

What you didn't know ...

On Strategic Communication

Many people think the only reason federal agencies communicate is to increase their resources or authority — strategically placing information in front of decision makers in order to get more money, people or power. However, I think public support and confidence are the primary targets of strategic communication. Failure to maintain both will result in mission failure because neither resources nor courses of action will be continued or increased without these life-giving ingredients. They are the key equities here. In light of recent news about our Army, I would like to offer a few thoughts on strategic communication.

In *The Prince*, the story-inside-the-story resonates with the need for strategic communication today. Essentially, the advising 16th-century writer compares undetected potential political problems in governing organizations to cancer or other fatal medical maladies which increase in seriousness within the human body, requiring more drastic measures and urgency to remove or cure if not done so early on. While his writings have been interpreted on many levels in regard to individual and organizational leadership, Machiavelli's brief analogy provides possible insight into why governing bodies — as well as organizations, businesses and the military — need to understand, from genesis, the domino implications to what they do. Machiavelli provides a poignant comparison which implies it is critical to identify second-or-third-order negative effects of legislation or behaviors early on and remove or mitigate them before damage is done. Doing so is essential to not only smooth running and longevity of the governing body or

organization, but to survival. Although much in the business and political worlds have changed since ink-to-paper of Machiavelli's analogy, a possible case can be made that connects it as a statement on the importance of the strategic communication efforts for military organizations today.

Machiavelli provides an intriguing historical perspective that, I think, potentially applies to any serious inquiry into the purpose and role of strategic communication. Even if credence is not provided today to Machiavelli and his analogy as an argument for the importance of public activities, the strategic communication task still boils down to determining how to create conditions among a multitude of diverse audiences that will enable and foster success for accomplishing whatever the organization's purpose or bottom line is among those audiences. The communication need for any organization — public, private; business or political — comes down to the same challenge whether you call the effort marketing, public relations, strategic communication, public affairs or even politics. The quest is to understand the impacts of an organization's actions while predicting bumps or roadblocks, avoiding or removing them and, by so doing, fostering success in the organization's key business or purpose.

The centerpiece of Machiavelli's medical analogy, however, remains as something that requires deeper understanding of communication effects in a broader context of today's complex world environment. More importantly, 9/11 provides a fresh and even frightening context that may well shape the inquiry spurred by Machiavelli's idea. Consider the consequence of failed strategic com-

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munication today. The result varies based upon how the individual judging the consequences perceives the importance and span of influence of the organization. When you ask just a few questions that pop into mind, the responses are similar to explaining the pieces on a chess board and the various implications of different moves of the game pieces. Does inattention to how an organization's behavior impacts audiences spell doom to an endeavor? Will public issues evolve as cancerous growths which require drastic effort to overcome? Can they be terminal? But now put this whole line of inquiry into the context of efforts which provide security to the United States of America — where the impact of failed communications can touch social, ideology, and economic issues and, even, freedom. At a minimum, 9/11 intensifies the strategic communication question in national security as terrorism is now considered acts of war vice crime. This all places the Machiavelli analogy onto a whole different playing field with potentially grave consequences.

Can America afford failed strategic communication efforts in the time of crisis? In the simplest definition, the product of strategic communication is public support or confidence in an organization, its product and activities. The goal should be to impact public opinion by helping build that confidence in national security. Questions introduced by the Machiavelli short story need to be explored to learn whether or not strategic communication considerations must be correctly included in the genetic fiber of humanitarian and military actions in securing the homeland and all that the military does. This inquiry looks at how essential it is to time strategic communication efforts in conducting successful missions. Still deeper, does or should consideration for strategic communication factors become so ingrained in the perspective of an activity that it shapes what is done? Based upon my experience, military planners primarily see communication efforts as secondary — rarely are they considered show-stoppers for mission success during the planning stages. Yet in the context of current operations in Iraq, the question of continued public support weighs more heavily today than, apparently, it did in the early days of military action there. As for the humanitarian piece, public confidence in Hurricane Katrina relief efforts waned from the very beginning, making it very difficult to see that federal agencies were thinking about public implications at all. Even in the wake of changes in Army leadership and at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, and how they came about, the true equity that was challenged and at risk was public confidence in the Army to take care of its war wounded.



Niccolo Machiavelli

Which brings the focus back to Machiavelli's words, according to one translation:

"Because in these cases (they) did what all wise princes must do, who have to have an eye not only on present disorders but on future ones as well, and have to avoid the latter with all industriousness: because, by providing for oneself beforehand, one can remedy them easily, but if one waits until they draw close, the medicine is not on time, because the illness has become incurable. And of this, it happens as the physicians say of the (consumptive disease) which in the beginning of its malignity is easy to cure and difficult to know, but in the progression of time, not having known it in the beginning nor medicated it, it becomes easy to know and difficult to cure. So it happens in the things of the state ..."

From my perspective, strategic communication is the very act of protecting democracy, securing the homeland. In my view, this translates to designing and implementing communication programs that endure and help create conditions that assist in accomplishing the mission. The analogy from The Prince implies that an empowered leader with increased effectiveness and a broad span of influence would be wise enough to avoid pitfalls that will fester in the public sectors and, in the end, have unnecessarily doomed the effort from the start.

— Michael L. Howard
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