

Alexander Hamilton Medal Acceptance Remarks
Edward M. Block
Institute for Public Relations
New York City, November 20, 2003

As all of you know, it's customary to acknowledge a flattering introduction by saying something like:

"I'm enormously honored to be here."

Actually, what I am is absolutely astonished to be here.

Jack Felton surely must have the oldest Rolodex in North America to have found his way to me as a candidate for the Institute's Alexander Hamilton Medal.

Perhaps he intended to confer the award posthumously.

Having discovered that I am not only alive but also actually ambulatory, he is stuck with it.

I can think of at least one other person who is astonished. That would be my late father.

He died when I was still in college majoring in journalism, a calling he regarded with something close to contempt, thereby confirming, at least in his mind, his utter failure as a parent.

Had it been possible for him to imagine the name of his youngest son ever being linked to the name of a founding father of our country, he would be way, way beyond astonished. And if somehow, in some way, he is tuned in to this gathering tonight, I hope he's thinking that - - all along - - he really knew his kid would somehow overcome journalism.

For this happy insight, I thank Jack Felton, Frank Ovaitt, the Board of the Institute and all of you.

Tonight I am also way, way beyond awed to follow behind such distinguished names as Dan Edelman, Pat Jackson, Betsy Ann Plank, Harold Burson and Chet Burger as a recipient of the Institute's Alexander Hamilton Medal.

It is said that Alexander Hamilton's greatest legacy is the decisive role he played in promoting an extraordinary set of policies - - radical concepts, you could say - - that endure today in our nation, now the world's oldest democracy. He did so in the face of great resistance from his colleagues and public opinion.

He won out in the end and that is why we refer to the United States as a Federal Republic.

He did so by personally, doggedly leading the fight for policies he passionately believed in.

He did so by articulating his case powerfully, convincingly. Even today, most Americans know about the Federalists Papers, most of which he authored.

He did so through persuasively selling his ideas to the public, face-to-face.

These are the reasons we can argue, with justification, that Alexander Hamilton has provided us the greatest case history in public relations we will ever discover.

That's why it is by no means a stretch for the Institute for Public Relations to confer a medal in the name of Mr. Hamilton.

In thinking about Hamilton's achievement, what comes to my mind is the hope that today's public relations executives, counselors and teachers will reflect on his legacy - - and honor it in their day-to-day work.

I say this because the elements of that case history represent the essence of our job descriptions in public relations. It's all there, isn't it?

Stick your neck out when important policy decisions are being debated.

Be prepared to propose policy options, not merely communications tactics, when management is seeking solutions to difficult issues.

Make your case on the basis of what's acceptable, credible and best in the long run for the public's whose interests are at stake. You may be the only one at management's table who recognizes that this approach is also what's best for management in the long run.

Develop and present a communications strategy that will succeed in the court of public opinion. You are the only one at the table equipped to do this.

These are the things we know how to do. These are the things we must teach - - and reward.

These are not romantic ideals, impossible in the real world. These are fundamentals of the management art of public relations.

How is it that we have let them atrophy these past few years?

The business community, the investment community, even respected names in the nonprofit community are all in trouble today because these fundamentals have withered, apparently overcome by other priorities.

Why have so many business enterprises and business leaders substituted reputation bungling for reputation building?

What happened to management's shared values that once upon a time displayed respect for ethics, integrity and decision-making for the long pull? And a decent respect for the commonweal?

Those of us who counsel the decision makers - - today's as well as tomorrow's - - would do well to take inspiration from the legacy of Alexander Hamilton.

I speak these words to you from the heart.

We need to lift our gaze upward from the bottom line, an accounting fiction.

We need to focus on the ultimate top-line, the enduring dictum so wisely described by Arthur Page: All business in a democratic society begins with public permission and exists by public approval.

This conception of accountability is what gives legitimacy to public relations' seat at management's table.

This concept remains - - and always will remain - - the ultimate value added of the unique perspective, the essential and critical dimension of effective management that we call public relations.

Thank you.

God bless.