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PERHAPS WE'VE GOT IT ALL WRONG

*Leading Public Relations writer and practitioner, **CHRIS SKINNER** argues that PR is going to have to rethink many of its established wisdoms if it is going to be relevant to the communications requirements of the emerging new society in South Africa*

AFTER five years experience of working in the development field in KwaZulu/Natal, I am now convinced that PR practitioners will have to change their whole approach and in the process develop new techniques, if they are to remain relevant in the new South Africa.

The most fundamental readjustment in a communications context could well be a shift in emphasis. For example, the communications model for public relations developed by Professor Gary Mer-sham in work emanating from the Department of Communication Sciences at the University of Zululand proposes the acceptance of communities and stakeholders as key communicators initiating the communication process, rather than the communicator/source in the traditional communication model.

There is no doubt that the authoritarian style of many South African organisations has tended to repel many forms of innovation. Thus it is no use trying to bring about change without first changing the existing communication infrastructure.

Any integrated development programme requires that everyone should have a chance to express their views concerning problems. Shared participation provides the opportunity to

suggest alternatives and gain acceptance of solutions to problems. While participation may be difficult to implement in certain circumstances, the underlying principle that ‘people matter’ should always be borne in mind.

Now although this is something of a cliché, the fact remains that development issues centre on people rather than systems. Meaning and understanding can develop only through communication. Thus the communication process is dynamic rather than static as depicted by some earlier linear communication models.

Our experience has also taught us that in development situations change agents need to appreciate that their effectiveness is dependent on their concern and on their gaining trust and respect.

There have been many instances where local and foreign experts entering a new culture have seen local problems in terms of their own culture. Their first priority therefore, must be to identify with the community, hence personality is crucial to the formation of relationships.

Field experience is more valuable in making an individual aware of this personality factor than any training course but for effective development, com-

munication must be approached within a purposeful and inter-actional framework.

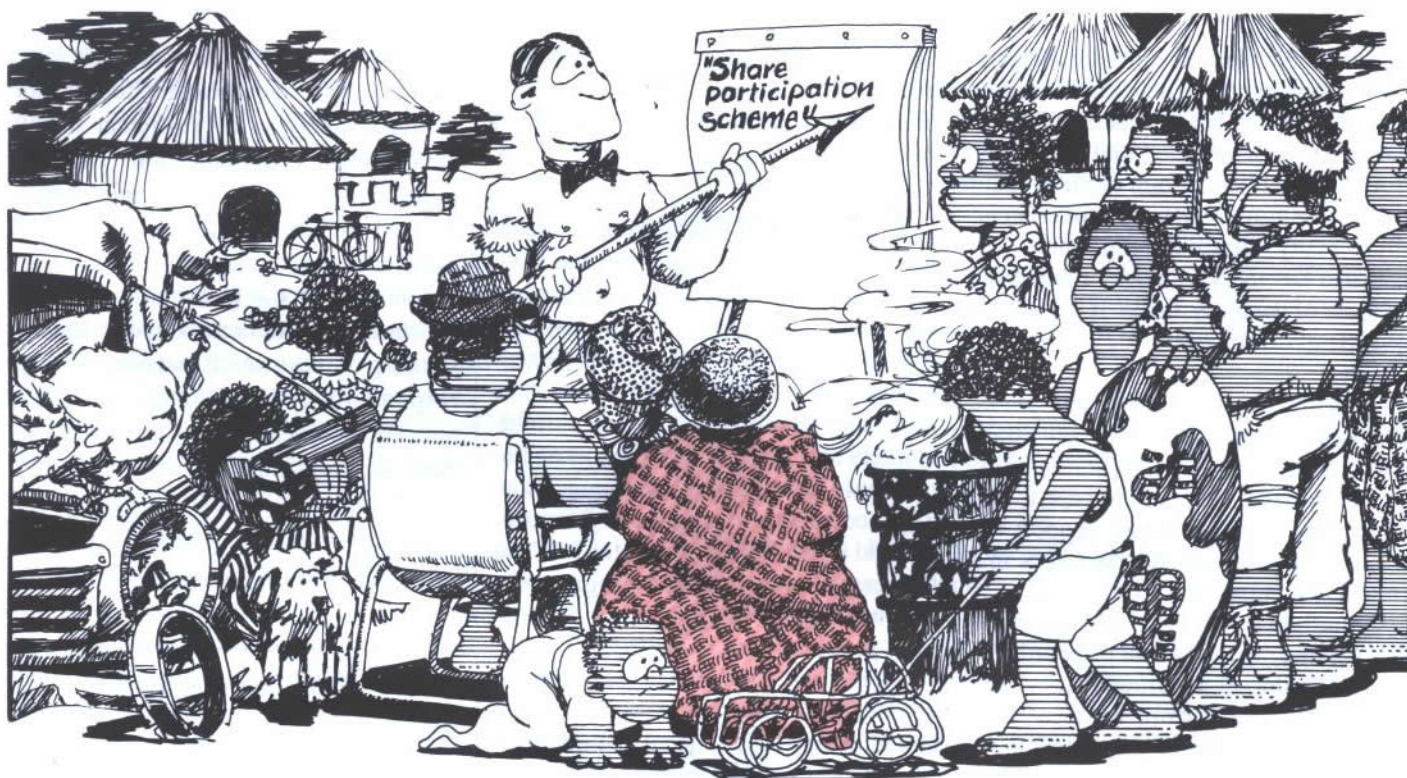
For too long we have suffered in our internal management-staff relationships, particularly in a white/black context, with what the philosopher Martin Buber describes as an ‘I-it’ relationship.

