

Taking the BS out of PR: Creating genuine messages by emphasising character and authenticity

The realms of advertising and public relations, and the nowadays closely related realm of politics, are replete with instances of bullshit so unmitigated that they can serve among the most indisputable and classic paradigms of the concept.

Harry G. Frankfurt, 2005

Spin is not advocacy. Spin does not take a point of view. Spin is distortion that deliberately misleads the audience.

Robert Dilenschneider, 1998

We often hear about 'spin' and 'spin control'. There is nothing wrong with the concept so long as spinning does not turn into lying.

James Patterson, 1999

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'One of the most salient features of our culture is that there is so much bullshit.' So begins Harry G. Frankfurt's (2005: 1) bestselling book, *On bullshit*, based on a lecture he gave 20 years ago. If Frankfurt thought BS was plentiful in the late 1960s, it has flourished a great deal since then. Why? Some have attributed its growth to the refinement of spin in the political sector, the proliferation of media and sources of information, the cutbacks in newsrooms which create a greater dependency on publicity agents, postmodern attitudes towards subjective truth, and a certain apathy toward

elected officials and media by the public. Whatever the reason, Frankfurt's mix of philosophy, personal insight, and subtle sarcasm helps explain the contemporary crisis of trust.

According to the 2009 Edelman Trust Barometer, a survey of 1,500 global opinion leaders in North and South America, Europe and Asia, the credibility of business, government and the news media was at the lowest point since the survey began. The trust deficit has also been measured by the Golin/Harris trust index, Gallup and Roper ASW polls, and studies done by Randstad North America. According to the Edelman study conducted over the last three years, the person most likely to be trusted fit in the category of 'a person like yourself', such as colleagues, friends and family. Official spokespersons, in both business and government, have seen steady declines in credibility. Only non-government organisations (NGOs) and other independent experts such as academics have maintained or increased trust (Edelman 2009).

A series of high profile acts of deception by journalists at prominent US news organisations, such as the *New York Times'* Jayson Blair, the *New Republic's* Stephen Glass, and *USA Today's* Jack Kelley, damaged media credibility worldwide (Medsker 2004). Public relations also suffers from a trust deficit. A PRSA/Harris poll conducted in November 2006 on media and public relations revealed that 41 per cent of the general public, 29 per cent of business executives and 43 per cent of congressional members disagreed that public relations practitioners 'help their clients provide fair and balanced information to the public and other groups'. According to philosopher Sissela Bok (1999), all kinds of lying – lies to protect others, white lies, lies to liars, and noble lies for the public good – harm not only the liar and the objects of the lie, but undermine the very fabric of society. High-trust societies are built on shared ethical values and preconceived notions of ethics and morality (Fukuyama 1995). But unlike the news media, public relations practitioners have not been dogged by allegation of lying as much as they have been criticised for spinning and manipulating the truth (Medsker, 2004). That may be because the public values authentic communication and knows when communication is insincere and misleading. In other words, most rational people have a bullshit detector. For that reason, Frankfurt's theory of BS resonated with the public because it described a phenomenon with which people could identify but not

necessarily define. Once defined, however, it exposed moral flaws in professional communication and more especially in public relations practice. We will explore Frankfurt's theory and provide suggestions of how to cut the bull out of PR.

On BS

Frankfurt wrote his lecture on BS because of the lack of concern for the truth that he saw in society. Trained as an analytic philosopher, Frankfurt defined the nature of a thing recognised by all but understood by none. As one reviewer put it (Noah 2005): 'Frankfurt's definition is one of those not-at-all-obvious insights that become blindingly obvious the moment they are expressed.'

He lamented that in a society where BS is so pervasive, 'we have no clear understanding of what bullshit is, why there is so much of it, or what functions it serves...In other words, we have no theory' (Frankfurt op cit: 1).

Although Frankfurt does not provide a direct definition of the subject, a summary of his book would define BS as communication that misleads people, short of lying, about the sincerity of the communicator, who is unconcerned and careless about the truthfulness of the message. BS is not false; it is fake. Let's explore this definition in each of its parts.

