purdue reports goes on to say the reason more people do not have good interpersonal communication, is that it can be threatening. We expose our inadequacies—reveal our needs, strengths, and weaknesses—thereby running the risk of rejection.

It seems people are just getting more and more out of touch, more apathetic, more disenchanted and more cynical, more just plain turned off. Everywhere we look we are right in the middle of an incredible communication crisis.

Peter Drucker, a well known management expert, grimly predicts; “The communications gap within institutions and between groups and society has been widening steadily to a point where it now threatens to become an incredible gulf of total misunderstanding”.

The failure to communicate has become the universal culprit when things go wrong. Good communication, we are told, is the key to success, not only professionally and socially, but in our intimate lives. Communication is a skill that can be learned—and improved. The communications gap is not a mechanical problem it is a human relations problem—say the experts.

Why are we having so much trouble trying to solve our communications problems? Well, let’s face it, everything is changing fast. People and changes have changed. One of the most difficult problems we have today is the problem of change itself. Change has changed. WE no longer live in an era where we can cope with change by reacting to single events as a single problem with single solutions. At the turn of this century problems still tended to occur one at a time and could be dealt with one at a time. Most things were relatively constant. Decisions could be made with relative certainty of what would be happening in the years ahead.

This is no small challenge today when you consider that the past two-thirds of a century have seen an advance from the horse and buggy to space travel.

It has been said that the “knowledge of life” of an engineer, professional or other technically trained person is about ten years; about half of his knowledge becomes obsolete in that period of time and he must continually keep up with new technology. We as a profession have been effective to a degree in the past because of our technical capability. The increasing complexity of our work relationship with other disciplines and with the public lead me to believe that it is a responsibility of every transportation professional to develop the capability required to deal with others, in today and tomorrow’s market, and that capability key, is communications.

Now, what does all this mean to the transportation professional who is full time, part time, or sometime public relations communicator and just why should improved communications be one of our greatest

efforts? Managing this changing age is the greatest challenge facing us today. We keep telling ourselves that we are better prepared today than we have ever been before in the history of mankind, but are we?

Communication is the horizon ahead, and it provides nearly limitless opportunity for the advancement of our science to the benefit of mankind.

It wasn't so long ago that construction of new transportation facilities was viewed by most people with skepticism and even alarm. This trend was described as a "crisis in confidence" in which society had lost faith in the technical professional's ability to make decisions in the public interest. Whether it was exactly that it not relevant now, but what is relevant is that today we are again on the edge of a new "crisis in confidence" but not dealing with the transportation professional continuing as a major decision making element of every government structure.

Some of the strategies identified previously in the University of Illinois research project, are as valid today as they were then in improving the probability of gaining acceptance and support of the professional and their programs. While we take a brief look at these strategies, apply them to your own responsibilities and see if they can improve your communications link and public relations efforts with all elements of your association.

The first strategy:

1. Being aware of political complexities of transportation programs and the ability to adjust recommendations to account for these factors without demeaning professional integrity.
2. The performance of engineering functions is seriously impaired when the elected representatives conducted independent evaluations of the technical aspects of the problems, separate from the evaluations of the professional.
3. The success of the professional's program was normally limited when the professional did not have the direct access to the policy making body.
4. Greater success occurred in implementing projects by those professionals who recognized the importance of communication and cooperating with business groups, traffic or safety commissions, community leaders, and other government officials rather than have the programs evaluated solely on the basis of their technical merits.
5. Modern management and administrative techniques of operating the departments in an efficient manner was a prere-

quisite for being able to cope with a variety of decision making situations to be encountered.

And the last strategy:

6. General success in implementing desired projects was evident when the professional recognized the importance of establishing good public relations and maintaining a positive and helpful image with the public, the media, and the elected officials.

Let me summarize these strategies as they represent six key measures to improve program acceptance.

1. Flexibility in recommendations
2. Evaluation *with* the professional
3. Direct access to policy makers
4. Good communication
5. Modern management techniques
6. Good public relations and image

While there's no guarantee that if these strategies are followed, success will be evident, we can assume that greater support and success rate will occur if they are a part of our programs. That is a valid conclusion.

Perhaps then, the crisis is that we must not only use all of the strategies in support of program implementation, but a new strategy in support of the professional with the necessity of looking to a new era and a new image of the transportation professional.