‘I-it’ is the primary word of experiencing and using in which the ‘I’ regards the other as an ‘it’ – an object. It is not a true relationship, in that it takes place within the individual and not between the individual and another person. It is a state of monologue, in which the ‘I’ cannot reach out to the other – he or she can neither listen attentively nor respond.

Words which Buber uses to characterise the ‘I-it’ relationship include, among others: domination, self-centredness, pretence, exploitation and manipulation. ‘I-it’ is not a relationship of mutual trust, openness and reciprocity, but one in which the ‘I’ uses and manipulates the other party as an instrument to achieve his or her own ends.

Ideally we should be pursuing ‘you’ relationships where ‘I’ reaches out to the ‘you’ with his/her whole being and the ‘you’ responds with his/her whole being.

They approach each other with mutual respect, sincerity and honesty, and with the intention of becoming subjectively involved in a reciprocal relationship.



This is the true state of dialogue – the relationship between two equal subjects.

The most fundamental change that we need to foster in South Africa is a change of attitude. Public relations people could have a key role to play in breaking down prejudices, opening dialogue and thus creating an atmosphere of mutual trust and dependability.

First priority in this goal is to overhaul the existing communication infrastructures of companies. This can be done by embarking on a communications audit. The scope of an audit may be as broad and as deep as the size and complexity of the organisation's demands.

The audit can measure the effectiveness of communications programmes throughout the entire organisation, in a single division or department, or within a specific employee group. It can examine communications on a particular subject or communications via individual media; it can uncover misunderstandings, information barriers and bottlenecks as well as opportunities. It can measure cost effectiveness, evaluate on-going programmes, confirm hunches, clarify questions, and in some instances, it can re-orient concepts among senior management.

Research reveals that only a limited number of companies have so far embarked on such an audit.

More commonly, limited readership surveys of internal publications are undertaken. These are fine as far as they go but they do not tackle the real issue of the place and relevance of these publications in an overall communications strategy.

As the composition of our workforce changes, we are in danger of losing touch with the growing needs and aspirations of the black, Indian and Coloured majority by failing to communicate in the idiom and style appropriate to their needs. How can we do this with the acute shortage of trained black house journal editors, for example, and the limited opportunities which still apply for their encouragement and development in companies?

This brings me to the question of the printed word and the over-emphasis placed on it in a Third World context. We have recently had the experience of launching the largest shopping complex in KwaZulu at Sundumbili, close to Mandini, on the Natal north coast.

