

The Counselors Academy
Public Relations Society of America
33 Irving Place, New York, NY 10003-2376
(212) 995-2230 Fax: (212) 995-0757
Address: <http://www.prsa.org>

David K. Berlo Not Your Run-of-the-Mill Animal

by Les Landes, APR

In 1992 at the PRSA National Conference in Kansas City, Dr. David K. Berlo was the featured speaker at an afternoon workshop for members of the Counselors Academy. His moving comments had considerable impact on people who heard him that day, leaving many of us wanting for more. Sadly, on February 23, 1996, Dr. Berlo died at the age of 66 after a brief illness before we were able to invite him back to share more of his wisdom with the Academy.

As a tribute to his memory, we asked Les Landes, APR -- a close friend of Dr. Berlo's and fellow Academy member to write an article for this publication about the man who was regarded by many as one of the leading communication theorists of his time.

I met David Berlo in 1976 at a University of Iowa symposium on communication. I was a graduate student. He was a legend. I didn't know it at the time, but David was the classic wunderkind. At age 27, he was appointed as the first chairman of the Faculty in Communication at Michigan State University. Two years later, he completed his landmark book **The Process of Communication** that became the definitive text in communication theory throughout

the 1960s and eventually was translated into 7 different languages.

At age 40, he was appointed the 11th president of Illinois State University. Outside the academic arena, he was the first in an elite line of prestigious business consultants--including Peter Drucker and Fred Herzberg --who produced training films with the Bureau of National Affairs Communications, Inc. In a special exhibit in the Museum of Civilization in Quebec City called "Messages," David was recognized as one of 11 highly significant communication theorists of the 20th century, along with the likes of Marshall McLuhan. Those are just a few highlights.

The day I met him at Iowa marked the first in a series of visits he was scheduled to make to the school over the course of the spring semester. News of his arrival had spread throughout the campus, and by the time he was scheduled to speak, the room that had been reserved for a meeting with students and faculty from the Journalism School was overflowing with people from every communications discipline in the University. So the convocation had to be moved out to a cavernous space at the end of one hallway.

Befitting a legend, he had a fawning entourage that followed him everywhere. I can't remember if initially I was impressed, curious, or bemused by the whole experience, but once he spoke, all that remained was awe.

That day was the beginning of a lifelong friendship that continued for 20 years until David's death in 1996. I discovered many things over the years with this remarkable man, not the least of which was how casually I had used the word genius before I met him. On a scale of 1 to 10, David's intellect was a 25. When he spoke to the Counselors Academy at the PRSA Conference in Kansas City, Danner Graves introduced him this way. "He's so smart, he'll make your teeth hurt." He was only partly joking.

That brilliance was particularly evident when he spoke about organizational relationships. David's thinking was always at least five years ahead of anyone I knew on the subject. Take the quality movement, for example. By the time it was becoming fashionable in this country, and organizations were responding with their first infant steps toward recognizing the merit of engaging people's hearts and minds as well as their backs and hands, David had

already articulated a comprehensive thesis upon which the entire philosophy and practice were based.

He started by asserting that workers fall into three general categories: slaves, indentured servants, and free people. Without delving into the qualities he attributed to slaves and servants, he contended that free people give the best performance – in the long run – for several reasons:

- They're willing to be at risk
- They're willing to accept responsibility (If you don't do it, it won't get done.)
- They're willing to accept accountability (If it doesn't get done, you pay.)
- They take pride in their work because it truly is their work, not someone else's
- They are more likely to live up to their commitments because they make them freely

After identifying those attributes, David came to a rather dramatic conclusion: *You cannot be free if you work for someone else*. Problem is, not everyone can be self-employed—or can they? According to David, anyone could work for themselves because the important distinctions are not in the organizational structure, but in one's head. Freedom is a personal choice, not a fate imposed by external circumstances. And every man and woman is free at any time to work for themselves and *lease* their services to whomever may be paying their check – whether it's one source or many – if they choose.

Being able to embrace that choice starts with an understanding of what makes human beings both similar to and different from all other animals. What makes us similar is our need for physical and emotional security. Those needs must be taken care of first before we can take advantage of the one quality that makes humans distinctively different according to David -- a trait that has become the trademark of Barney the purple dinosaur. That trait, of course, is

imagination – a world of experience that is controlled entirely by personal choice.

If you want to make the most of people's ability to imagine, you have to select a leadership strategy that fosters it. David offered three options for all working relationships: 1) Do it to 'em; 2) Do it for 'em; and 3) Do it with 'em.

All three leadership strategies can be legitimate depending on the state of mind of the individuals with whom you are working at any point in time. Even a "do it to 'em" approach can be productive and humane if done appropriately. That's what good animal trainers do. But only a "do it with 'em" strategy will produce the best that people are capable of contributing, the only approach that fires the imagination and gives people the confidence to act on it.

David referred to his "do it with 'em" strategy as Teaming Up. Teamwork, of course, has become one of those beleaguered terms from the "Quality Era," and most organizations have not fared well with it. Those failures are due, in part, to a lack of trust – and where we look for it. With free people, David suggested, the primary basis for trust is not a personal one, but rather in the "game" itself, in the rules and the willingness of all players to observe those rules.

As with all games, when there's an infraction, there's always a penalty – but never, ever a punishment. There are numerous distinctions between the two, but the most important one is pain. Needless to say, where there is pain in a relationship, trust is always compromised.

For me, most of what David said and wrote on the subject of organizational communication can be summed up in the value of adult-to-adult relationships over the typical parent-to-child or whining co-dependent relationships that characterize so many dysfunctional organizations.

David captured his sentiments on that subject in his stock response to a question he often got from clients: "How can I motivate my people?" He offered two answers:

1. You can't. But fortunately, you don't have to. God gave people all the motivation they need. You just have to find out what motivates them and figure out how to make a buck out of it.
2. Unless you've taken in slaves, or God has taken you in as a partner, you don't have any people. All you have are adult co-workers with whom you have to relate in order to get the work done. So you'd better figure out how to make a deal with them.

What does David's thinking about people have to do with public relations? As more people aspire to be free and self-employed -- and they accept the responsibility and accountability that go with it -- we will have to negotiate different kinds of "deals" in order to have mutually agreeable working relationships. In that regard, the challenge facing public relations is no different than in any other type of business. But as people in public relations start making more personally motivated choices, we may find we can no longer count on the traditional "slavish" devotion to long hours and personal sacrifices that have been a trademark of the profession for so many years.

Whether that's good or bad is not relevant. It just is. The point is how do we cope and adjust – especially those of us in positions of leadership in our respective agencies? While there are no easy answers to that question, we clearly have to start by reexamining how we think about and relate to "our people." A good place to start is by developing a profound understanding of the slogan that David placed at the top of all his letterhead: "People are not just run-of-the-mill animals." Truer words were never spoken – especially about David Berlo himself.