First, BS is misleading communication, but its intent is not to mislead persons about facts or ideas, but, rather, about impressions. In particular, BS is used to create favourable impressions of the speaker. Frankfurt uses the example of a Fourth of July orator who 'goes on bombastically about "our great and blessed country, whose Founding Fathers under divine guidance created a new beginning for mankind"' (ibid: 18). He calls this humbug (a concept closely related to, and used to establish the premises of BS), not because the speaker regards his statements as false, but because he is trying to convey a certain impression of himself. As Frankfurt explains:

He is not trying to deceive anyone concerning American history. What he cares about is what people think of *him*. He wants them to think of him as a patriot, as someone who has deep thoughts and feelings about the origins and the mission of our country, who appreciates the importance of religion (ibid).

BS falls short of lying. Liars communicate with the intent to deceive. They willfully communicate

information that they know is false with the intent to mislead others about that information. In the account given above, the orator is not lying. As Frankfurt explains: 'He would be lying only if it were his intention to bring about in his audience beliefs that he himself regards as false, concerning such matters as whether our country is blessed, whether the Founders had divine guidance, and whether what they did was in fact to create a new beginning for mankind' (ibid). So BS isn't lying, but it is used to misrepresent us, or to mislead others about what we really care about.

Frankfurt asserts that BS may be worse than lying because lying acknowledges truth but BS does not. As Frankfurt explains: 'The liar is inescapably concerned with truth-values. In order to invent a lie at all, he must think he knows what is true' (ibid: 51).

It is impossible for someone to lie unless he thinks he knows the truth. Producing bullshit requires no such conviction. A person who lies is thereby responding to the truth, and he is to that extent respectful of it. When an honest man speaks, he says only what he believes to be true; and for the liar, it is correspondingly indispensable that he considers his statements to be false. For the bullshitter, however, all these bets are off: he is neither on the side of the true or the side of the false (ibid: 56).

It is the lack of connection to a concern with truth that Frankfurt considers the essence of BS. The BS artist does not care whether what he says is true or not, he just picks out, or makes up, what best fits his purpose. For this reason, Frankfurt considers the bullshitter as a greater enemy to truth than the liar. Both liars and BS artists conceal part of themselves in order to mislead us: the liar hides that he is attempting to lead us away from what he considers to be true; the BS artist hides that he's not really interested in the truth. One feigns truth, the other feigns sincerity.

There is a carelessness, or lack of exactness, in BS that is also troubling. To illustrate this point, Frankfurt used an account of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) reprimanding a sick colleague for saying she felt like a dog that has been run over. Wittgenstein reportedly replied: 'You don't know what a dog that has been run over feels like.'

Why was Wittgenstein upset at such an innocuous statement? Because, as Frankfurt

surmises: 'Her description of her own feeling is, accordingly, something that she is merely making up. She concocts it out of whole cloth; or, if she got it from someone else, she is repeating it quite mindlessly and without any regard for how things really are' (ibid: 30). Therefore, Wittgenstein perceives her as speaking thoughtlessly about the way she felt. 'Her fault is not that she fails to get it right, but that she is not even trying (ibid: 31) Why doesn't the BS artist try to get it right, or exact? It's not from a lack of effort or resources. As Frankfurt notes:

The realms of advertising and of public relations, and the nowadays closely related realm of politics, are replete with instances of bullshit so unmitigated that they can serve among the most indisputable and classic paradigms of the concept. And in these realms there are exquisitely sophisticated craftsmen who – with the help of advanced and demanding techniques of market research, of public opinion polling, of psychological testing, and so forth – dedicate themselves tirelessly to getting every word and image they produce exactly right (ibid: 22-23).

