

Institute for Public Relations
50th Distinguished Lecture & Awards Dinner

November 10, 2011
The Yale Club
New York, NY

Alexander Hamilton Medal
Acceptance Remarks by Bill Nielsen

Thank you for that very generous introduction.

Thanks, also to Frank Ovaitt and the Board of The Institute for the honor of receiving the Alexander Hamilton Medal.

I am so appreciative of this honor. Those of you who know me know that I have a great passion for our practice and I am very fortunate to have worked in both agency and corporate settings – being well positioned to see the importance and the potential impact that our skills can have on both for profit and not-for-profit organizations.

It was Jack Felton, our former President and ceo, who conceived of the Alexander Hamilton Medal. He reasoned that Hamilton, one of our nation's Founding Fathers, was actually a very appropriate icon for what our practice is all about.

Hamilton's work on The Federalist Papers was completed out of a great sense of passion and purpose to build awareness, understanding and acceptance of the early drafts of our Constitution – all with the aim of winning its ratification by the States. You might say it was the work of a “revolutionary PR guy.”

How Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay got it done is a marvel. There were no fax machines, Internet, texting, Facebook or Twitter, or even paved roads. Their outcomes were achieved only because of the strong sense of purpose and conviction, especially expressed by Hamilton, about what this new nation could be and become.

It's interesting to think about the role social media might have played as the founders sought to put their ideas together and communicate with each other. They may never have gotten there, especially if you look at today's Tweets. Can you imagine the number of hashtags Hamilton would have used? His Tweets would have been indecipherable, as many Tweets are today. There is no question that Texting while driving would have been safer. At least the horse would know not to run off the road.

Hamilton was no saint. He died as the result of wounds he received in a duel with Aaron Burr, a man who felt he had been personally and deeply offended by Hamilton -- who would not apologize.

But, in his short life of less than 50 years, Alexander Hamilton accomplished so much – largely because of the strong sense of purpose he felt in his life. He practiced law here in New York State. He was one of the 39 signers of the US Constitution. He was appointed the First Secretary of the Treasury and helped create much of our banking and finance system. He founded The Bank of New York, the Federalist Party and the New York Post, the oldest continually running newspaper in America.

For me, it was Alexander Hamilton's sense of purpose in life that has given me the greatest inspiration, and I have given a lot of thought to the role purpose plays for those who are fortunate enough to practice in our field.

I believe that we all share an enormous gift in this career field – and that is the real possibility of making a difference through our lives of work. Indeed, the skills that make up our field are critical to the functioning of our society, the free enterprise system we enjoy and the global economy of which we are a part. What sets us apart from other disciplines of management is that we serve not merely to execute our responsibilities ... we serve our organizations and society out of sense of purpose ... a sense of purpose that is driven by truth and informed and shaped through the principles we have adopted and the personal values that make up our character.

I have seen our profession grow from what was considered a “nice to have,” non-essential status, to a critical and very essential skill-set in any well-managed organization. As we have seen our span of influence grow and the importance of our work demonstrated over and over again, I think it is not an overstatement to say that our profession has literally become “too big to fail.”

That realization imposes a huge responsibility on the current generation of leaders and senior practitioners in our field to maintain very high standards of behavior and professionalism.

But it also means we must focus on preparing the next generation to succeed -- well beyond anything we have accomplished. As my friend Tom Martin says, our hunt for future leaders and practitioners must be relentless. We need to mentor them as they start and help them grow and develop professionally so as to gain wide experience. We need to instill within them the values and principles at the core of what we do. We need to build their self-confidence and celebrate their good judgment.

Also important to our preparation for the future is coming to grips with how we define what it is we do and the responsibilities we accept for who we are. And, as Jon Iwata and Roger Bolton suggest in their work on *The Authentic Enterprise*, we need to fully occupy the space that belongs only to us, and nobody else.

As we have said, if we don't do this, others will continue to define us, miscast what we do and encroach on our territory.

As many of you know, I feel strongly that our definition should take shape around the values we hold and the responsibilities we accept, personally and individually, for four broad stakeholder groups: **the publics** with whom we communicate with truthfulness and transparency, both internal and external, **the organizations and clients we serve** with counsel and honest advocacy, members of **the media** in all forms who properly

exercise their First Amendment Right to inform in the public interest, and to **our profession** and the high standards of honesty and integrity we expect from one another.

I believe the true character of our profession is a combination of our individual character and integrity, our insistence on the truth, our common sense, sensibilities and civility, our creativity, our unique communication talents, the way we think and look at the world and the strength of the convictions we hold, independently, to act upon what we believe -- and not merely as blind advocates for our companies or clients.

It is the characteristics of our values-based work -- rooted in each of us, personally -- that gives rise to the strong sense of purpose in our work.

In the Society that has emerged from the work of our founders – Alexander Hamilton among them – I believe our function, when practiced with purpose, plays an essential role in achieving our best hopes and dreams in virtually every aspect of our society and our global community.

If we see ourselves in this light, then I believe our best work is ahead of us.

Thank you for this recognition. I am deeply honored.