I recently received a comment from a fellow professional who had a different view of this dilemma. Part of this current problem he said, is the image we have attempted to create in the past, that we are going to solve all the congestion and the transportation problems of the world. We should concentrate on improving people's mobility rather than a concentrated effort in solving all traffic problems, which we haven't done and can't do. While improvements in the transportation system are constantly being made, these improvements in many cases have proven to be inadequate in meeting complex situations arising from increased urbanization. One prominent reason for these inadequacies has been failure by citizens to recognize that transportation is not an isolated activity, but one element of the complicated urban system.

Have we overlooked the improvement of personal mobility? Perhaps this is one of the reasons that as professionals we have received unfavorable public image and are finding it more and more difficult to implement our programs and experience growth in the profession. Should we concentrate on public mobility, let the public know what we are doing in that regard and stop claiming our goal is to solve all traffic congestion? It might help policy makers to better understand what to

expect from public transportation investments so that our limited resources are more wisely invested.

And how well are we communicating as a profession? A recent study on the “honest and ethical standards” of various occupations was rated in the 1983 Gallup Poll with a general but arbitrary decision that everyone below 50% needs image improvement. Clergymen were rated at the top at 64% and car salesmen at the bottom of 6%. I guess what that means is if you can’t trust God, who can you trust? And, how were engineers rated? Only 45% thought engineers were honest and ethical. The only consolation to that is, that right below engineers are funeral directors, lawyers, congressmen, insurance salesmen, and labor leaders. Have we failed to communicate within our profession?

While there are many elements to the declining image of the engineer, let’s look at one aspect of our image, flexibility or inflexibility as the case may be. We have rightfully or wrongfully treated as inflexible professionals in an inflexible profession. Back in our school days when most of us received our training, we were curious and liked to solve problems, and as our formal training progressed, we determined “the best way” to do many things, and after we got out of school and into the real world, we found even more predetermined solutions. We didn’t have time to really think, but open the textbooks and the manuals and took their answers as the “only way” rather than the “best way”.

Most of us have reached the point in our career where we quite frequently deal directly with the general public. Our superior, usually an elected or appointed official, who is not trained as an engineer, asks the question and we give him the cookbook solution and expect all to be well. But is it really? What if the only solution doesn’t quite fit in the eyes of the public, and someone proposes another way?

Being responsive to the request, our superior comes back to us to evaluate another approach or asks us if there is another way, and after responding, no, the numbers come out that way, it isn’t long before we realize “we’ve lost it”. We may truly believe that our solution is the right solution and indeed it was, that all other proposals are political expedients. And it’s only after we’ve lost it, that we begin to think maybe we were too inflexible. We find out all too late after we’ve lost it, that the “only way” is not always the “best way”.

It may take a long time to change our overall image, but we can take some immediate steps to appear to be more flexible.

First, be honest with ourselves when we take the “one solution” stand. Better yet, be imaginative in presentation and help the decision maker arrive at the right solution. A little basic training and the right information will do wonders to help most people think they reached the solution ahead of us, and it’s their idea and a great one too.

Second, and most important, be innovative wherever possible. Offer alternatives to decision makers.

Provide the facts clearly and professionally and let the decision makers do their job, and don't take it personally if the selected plan is not your idea of the best solution. Be content wthat it will work and is safe and then we will have gained much more than we've lost.

So let's start right at home when we strive to change our image. Be honest with ourselves before we take a stand and be innovative in offering alternative solutions. Let's not continue to try to prove "the only way" is the only alternative.

In conclusion, it's not all gloom and doom. I believe that the profession will recognize that these conditions do exist and that specific efforts will be made to enhance awareness of the transportation professional before all elements of society. Special public relations programs must go hand in hand with an objective to restore and improve the credibility of the transportation professional. We must build upon these efforts to assure that tomorrow's professional is indeed recognized as a necessary and vital part of all transportation programs.

Through the profession, we can diminish and hopefully reverse those decisions that are based upon sound transportation principles, and only then can we gain the credibility that will cause our programs to succeed.

And a final comment to you as an individual. There is no one in the world who can get the job done better than we can, but to get the job done, we are going to start with ourselves and our own intentions. We must rise above our absorbing daily concerns, look around, appraise what we see and adjust our course accordingly. . . . I quote from an unknown but knowledgeable author "*On the plains of opportunity bleach the bones of countless millions who, at the dawn of victory, hesitated and sat down to rest and resting died*".

I trust that with tomorrow's conclusion of this 70th Road School, you will leave this meeting technically challenged, challenged by your profession, and with a recognition that communications in your home, with your family, and public relations within our profession need not be our dilemma.