What contributes to BS? 'Bullshit is unavoidable whenever circumstances require someone to talk without knowing what he is talking about' (ibid: 42). When this happens, what comes out amounts to hot air. Hot air is empty, without substance. It doesn't contribute anything useful. For Frankfurt, there are similarities between hot air and BS. 'Just as hot air is speech that has been emptied of all informative content, so excrement is matter from which everything nutritive has been removed. Excrement may be regarded as the corpse of nourishment, what remains when the vital elements have been exhausted' (ibid: 42-43).

Where's the BS in PR?

Too often you hear people dismiss information as 'just PR', a bunch of PR, or simply PR, meaning that it already has the connotation of BS. There are several tactics and strategies that contribute to this perception. We would argue that two practices, that of spin and of being a hired gun, are especially harmful.

Spin and hype

Public relations, when it is reduced to spin and hype, is BS. There are many different definitions of spin. For some, spin 'is a lie, plain and simple' (Paul 2005). For others, it is an acceptable technique in a toolbox of powerful tactics 'for the aggressive engineering of perceptions'

(Patterson 1999). According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, spin means: to evolve, express, or fabricate by processes of mind or imagination. One journalist from a national newspaper echoes that sentiment: 'Spin doctors work with myth, not with facts' (cited in Dilenschneider 1998).

Sometimes spin is pure falsehood. The famous case involving Hill and Knowlton's front organisation, Citizens for a Free Kuwait, engaged in clear-cut lying about Iraqi atrocities in Kuwait. When spin is used this way, it might win some battles, but it loses the war over trust and credibility (Hargreaves 2003: 38-39).

Most spin is not concerned with truth, but with results. As one editor of a major magazine said: 'Spin doctors take shortcuts with the truth. To them, the end justifies the means' (cited in Dilenschneider 1998). Therefore, the spinmeister isn't concerned with the truthfulness or accuracy of the message, rather the results. This lack of sincerity for the truth defines spin as BS according to Frankfurt's theory.

Journalist Bryan Appleyard (1999 cited in McNair 2004) discerned this insincerity when writing about the explosion of spin in British politics. He said: 'At a quite refined intellectual level the PRs [sic] and the spinners do not believe in truth and are pretty confident that they will not be found out because nobody else believes it either.' Dilenschneider (op cit) also said: 'Spin doctoring is to public relations what pornography is to art.' This is an apt simile, because pornography has no real value to society, yet poses as art to keep its first amendment protection. Spin does the same thing. It purports to assist our democratic process, but lacks sincere and useful information, and therefore 'subverts the free flow of information in the public sphere, thwarting the citizen's exercise of rational choice' (McNair op cit: 325). Spin is justified as part of our modern political process when, in fact, it only serves to benefit the self-interests of certain parties, while ignoring the interests of society as a whole.

When PR is reduced to spin, it's bad for you, it's bad for your company, and it's bad for your clients. More importantly, it's bad for the profession. Most importantly, it's bad for society, our collective community where we all reside as citizens. In George Orwell's *Nineteen eighty-four* (1949), he envisioned a society repressed by a dictator who used deception and misdirection. In Aldous Huxley's *Brave new world* (1932),

society is flooded with so much trivia it can no longer distinguish fact from factoid. As Patterson described the difference: 'Orwell feared truth would be denied us. Huxley feared truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance' (Patterson op cit: 733). Again, one tactic is to lie, the other is to use BS. Both harm society.

Hired gun techniques

Many practitioners defend acting on behalf of an organisation's self-interests using what Fitzpatrick and Gauthier (2001) called the attorney-adversary theory of public relations. This approach takes its lead from the judicial system, where the accused has a legal right to an advocate in the adversarial environment of the courts. In the 'court of public opinion', public relations practitioners act as hired advocates. Patterson and Wilkins (2002) explain adversary theory as promoting one-sided or highly selective messages in a marketplace of opinion where multiple opinions are offered. The primary duty of such advocates is to 'vigorously defend the client in public arenas' (Barney and Black 1994: 240). Such advocates need not be concerned with balanced messages nor the effect of their message beyond the immediate interest of their client (ibid). Such a lack of concern can lead to information that is misleading and incomplete, and thereby falls under the definition of BS.

