

Playing the fool is part of the job

How do we translate democracy and consultation into action, asks Liam FitzPatrick



I recently wrote that the fully involved organisation was largely a myth. With some notable exceptions, such as John Lewis, most workplaces can't cope with democracy and real consultation.

To pretend that employees en masse are going to influence strategy fundamentally is a cruel falsehood.

That's not to say that there is no place for listening in the workplace. And I keep hearing of some great examples where internal communicators are finding more and more innovative ways to gather feedback.

It's very common to see moderated bulletin boards on intranets. They run the risk of domination by a few regular correspondents and Brits have a tendency to use them to moan. In my experience, senior managers quickly lose patience with them, but, with clear ground rules and sensitive moderation they provide a good indication of the real issues that ordinary staff are debating. And if all that really matters is the fact that sauté potatoes cost more than chips in the canteen then we shouldn't question the value of the exercise.

As survey software gets cheaper and simpler we're seeing polling become more practical and manageable. The challenge is to avoid overkill and to extract data which goes beyond a temperature check and can provide a sensible guide to action.

Yet I think the most powerful approach is when managers get away from their laptop screens and actually talk to people. An ex-colleague of mine used to have email-free days when she would speak to people rather than just respond electronically to their messages. Where an email might have got a one line reply, a two minute conversation yielded all sorts of unexpected information and background.

Another team with whom I have been working do a monthly telephone poll when they all ring ten people each and ask a couple of simple questions. The value comes from the additional comments which people make about how they feel or what is really troubling them. It may not be scientific but General Elections have been won on the basis of less intelligence.

All executive teams in every shape and size of organisation face the inherent danger of being

out of touch. We all limit what we tell our bosses to what we think they need to know and they often only hear what they want to hear. A key skill of an internal communicator is to be the reliable source of truth about what is truly being said far away from head office. And the job overall is impossible if you can't speak with knowledge and conviction about what is really going on.

As one senior professional puts it – it's a bit like being the fool at the court of King Lear; you have to say what everyone is thinking but which no one else is willing or able to say. ■



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PR-ing the good

The learning zone

The CIPR's new Head of Education Policy, Gerald Chan outlines the value of PR research

IT IS interesting to note that the artist Caravaggio never left a signature in all but one of his paintings.

Some of you will disagree and say that his mark is unmistakable, it is after all, evident in the body of his work. What strikes me as interesting about the public relations industry is, like Caravaggio, we are strangely reticent about ourselves. We are professional communicators and yet are bad at 'PR-ing' the good, sometimes excellent, work we are involved in.

A former CIPR President once said that a good communicator is always in the background, providing sound advice to individuals or organisations. He or she is there but never intrusive. And he would invariably have left his mark – a well-briefed spokesperson who is 'on message', positive stories in the media following a major announcement etc. But once the practitioner finds himself in the media spotlight and becomes the story, the cardinal rule is broken and he would have failed in his task. Cue Jo Moore and Ala=stair Campbell.

There is however, no harm in creating awareness about the role of PR in society and the added value it brings. That is what we must do as a Chartered body and it is time we distinguish ourselves from the other marketing functions if we are to gain credibility as a mature profession.

PR is unique and the best way to demonstrate this is to look at the intellectual and vocationally based courses at higher education level. These show how the practice has evolved from a tactical one into a strategic discipline with a robust knowledge base. As undergraduate and postgraduate programmes are under the constant pressure of meeting Government and funding body specifications, you can be sure that their output, whether it is in the quality of teaching, graduates or research, will be respectable.

The hard work that our approved course leaders are engaged in must be recognised. They have raised standards in our industry and helped to develop PR. Nowhere is this more evident than in their research output. At the recent CIPR Alan

Rawel Academic Conference in March, we witnessed how progressive PR research now is. Papers presented illustrated how academic research helps practitioners to better understand the environments they work in and builds on their knowledge. Scholarship backed up with applied research and critical reasoning is relevant to industry. Supporting this is an indication that we, as a profession, are proud of the further training and development of our practitioners. So let's put an apple on the teacher's desk! ■



Gerald Chan is CIPR's Head of Education Policy. geraldc@cipr.co.uk. More details about the Alan Rawel Academic Conference are available on www.cipr.co.uk/academic