

## HR AND PR

### *More in Common than You Think*

By Ann Marie Varga, APR

**Contrary to popular belief, we don't merely pitch potential news stories any more than our colleagues in human resources just fill job openings. In an ever-changing global environment, professionals in both arenas need to align efforts with the organization's business goals and mission.**

“We must earn a seat at the table,” the association president told the capacity crowd, “and we must demonstrate our value to the organization.” Sounds familiar, right? Well, in this case, I wasn't attending an FPRA conference. I was attending the 2011 Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) Annual Conference & Exposition, a gathering of more than 12,000 human resource professionals from 73 countries around the world. The SHRM conference was an elective for my graduate studies program in human resources management. A public relations professional for more than 25 years, I'm preparing to teach undergraduate public relations courses for Rollins, which requires a master's degree. After much consideration, I chose the human resources program because on paper it appeared to offer a lot of synergies. As a manager who has reinvented my team many times in the last decade based on

changing technology and shrinking resources, I also knew I could benefit from courses like team building, organizational psychology and leadership. A year and a half later, I have to confess that I had no idea just how much public relations and human resources have in common – and just how much I would be personally and professionally transformed.

#### **The Common Denominators**

In the nearly three decades that I've worked in public relations, I've seen the profession change from a narrow delegated role into a strategic management function. The same is true of human resources. Contrary to popular belief, we don't merely pitch potential news stories any more than our colleagues in human resources just fill job openings. In an ever-changing global environment, professionals in both arenas need to align efforts with the organization's business goals and

mission. We must fulfill our organization's short-term needs and strategically forecast long-term demands. We both must also stay current on trends in our industry, maintain knowledge of the world and how it works, as well as recognize the impacts of culture and diversity on our company. And evolving technology has dramatically changed the way we both communicate with our constituents, from sharing news to recruiting for positions.

As relationship managers, public relations professionals deal with both external and internal constituents. Our human resources counterparts, however, focus on our organization's greatest asset: human capital – the recruitment, selection and retention of employees. The obvious bottom line, however, is that both of our professions deal with people. So understanding the needs of our constituents and considering how people will respond and then creating strategies to engage them and earn their trust is critical to both disciplines. We also share other common struggles: the preconceived notions of our professions; trying to earn that elusive seat at the table, and trying to demonstrate our respective value to the organization (which for both professions is difficult to measure). But if you don't hire well or effectively develop and retain your employees, it's damaging and costly. It's as damaging and costly as sustaining a hit to your organization's reputation due to mismanagement of an issue or a missed opportunity for demonstrating your organization's contributions to the communities you serve. Both public relations and human resources professionals are striving for the same

thing – to create a sustained competitive advantage for their organization.

## **The Value of Collaboration**

Many of the sessions that I attended at the SHRM conference and many of the courses I've completed during my graduate studies have stressed the importance to "communicate, communicate, communicate." As communicators, we know that open, honest and frequent communication is key to building trust with any and all of our stakeholders. Since the public relations department serves as the primary news and information officers for our organizations, many of us are responsible for keeping employees informed of company happenings. Regular collaboration with our human resources colleagues is critical to make sure that we're speaking with one clear voice internally and externally. Even something as seemingly innocuous as an annual benefits update needs collaboration since there may be issues to be managed, such as higher insurance costs to employees. If we stay in our silos and don't invite other perspectives, there could be damaging consequences.

At Rollins, I serve as a member of the leadership team that is implementing the College's new Service Excellence Initiative – a culture change striving to improve how we treat our students, visitors to our campus and our colleagues. With a new onboarding program (the current term for employee orientation) and annual performance evaluation process, the four cornerstones of Respectful, Responsive, Collaboration and Competent will eventually become second nature, but to achieve the culture shift, this

three-year Initiative is a campus-wide effort. Core to the effort is a comprehensive communication plan developed by PR, but implemented in partnership with our human resources colleagues. In addition to the functional benefits of collaboration, a greater understanding of the key elements of human resources enables PR professionals to build consensus, solve problems, earn trust, manage team dynamics, mentor and motivate employees, understand organizational culture, enhance consulting and presentation skills, and much more. The benefits of greater understanding and enhanced collaboration can have a positive impact on organizational efficiency, the organization's competitive advantages and on individual professional development.

## Pearls of Wisdom

My graduate studies have reinforced for me that public relations is a fine balance of art and science. We may wax poetic, but we are social scientists – right alongside anthropologists and sociologists. Partnering with our human resources colleagues can give us critical human insights and we can reciprocate with our communication skillset.

Perhaps the most valuable pearls of wisdom that I've gained during my studies come from *The Leadership Code*. The book was co-written by Dave Ulrich, who is considered one of the foremost authorities on human resources management. Ulrich has been ranked the “#1 Management Educator & Guru” by *BusinessWeek*, selected by *Fast Company* as one of the “10 Most Innovative and Creative Leaders,” and named “The Most Influential Person in HR” by *HR Magazine* for three years.

*The Leadership Code* is subtitled with *Five Rules to Live By*. Those rules are: 1) Shape the future (Strategist); 2) Make things happen (Executor); 3) Engage today's talent (Talent manager); 4) Build the next generation (Human capital developer), and 5) Invest in yourself (Personal proficiency). These rules transcend discipline and apply to all professionals – all people. At the risk of sounding trite, the fifth rule has transformed me through self-reflection and self-evaluation. I believe I have emerged a better public relations practitioner, a more collaborative colleague, a better leader and manager, and a better person.

Recently, Stanley Deetz, professor of communication from the University of Colorado at Boulder, spoke to Rollins communication students. Deetz is an author and is known around the world as a specialist in the study of organizational communication from a critical/cultural/philosophic perspective. His teaching, research, and applied activities consider both internal organizational practices and their consequences for society. He told the students “If you don't have a seat at the table, you're probably on the menu.”

Collaboration is key ... so invite your human resources colleagues to sit at the table with you. There's strength – and wisdom – in numbers. Food for thought.

## About the Author

**Ann Marie Varga, APR**  
**Asst. VP of Public Relations, Rollins College**



Ann Marie Varga, APR, has more than 25 years of experience in the field of public relations. As assistant vice president of public relations and community affairs for Rollins, she oversees the development and

implementation of strategic communications and community relations for the College. Her career includes experience in higher education, corporations and agencies as well as private consulting. Varga is a sought-after presenter on the value of public

relations and the evolution of the field, its tools, strategies and tactics. Practically a Central Florida native, Varga received a bachelor's degree in English and speech communication from Rollins College. She will complete her master's degree in human resources at Rollins in May 2012. Varga has been a member of FPRA since 1983 and was named as Central Florida's "PR Professional of the Year" in 2004. She was also named the PR Professional of the Year in the Academic Institution category of the PR People Awards 2006 by *PR News*. She currently serves on the Executive Committee of the Public Relations Society of America's Counselors to Higher Education special interest section.

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