The advocacy theory has been criticised on many levels. Some question the appropriateness of the attorney metaphor. While the judicial process relies on two parties presenting both sides of an argument before an impartial judge or jury, public relations presents information in an environment that is sometimes void of diverse arguments and that can have direct consequences to the audiences receiving the information. As Fitzpatrick and Gauthier noted (op cit: 197): 'With access to only one version of truth, how can the public take responsible action?' Baker (1999: 73) claimed that professional persuasive communicators have an additional responsibility to their publics that is absent from the legal persuasion metaphor. She also argued that it could not meet such moral norms as beneficence, nonmaleficence, reversibility, universalisability and respect for human dignity. Martinson (1998) has criticised the singular duty to plead the cause of a client or organisation in the 'marketplace of ideas' by examining its lack of attention to distributive and social justice.

Additionally, the advocacy model has been compared to a hired gun, where the PR

professional has no vested interest in the organisation, its behaviours or its values, but uses its expertise to get messages placed through connections with certain media outlets. The advocate, or hired gun, model for public relations allows the PR practitioner a certain distance from the organisation and products being represented. The practitioner then can use 'plausible deniability' if the messages he or she creates are not entirely factual. However, from a BS perspective, more important is the lack of sincerity, concern or commitment on the part of the advocate. He or she may not be lying *per se*, but the lack of concern for the truthfulness of the message would be something that could transpire more easily because of the roles being played.

Taking the BS out of PR

In a speech given in November 2005, Bill Nielsen, former vice-president of communications for Johnson and Johnson, said if public relations practitioners expected to 'stand for the truth and be believed', they had to tell the truth. Good character includes such simple ideas as a sense of civic duty, an innate sense of fairness, the ability to always care, pervasive honesty, respect – for organisations, institutions and for people who may hold different points of view – and personal integrity that is beyond reproach (Nielsen 2005: 5).

Character

To find an ethical solution to the problem of BS in public relations, the industry might create a new code of ethics or place greater emphasis on the public interest. But these solutions are just as susceptible to the insincerity of BS as other extrinsic motivations and influences. The first step to taking the BS out of public relations is taking the BS out of the practitioner and the organisation. A more authentic approach to public relations places responsibility for moral action on practitioners as individuals and organisations as a collective community of individuals. The ethics of virtue addresses issues of character and integrity and focuses more on individual moral substance than on codes of ethics and mission statements. Nielsen contended that character would play a critical 'role in recasting our work together going forward not only at the professional and organisational level but at the societal level as well'. Character, he continued, 'will determine our collective future including the new talent we must continue to attract to build on today's momentum' (ibid: 1).

Nielsen chaffed at the idea of reputation management despite its popularity among

today's management. He called the label a 'misnomer' because 'reputation is earned through good character and behaviors that are observed and judged by others who accord reputation value' (ibid: 4). Reputation results from good management, Nielsen continued. He quoted Lincoln, who said: 'Character is like a tree and reputation like its shadow. The shadow is what we think of it, the tree is the real thing.' The irony is that management has put more focus on what external publics think than on cultivating organisational virtue, the source of good reputation. Nielsen urged fertilising the tree, not the shadow.

The theory that best expresses Nielsen's philosophy is virtue ethics which concerns character traits and habits that lead to right action. For example, an honest person has cultivated the virtue of honesty and chooses honesty, not because it is the best policy, but because of a desire for honesty and an aversion to dishonesty. Since the motive for honesty is a character trait of the person, the attributes of the individual and the act are in harmony. For the virtuous practitioner, honesty is a habit, a trait of character, and conscience commitment, not a duty or reasoned calculation of good versus bad outcomes. The virtuous organisation may consist of a collection of individuals with character but more likely its character traits are embedded in constitutional elements, such as its operations, practices, rituals, and culture. It is the values that old members look for in new recruits or expect to inculcate through training, cultural rituals and expectations, and rewards and discipline.

