

Coorientation

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Whether you call the world's most popular sport soccer -- or like most people in the world call it football -- everyone can agree that one of the game's most exciting moments comes during a penalty kick. That's when the goalkeeper, standing alone on the goal line, goes one-on-one against an opponent intent upon scoring. Put yourself in the mind of the goalkeeper in those tension-filled seconds just before the shot is taken. At that critical moment, the goalie is trying to figure out what the kicker is planning to do. Goalies also play a mind game that goes something like "I wonder if the kicker is thinking that I am thinking that kicker is thinking...."

The goalkeeper may not know it, but that moment of guessing and second-guessing is an example of an important communication theory known as coorientation. It is the belief that people not only act on the basis of their own perceptions, but on what they believe are the perceptions of others. It is an idea first articulated by researchers Jack M. McLeod and Steven H. Chaffee in 1973, and it has important implications for the practice of public relations¹.

There have been many examples -- too numerous to count -- where organizations and individuals have misinterpreted the intentions of key stakeholders. These missteps can have a wide spectrum of consequences, ranging from inconvenience and waste to conflict and failure. Avoiding these kinds of problems requires an understanding of coorientation, the publics we are trying to influence, and ourselves.

For example, think of the problems that a social service agency might have in trying to establish a drug rehabilitation center in a residential neighborhood. The success or failure of the venture will depend on the perceptions of the key players in the drama: the agency and the neighborhood's residents. If the agency underestimates the neighborhood's concerns about the center or fails to identify any misperceptions residents may have, the result could be a political

controversy that kills the project. However, if the agency overestimates the neighbors' concerns and perceptions, it could engage in costly, time-consuming and potentially antagonistic strategies that are counterproductive.

Understanding an organization's coorientation with its stakeholders on a particular issue involves asking four questions:

1. What is our organization's view of this issue?
2. What is the stakeholder's view of this issue?
3. What does our organization *think* is the stakeholder's view, and does this agree with reality?
4. What does the stakeholder *think* our organization's view is, and does this agree with reality?

When asking these questions, it is important to remember that the various parties may define the issues differently. Turning to our scenario for an example, the social services agency may see the need for a neighborhood drug rehabilitation center as a public health issue. However, some residents, concerned about introducing substance abusers into their neighborhood, may define the issue as a matter of public safety. Both may be valid points for discussion. However, if the parties involved don't know each other's frame of reference, they could end up talking past each other.

This is why McLeod and Chaffee wrote that accuracy, which they defined as the extent to which an organization's estimate of the stakeholder's views actually matches those views, should be a major focus of any communication program. All parties must know precisely what the other is thinking. A common understanding of areas of agreement and disagreement is a crucial first step in building mutually beneficial relationships.

In our neighborhood drug rehabilitation center scenario, the social service agency's first step should be to ask itself the four questions listed above. If it doesn't know the answers, it should conduct research. Even if the agency *thinks*

it knows the all answers, coorientation research remains the best option. After all, how will it *know* that it knows without first testing all assumptions?

Like the goalkeeper at the beginning of this discussion, coorientation gives practitioners a fighting chance to succeed. Conducting a public relations campaign without coorientation is a lot like the goalie taking the field wearing a blindfold.

Endnotes

¹ Jack M. McLeod and Steven H. Chaffee. "Interpersonal Approaches to Communications Research" in *Interpersonal Perception and Communication* , a special edition of *American Behavioral Scientist*. Vol 16. No 4. March-April 1973. pp. 483-488.