In order to promote the free enterprise system in black society, we offered some seven million shares in this development to black shareholders.

This is not the first experiment in share-ownership, for we have a number of successful multi-partner ventures in KwaZulu involving both black and white

entrepreneurs. It was, however, the first offer to ordinary black consumers in a major property development, the success of which depended on their custom and support.

It is difficult enough to sell the concept of share-ownership, so much more so in the project which was in the design stage only. The detailed prospectus and application form did not help matters as they were totally unintelligible to the essentially illiterate target market. Yet we had to go this route by law to protect the interests of potential shareholders. It demonstrated quite unequivocally the need to adapt First World requirements to changing circumstances applicable to Third World reality.

We overcame this problem by (in addition to the prospectus) designing a promotional mix which consisted of a simple brochure, which explained the philosophy of share-ownership, and newsletters giving details of the progress of the construction of the shopping complex in both English and Zulu; extensive briefing sessions and discussions with potential shareholders on home ground (over 4 000 people were addressed in this way); and the use of *Radio Zulu* for news updates and competition details. The competition itself generated over 200 000 entries, a record for *Radio Zulu*. Radio

PLEASE TURN OVER

has immediacy and flexibility, it helps to create an awareness of and interest in new ideas, and it can act as a personal companion to both literates and illiterates. From the production point of view, radio may be used for diverse types of content, offers many different programme formats and has the advantage of being the cheapest of the mass media. It is ideal for assisting community development projects.

What did we learn from this whole exercise? The message was clear – establish credibility for the organisation offering the service, sell the concept to the community, without whose support the venture will fail, and address issues in a simple, uncomplicated style.

Overall, here we could perhaps claim we were making the first step towards the 'I-you' model of communication. We identified the communities and stakeholders not simply as objects to be manipulated but as equal participants in the communication process.

It is essential that both the mass media and interpersonal channels are co-or-

minated in any integrated development effort. In particular, there is a need to break down the traditional isolation of rural society.

For example, without inputs by field workers in rural areas, the mass media have little chance of widening social change in villages. In the past the crucial role played by the human dimension was not always fully realised. The effective relationships between fieldworkers and the rural poor are most important in development communication. This necessitates more face-to-face contact and the ability to learn on the job. The success of development programmes depends largely on the selection of the right people to send to the field.

Thus in the Third World, basic human communication needs require as much attention as technological communication needs. Communication is more than just the transmission of messages. The language used and the images evoked have to be appropriate to the target

population if the communication is to be effective. No one package, formula or model is likely to be sufficient for all development communication. The mix most likely to work is the mix that is tailored to meet particular sets of circumstances and conditions.

Our relevance as public relations practitioners will depend on our understanding of these trends and our ability to respond to dynamic change. Unfortunately we too have been isolated from these developments and, on the whole, are ill-equipped to meet the challenges of a very different society we will soon find ourselves living and working in.

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NATURAL FACTS

Meet the soundproofing system developed 65-million years ago – which is still at the leading edge

In perpetual search of "live" food, almost exclusively the only type of food it will eat, it is a matter of life and death for the owl to be able to approach its prey swiftly and undetected.

For the owl seeking terrestrial prey, this requires incredible stealth. Adaptations to the physique of the prey-hunting owl have thus evolved over the past 65-million years to meet this requirement: the disproportionately large size of the wings to body mass, enabling buoyant, effortless flight; and the exceptionally dense, soft and smooth qualities of the plumage. This greatly reduces air turbulence and even eliminates ultrasonic sounds.

But perhaps the most remarkable of all are

the miniscule barbs along the leading edge of the outermost primary feathers. These barbs, which lock the feather vane into a firm but flexible structure, curve forward in a unique fashion to form a highly effective aerodynamic front.

The near-silent flight of the owl enables it not only to hunt successfully but also to continue listen-

ing for sounds of its own aggressors while in flight. And thus, over millions of years, it has adapted to survive and continue as a species.

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