

A model for others



Philip
Dine

Last month's column contained the following paragraph:
I've mentioned several times that your efforts to change the national conversation are unparalleled in the labor movement. Those aren't mere cheerleading words; they accurately reflect the situation—and in a future column we'll delve into how you're setting the standard for unions.
So let's get to it.

Reporting on labor for more than two decades, I saw firsthand labor's problems in formulating and communicating a compelling message. That perplexed me because labor's declining clout, combined with the lack of public understanding about labor's value, make it critical for unions to change the narrative.

Years ago, for a project I was working on I identified four types of union behavior I'd witnessed vis-à-vis the media.

Some unions fell into the "ostrich" category, pretty much ducking when reporters asked questions—as if the story would simply go away. But all that went away was the union's chance to get its views into the story.

Other unions adopted, albeit unintentionally, a "put them to sleep approach," sending reporters a constant barrage of predictable press releases. I'm sure I wasn't the only reporter who regularly turned those releases into paper airplanes headed straight for the wastepaper basket. Any reporter worth his salt doesn't like to tackle a story idea that's been sent to a multitude of fellow reporters.

Then there were unions that wouldn't talk to a reporter unless they personally knew him or could find someone to vouch for him. They hear you're a "good guy" and they'll talk to you until the cows come home, otherwise they won't give you the time of day. Problem is, their corporate adversaries were only too happy to talk to anyone who'd listen. Advantage: management.

Finally, there were unions that sought to intimidate journalists into producing favorable coverage. (You didn't think I was making up the rooftop encounter last month, did you?) Surprise: Bullying never produced good press.

This always puzzled me, because it seemed patently obvious that a priority for labor was to explain why it was as relevant as ever and why marginalizing unions produced a skewed industrial relations system that was exacerbating the growing income inequality.

To be fair, the AFL-CIO has made improvements in getting out the message under the leadership of Rich Trumka, though frankly the situation had nowhere to go but up. Meanwhile, individual unions do a decidedly mixed job in crafting a compelling message and effectively communicating it—including many large unions with extensive resources.

Then there are the letter carriers. You've never put your head in the sand, you've never sought to intimidate, you've never avoided reporters you didn't know—and you've certainly never inundated journalists with needless press releases. In fact, as a reporter, I paid attention whenever I heard from the NALC, precisely because it wasn't an everyday occurrence.

But it's far more than what you don't do; it's what you bring to the table.

Here, we have a leadership that has made the effort to devise a coherent and powerful message, and furthermore that's always ready to tweak that message as economic and legislative realities warrant. And we have a membership with the commitment and skill to drive that message in a way that influences the thinking of the public, of lawmakers and of journalists.

You've accomplished this by engaging on several levels. You've done it through your unrelenting efforts to get our voice out in national and local media outlets, and your impact has been evident recently from small towns to Washington, DC, as readers whom you've informed pounced on inaccurate news stories.

You're done it by influencing reporters' coverage of postal issues—as President Rolando did when the Postal Service released its quarterly financial report in August. Doing this requires credibility and respect—which both he and NALC certainly have earned from journalists.

And you've done it by contributing in other ways as well, whether a Steve Brown letting us know the moment an unfair word about postal matters hits the airwaves or the printed page in Philadelphia, or a Jeff Parr in California interviewing and publishing an informative interview with his congressman on postal issues.

Here's the bottom line: While most unions struggle to make a dent in the public's views, you have fundamentally changed the national conversation about the future of the United States Postal Service.

As a result, you're doing something else we don't mention often—you're providing a communications model for other unions and for the labor movement as a whole.

If they're paying attention, you may end up helping to save more than the Postal Service.

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