Persons or organisations with character cultivate virtues as part of their character development. Right action is the product of good character. Duties, rules, and the greater good play secondary roles to being virtuous and having moral goodness. Moral action is learned from doing what the virtuous person would do. Aristotle, the founding philosopher in virtue ethics, 'recognized that one acquired virtuous character by acting like the person who had such character' (see Alderman 1982). Virtuous models, such as Jesus and Plato, serve as exemplars of character. They stayed true to their beliefs even though their commitment to character resulted in their deaths. They eschewed fakery and condemned those who used communication to draw attention to themselves rather than to their message. They also used narratives to explain the way virtuous people should act. More important, their personal narratives reinforced what they

taught or communicated. This congruity between private beliefs and public expression represents the first step toward achieving authentic communication – sincerity.

Sincerity

If sincerity is the avoidance of being false to any man through being true to one's own self, we can see that this state of personal existence is not to be attained without the most arduous effort.

Lionel Trilling, 1971

At some time in history, the literary critic Lionel Trilling wrote, humanity determined that sincerity was worth the effort and, for the last 400 years, sincerity has helped define Western culture. The BS artist, on the other hand, values expediency and invokes sincerity or insincerity depending upon the desired public impression. Trilling defined sincerity as 'congruence between the avowal and actual feeling' (1971: 2). Simply using one's expertise becomes problematic if the public relations practitioner creates a message inconsistent with his or her true feelings. Sincere communication should accurately reflect the beliefs and values of the communicator. If the values communicated differ from the personal values espoused by the communicator, it represents a moral disconnect that deceives the audience as to the communicator's true beliefs. A common example of this kind of communication is when a public relations spokesperson claims an executive has resigned to spend more time with his or her family. The truth or falsity of the message is not as important as deflecting criticism and scrutiny from outside interests. The public relations practitioner knows the information is insincere, but communicates the information as if the executive sincerely wants a family-friendly position.

Another potential disconnect emerges from differences between individual character traits and organisational character. Virtue scholars disagree as to whether organisational character is a product of collective action or the goals, principles, and procedures that shepherd right action (Wilbur 1984). For public relations, the latter definition is most likely true. Again, the question is whether one's personal values mesh with the organisation's character. The incongruity between the two is illustrated in the experience of a consultant for a multinational corporation, who asked the company's top management to spend the morning reflecting on their top five to seven personal values (Pruzan 2001). He then had the managers merge into groups of seven and determine what values were most important

to the group. In the afternoon session, the consultant went through the same procedure, only this time he asked the executives to identify what the five to seven most important values of the organisation were. The results surprised the consultant as well as the managers; their personal values failed to match up with their perception of the organisation's values.

This disconnection between personal and organisational values poses a problem for public relations practitioners, who communicate organisational values to the public. Their role in an organisation as communicators of an organisation's values, vision, identity, and intentions often means they disseminate messages contrary to their personal beliefs. As individuals representing the organisation, they must somehow identify, articulate, and sometimes defend actions that they themselves did not directly plan or execute. History is replete with examples of public mouthpieces relaying information they assumed to be true but later learned was incomplete or inaccurate. No matter what the personal integrity of practitioners, their sincerity is irrevocably tied to their confidence in the character of top management and management's commitment to the organisation's values. The practitioner's loyalty is only morally defensible if he or she first, believe in the morality of the organisation and its leaders, and second, believe that he or she can influence the decisions of those leaders (Stoker 2005). In an age of economic downturns and intense media and new media scrutiny, organisations are relying more and more on individual practitioners to apply a BS test to company communication.

Another potential disconnect arises from the agency-client relationship. In the most ideal situation, the character traits of the person would match those of the organisation. The practitioner could act as a conscience for the organisation because personal aversions to unethical behaviour would be consistent to collective or institutional aversions to unethical behavior. For example, if the organisation refuses to disclose bad news, the practitioner could identify the action as deceptive and thus inconsistent with the organisation's aversion to deceptive behavior. In other words, the practitioner identifies the virtue trait associated with the action and urges the client to be sincere in its communication.

