

"TRUE GRIT"

An unfortunate weakness among many public relations directors is the inability to put one's job on the line when matters of principle are involved in a policy showdown.

In situations where top management's opinion differs from the convictions of the PR director in major areas of public relations involvement, the easy — some may euphemistically call it "diplomatic" — thing to do is acquiesce. This may save the PR officer's job, at least for the time being; but important as that may be, his job is about all that can be salvaged.

For the PR director who capitulates without a fight in a matter of principle within his purview inevitably loses a portion of his self respect, weakens his position with management, surrenders his staff's faith in him, and — where instances of acquiescence accumulate — ultimately loses his job anyway, or at the very least, is relegated to a fringe position of unimportance.

Since known instances of quick PR capitulation far outnumber known instances of a gutsy stand, we call to the attention of our readers the case of the public relations director who successfully stood by his guns despite the dire threats of a strong union and heavy pressure from the company president's office (see lead story).

We suspect that both the union and the company's management respect him for not backing down to save his job — which, happily, he still holds.

A Behind-the-Scenes Report:

UNION, THREATENING SHUTDOWN, DEMANDS APOLOGY FROM COMPANY'S PR HEAD; SECOND STATEMENT BRINGS ANOTHER THREAT & DEMAND FOR SCALP

Harold J. Pryor, chairman of the United Transportation Union, threatened to shut down the Long Island Railroad on New Year's Day unless Hank Boerner, the carrier's public relations director, took back a statement to the newspapers denouncing trainmen who reported sick on Christmas for their "apparent lack of responsibility." The wholesale absenteeism had resulted in cancellation of 61 passenger trains and a general fouling up of schedules. "If Boerner doesn't retract," the union official declared, "we might very well have all the men report sick on New Year's."

Despite pressures from the top executive suite, Mr. Boerner replied that his remarks obviously were aimed at trainmen and engineers who should have come to work but didn't, not at the majority who faithfully reported in, and therefore that he had nothing to retract. Said Mr. Pryor: "It's not fair of Boerner to harshly criticize the employees who are working to bring in his pay check while he's home enjoying his Christmas dinner." Referring to the possibility of a total shutdown Jan.

1st unless the PR director apologized, he added that "Boerner may not be able to enjoy his New Year's hangover at home." The PR chief retorted that he didn't drink, "and anyhow, I. expect to be at work New Year's just as I was on Christmas Day."

The massive Jan.1st sick-out never came off; Mr. Boerner did, indeed, spend New Year's Day at work; pressures eased all around; and there the battle might have ended. But on Jan.5 all hell really broke loose, with repercussions that flowed all the way to the Statehouse in Albany. Answering a query from the NY Times the previous day about a report that the Long Island would have to seek a NY State subsidy this year to avoid raising fares, Mr. Boerner included in his reply a charge that UTA-affiliated trainmen were cheating the State-owned railroad out of an estimated \$5-million a year by making ticket deals with passengers.

Upon reading the NY Times story next day, UTU Chmn. Pryor promptly demanded that the PR director be fired on the spot, then attended a contract negotiation meeting with LIRR Pres. Walter Schlager Jr. "to discuss the matter," among other things, "and get it resolved to our satisfaction." Meanwhile, there was again talk among disgruntled trainmen of a walkout - a work stoppage which, Mr. Pryor let it be known, he would be unable to prevent.

"Area newsmen," Mr. Boerner subsequently told PR Reporter, "were 100% behind me, and I was getting calls both at home and at the office. Some expressed personal support and others asked how they could help." While the Pryor-Schlager session was in progress, one newspaperman tried to get Gov. Rockefeller on the telephone. At least two others called friends in the State Legislature.

Upshot of Mr. Pryor's meeting with the railroad president was a letter of clarification from the PR director to the UTU chairman in which he apologized for any misunderstanding created by the way his off-the-cuff remark was reported. There was no intention, he said, of "casting doubts as to the honesty or integrity of the majority of the trainmen and conductors." Copies of the letter were distributed to the carrier's 1,600 trainmen and also to commuters.

(The railroad, the Metropolitan Transit Authority - which operates it - and commuters agree that under the Long Island's present ticketing procedures, more than one passenger can use a monthly commutation ticket in the absence of an eagle-eyed conductor.)

Mr. Boerner was not fired, and Mr. Pryor "forgave" him in a statement one newsman privately called "noble indeed." Said the union chief: "We all belong to the brotherhood of mankind, and a man is entitled to make a mistake as long as he apologizes and tries to rectify it. I think it's a gentlemanly thing to do, and I think the employees will understand and appreciate it."

Of related interest: Mr. Boerner, 33, was formerly system manager of community relations for American Airlines. He joined the LIRR in his present capacity two years ago and now heads a staff of PR professionals comprising, in addition to himself and a special PR representative, managers of press, broadcast and community relations, publications, information services, and speakers bureau. Reporting to his department, in addition, are the railroad's 32 train information people.