

The Engineering of Consent

By Edward L. Bernays

The United States has become a small room in which a single whisper is magnified thousands of times. Only by mastering the techniques of communication can leadership be exercised fruitfully in the vast complex that is modern democracy in the United States.

Today's leaders have become more remote physically from the public; yet, at the same time, the public has much greater familiarity with these leaders through the system of modern communications. Leaders are just as potent today as ever.

Leaders have been able to overcome the problems of geographical distance and social stratification to reach their publics. Leaders may be the spokesmen for many different points of view. They may direct the activities of major organized groups such as industry, labour, or the units of government.

Such leaders have been able to accomplish purposefully and scientifically what we have termed "the engineering of consent".

Any person or organization depends ultimately on public approval, and is therefore faced with the problem of engineering the public's consent to a program or goal. The engineering of consent is the very essence of the democratic process.

The average American adult has only six years of schooling behind him. With pressing crises and decisions to be faced, a leader cannot wait for the people to arrive at even general understanding. In certain cases, democratic leaders must play their part in leading the public through the engineering of consent to social goals and values.

Today it is impossible to overestimate the importance of engineering consent. The techniques can be subverted; demagogues can utilize the techniques for antidemocratic purposes with as much success as can those who employ them for socially desirable ends.

The leader must apply his energies to mastering the engineering of consent. During World War 1, the famous committee on Public information, organized by George Creel, dramatized in the public's consciousness the effectiveness of the war of words.

During World War 1 and the immediate postwar years a new profession developed in response to the demand for trained, skilled specialists to advise others on the technique of engineering public consent. In the United States, the public relations profession deals specifically with the problems of relationship between a group and its public.

This does not prevent those who do not deserve good will from winning it and holding onto it long enough. Just as the civil engineer must analyze every element of the situation before he builds a bridge, so the engineer of consent, in order to achieve a social objective, must operate from a foundation of soundly planned action.

The consent engineer should provide himself with the standard reference books on public relations, publicity and public opinion. The public is people but what do they know? More importantly what group leaders or opinion molders effectively influence the thought process of what followers?

To function well, almost all organized groups elect or select leaders who usually remain in a controlling position for stated intervals at a time. To influence the public, the engineer of consent works with and through group leaders and opinion molders on every level.

Thorough research will disclose subconscious and conscious motivations in public thought, and the actions, words and pictures that effect these motivations. It will reveal public awareness, the low or high visibility of ideas in the public mind.

Contact should be made with business leaders, heads of trade associations, trade union officials, and educational leaders, all of whom may be willing to aid the engineer of consent. Social service executives should also be contacted, and also officials of women's clubs, and religious leaders.

Editors, publishers, and radio station and motion picture people can be persuaded to discuss with the consent engineer his objectives and the appeals and angles that effect these leaders and their audiences.

The local unions or associations of barbers, railwaymen, clothing workers, and taxicab drivers may be willing to cooperate in the undertaking. Grass-roots leaders are important. The engineer of consent learns what group leaders know and do not know, the extent to which they will cooperate with him, the media that reach them, appeals that may be valid, and the prejudices, the legends, or the facts by which they live.

He is simultaneously able to determine whether or not they will conduct informational campaigns in their own right, and thus supplement his activities. The themes will be ever present but intangible - comparable to what in fiction is called the "story line".

To be successful, the themes must appeal to the motives of the public. Motives are the activation of both conscious and unconscious pressures created by the force of desires. Psychologists have isolated a number of compelling appeals, the validity of which has been repeatedly proved in practical application. The situation may call for a blitzkrieg or a continuing battle, a combination of both, or some other strategy. Planning for mass persuasion is governed by many factors that call upon all one's powers of training, experience, skill and judgement.

At this point it will be possible to plan the tactics of the program i.e. to decide how the themes are to be disseminated over the idea carriers, the networks of communication. The engineer of consent must then create news. News in turn shapes the attitudes and actions of people.

Words, sounds and pictures accomplish little unless they are the tools of a soundly thought-out plan and carefully organized methods. When the public is convinced of the soundness of an idea, it will proceed to action. People adopt ideas and philosophies but in a democracy they can only be accomplished by the engineering of consent.