Just having the expertise to represent a company does not fulfill the practitioner's moral responsibility. To use one's expertise to

communicate an inauthentic message would be insincere, not only for the practitioner but for the organisation. To overcome this problem, the practitioner would have the moral obligation to help an organisation abandon actions that the practitioner and publics consider damaging, correct the damage that has occurred, and change so that the damaging behavior does not re-occur. These changes should bring the organisation's values more closely in line with the personal and professional values of the practitioner. Then the practitioner could authentically use non-moral virtues, such as advocacy, expertise, and independence, to assist in rebuilding the moral character of the company. As the organisation communicated values consistent with its character, it would become more sincere and more authentic.

Authenticity

Striving for more authenticity in communications is the final step to reducing BS in public relations. Nielsen's concept of PR people with character will go far to advance the integrity of the field. But good character alone may not fully reduce or eliminate BS from public relations. To reduce disconnects between character and public action, practitioners will need to have moral autonomy. To make authentic moral decisions, they must be able to act independently of all influences that might nullify their humanity and their commitment to character, truth, and genuine communication. Even people of good character can succumb to extrinsic aesthetic pressures. Aesthetic pressures are often associated with beauty, but philosophers might also define aesthetics as physical, emotional or psychological needs. It might be hard to do the right thing when it could cost one his or her livelihood. It is difficult to avoid faking or softening the message if it harms the reputation of friends and colleagues. It also is tempting to use colourful, clever language, even humour, to draw attention away from the message. Thus, in addition to sincerity and character, BS-free public relations demands authenticity.

The definitions of authenticity vary from the dictionary's emphasis on being original, real, and genuine to the philosophers' elusive concept of becoming an individual, an actor who achieves selfhood. Most philosophers focused on the negative aspects of inauthenticity, worrying more about the individual who surrenders self to social norms and values than about the positive implications of an individual who becomes truly authentic (see Golomb

1995). Part of the reason for this rejection of societal structures and institutions stems from a fear that outside forces would rob individuals of their freedom and thus their responsibility for their own lives. The existentialist philosophers distrusted religion, government, culture, tradition, or anything that might inhibit individuals from becoming distinctive and independent. A modern day example might include fears that television might mainstream people into a common culture, scare them into believing that the frequency of violence on television mirrors real life, and lull them into shutting down all brain activity.

To see television as something evil that enslaves individuals shows a lack of faith in the power of human beings to choose and act for themselves. The last century has witnessed an evolution of society in which the oppressive structures of the past have given way to greater pluralism and freedom. The internet has increased access to new ideas, created virtual communities, and expanded commerce. Though inequities still abound, there is more opportunity for individual choice, even in countries once dominated by totalitarian regimes. It would seem that the existentialists' fear of becoming part of the crowd, losing the chance to make choices, and being enslaved by tradition and culture have abated. The truth is, however, that the corporate world, with its infatuation with buying, selling, and the bottom line, has marginalised the individual in ways the existential philosophers could not have foretold. Position, power, and authority bestowed by society or by the corporate world endanger our very nature, our very selfhood. The opinion of others, the label placed upon us by society, becomes more important than our 'sentiment of being', one's regard for who he or she is as a human being, a knowledge of one's own existence (Trilling op cit 92-93).

Being authentic requires a strong sense of self. Citing philosophers concerned with a sense of self, Trilling provided the following explanation of how strength and authenticity are related:

The sentiment of being is the sentiment of being strong. Which is not to say powerful: Rousseau, Schiller, and Wordsworth are not concerned with energy directed outward upon the world in aggression and dominance, but, rather, with such energy as contrives that the centre shall hold, that the circumference of the self keep unbroken, that the person be an integer, impenetrable,

perdurable, and autonomous in being if not in action (ibid: 99).

In the same way that Nielsen has stood up against the tide moving the industry toward reputation management, authentic public relations practitioners think for themselves and help organisations and professions see the world a way that is at once individual and collective. The individual must stand tall for his or her beliefs and interpretation of the events in order for others to identify with him or her. Nielsen was expressing his view of the future of PR, but it resonated with many in the audience who shared similar experiences, values, and beliefs. At the same time, it may have been mocked or ridiculed by others who saw it as praiseworthy rhetoric, but not rooted in the reality of the practice. An authentic person is not as concerned with how well the message is received as much as how well it represents his or her true thoughts. This is the opposite of BS as Frankfurt defined it. Some might question whether the lone practitioner can even have enough influence in a rule-governed organisation, but as Utilitarian John Stuart Mill argued, it is not incumbent that people transform an entire company or society, but that they seek to serve the private utility of those around them (Mill 2002). We have to trust that sincere, authentic communication has universal appeal and will resonate with like-minded people everywhere.

Public relations achieves authenticity when it gains the strength to eliminate or reduce the disconnections between the personal and the professional and achieve moral congruity among internal beliefs, conscious commitments, and external actions. To accomplish this task, practitioners must be able to separate themselves from external forces that demand conformity and develop courage of character. The authentic public relations person would be a work in progress, strong in character but open to further development and refinement. This requires confidence and humility, commitment and tolerance. Indeed, the authentic public relations practitioner heeds Nielsen's challenge of becoming a person of character, to becoming a truly BS-free communicator.

Conclusion

If the profession of public relations hopes to reverse the negative perception that it is replete with hacks and flaks, then it must embrace sincere and authentic practices that develop the character of honesty and integrity. Such efforts can't be 'purely strategic' in an

effort to manage perceptions and images, thereby becoming inauthentic themselves. The first step has to be for each practitioner to look inward and evaluate his or her practice for occasions of insincerity and inauthenticity. If these practices have had temporary success in advancing organisational goals and objectives, they have also had lasting detrimental effects on the overall credibility of professional communicators. Like stalagmites on the floor of caves, which are formed from the dripping of mineralised solutions, the cumulative effect of these practices leaves deposits of cynicism and mistrust that build up resistance to truthful and genuine messages.

According to an Arthur W. Page Society (2007) white paper on *The authentic enterprise*, 'authenticity would be the coin of the realm for successful corporations and for those who lead them' (p. 6). This can only hold true if corporate communicators are steadfast in their commitment to these principles. There is no question that this can be a very difficult task for the practice of public relations, because words and messages deal as much with perceptions as they do with reality. But as long as the messages hold true to the genuine actions and character of an organisation, the efforts can remain authentic. Where the fabric of authenticity begins to unravel is when organisations attempt to please all parties and be liked by all.

If you are authentic, you can't be everything to everyone, which is certainly a temptation within the public relations practice. But, that doesn't mean that an organisation can't be something different to each of its publics, depending on their connection to the organisation. In the parable of the blind men and the elephant, each of the blind men perceived the elephant as something different – a fan, a rope, a tree trunk – depending on what they touched. The elephant wasn't trying to be these things; it was just being an elephant (being authentic). Often stakeholders are blind to the other operations of an organisation. Consumers may not be aware of how employees view the company, etc. But if an organisation tries to be one thing to employees and something else to consumers, then, in today's more transparent communication environment, the incongruities will be exposed. Authentic organisations try to stay consistent with their values, even if different publics interpret them differently.

The challenge for the authentic communicator is reconciliation. First, to be sincere, as Trilling

defined it, communicators must reconcile themselves and their values with those of the organisation they represent. Second, communicators must reconcile misperceptions of publics with the genuine actions and values of an organisation. If the organisation is being misunderstood, the authentic communicator must use accurate, sincere, and genuine messages to correct those misunderstandings. Third, the authentic communicator must use two-way communication to determine whether the organisation is acting in ways that are inconsistent with its espoused values and practices. In this case, the communicator needs to help the organisation listen to its stakeholders to reconcile its own behaviour.

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