

## HARMONY: A TOOL IN EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

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*Armonia* is the daughter of Aphrodite and Ares, love and war. Aphrodite, the alchemic goddess has the power to transform rough materials into precious ones infused with life and love. Ares, the impartial god of war, besides being a warrior, is also a dancer and a lover connected with spring, the season of revival and renovation. With such genes in her blood, there is no doubt that *Armonia* has important skills, useful not only during the mythological era, but also in the technological world of the XXI century. Harmony is especially useful in jobs, such as Public Relations, which are based mainly on words, acts, gestures, tones, relationships, conversations, and negotiation.

The concept of harmony is connected with the world of music: it studies the simultaneous combination of different sounds, as well as the creation, the relationship and the linking of chords. Harmony designs the syntactic criteria that rule the simultaneous encounter among sounds that belong to the same discourse. Harmony replaces dissonance that has created tension in hierarchical relations.

In a broader sense, harmony is something we experience through our representational system, through our five senses. In the visual field, we find harmony when we perceive proportion among colors, dimensions and shapes. In the gustatory field, we taste balance between sweet and sour, bitter and spicy. In the olfactory field, we smell the equilibrium among scents and fragrances. In the tactile field, our fingertips recognize the softness and hardness, warmth and coldness of any texture.

What about harmony in the process of interpersonal communication, in the Public Relations realm, where the human side of a profession is observed and valued as an indicator of discipline, competence and expertise? Can harmony be a synonym of inner strength, social intelligence and effective communication? Maybe. This is what I would like to demonstrate by examining several ways of expressing harmony in Public Relations practice. The reason I wish to demonstrate this is because the efficacy of Public Relations practitioners is important for the organization they work for.

The inner strength of a Public Relations practitioner is evident in his way of dealing with problems, of coping with crisis. In those moments, the Public Relations consultant does not lose his temper, and is able to stay calm, to slow down the intensity of negative emotions in order to activate the rational part and master the situation. Inner strength has to do with the virtue of moderation and flexibility, with the two Delphic oracle's statements *know yourself* and *nothing in excess*.

Social intelligence is based on the knowledge and the intuitive comprehension of what the other person feels and thinks during an interpersonal exchange. Social intelligence is based on social emotions that help us to live with others and understand their needs, to initiate and maintain relationships based on trust, reciprocity, and bonds. One component of social intelligence has to do with *ethos* and ethical emotions that push us to follow moral rules. This component teaches us to recognize what is right or wrong, and to discriminate good from evil, in a proper combination of *pathos*, *logos* and *ethos*. When we feel anger, we realize that we are in the presence of some injustice, abuse, and inequity; so we start thinking about what to do to stop injustice, abuse, and inequity and to change what we can or have to change.

The more Public Relations is institutionalized, within organizations and society, the more Public Relations experts become visible and the more their role gains importance and prestige. Because of that, Public Relations experts are expected to carry out their role in a disciplined way. Discipline has two meanings. One is related to the branch of knowledge needed to practice a profession. Disciplined competence is based on a background of specific studies for Public Relations consultants so that the difference between *doxa*, opinion, and *episteme*, knowledge, is exactly understood and utilized. The other meaning of discipline is related to being moderate, methodical, congruent and harmonious. In both senses discipline is a necessary competence and attitude for every serious practitioner (Gardner H., 2006).

In this paper, different ways of attaining harmony in the consulting and educational roles that the Public Relations practitioner exercises in his/her daily personal and professional life are presented and discussed. The basic assumption is that the more Public Relations is institutionalized, the more it is considered both an intellectual and a professional discipline, thereby helping us to succeed in our jobs, earning money to eat healthy food and

live a wholesome life. This profession helps us to understand the complexity of our world and to transform it into manageable components. In order to succeed in our discipline we search for harmony reached by reflection on our way of being and acting in our professional field.

Reflective posture in Public Relations practice helps us to become aware of the limits of our discipline so that we learn to distinguish between what, when and how to do and what, when and how not to do something. In order to be effective we should also utilize both our radar intelligence to foresee connections and differences, and our laser intelligence to deepen important issues. And if we want to add creativity to our discipline, we can cultivate amazement, challenges, openness to new ideas and harmony.

Harmony is a tool in effective communication and relations because it creates balance and congruence among the pragmatic, systemic, and strategic approaches (Watzlawick P., 1967). The pragmatic approach teaches us to calibrate any feedback of our actions, to pay attention to all the information we receive from the interlocutor during interaction. Following the pragmatic approach, we consider ourselves co-responsible for the answer we obtain, so that if anything goes in a direction different from the one we expect, we can make some changes to put the transaction back on the right track.

The systemic approach helps us to recognize that we belong to a whole set of relationships, which sustain and define-us. This means to see ourselves, and what we do **with** others (not TO others), in a process of reciprocal influence, where we -simultaneously- influence others and are influenced by them. So it becomes important to know the process of reciprocal influence, and in this way, we carefully observe who is influencing whom, how this person is using his/her influence, and which instrument of power he is using. He may use strong instruments of negative power, against others, such as commands, control through role, hierarchy, finance, violence, menace, and blackmail. Or she may use light instruments of positive power, towards a desired outcome, such as non-violence, goodwill, kindness, courtesy, loyalty, fidelity, attachment and also efficiency, growth, service, and maintenance (Hilman J., 2002).

The strategic approach means that in order to be effective and reach our goals, a strategy regarding interpersonal communication must be chosen: it is important to devise a particular way to be listened to and to be followed. The strategic approach helps us to decide which communication style -

direct or indirect, persuasive or evocative, implicit or explicit- should be selected on a particular occasion and with a particular person. This means gaining the mastery of understanding preferences of others and the flexibility to replace what is not working with something more successful.

*This seems to be the skill of José Mourinho, the former Chelsea' team coach and the current team coach of F.C. Inter. He is able to say the right words at the right time with the right music, so that each soccer player follows him and the team wins.*

Harmony as a tool in effective communication has to do with the fact that when we are talking about human beings we are also talking about human values. And the consulting and educational processes are connected with human outcomes and values. Being aware of that helps us to discover the importance of our disciplinary intelligence, of our skills in the Public Relations field.

The Public Relations expert, both consultant and educator, has learned to eradicate previous wrong ways of thinking or biases, *doxa*, in order to think and act with *episteme*, as an expert in his branch. Becoming an expert through discipline is a way of looking at things through professional lenses, a way of identifying topics and methods related to this profession. Becoming an expert in Public Relations brings us to dedicate time and effort to deepening the knowledge of the matter we are dealing with.

The institutionalization of the Public Relations role brings us to search for excellence and efficacy in order to be up to our new and more important job. And one way to reach and increase excellence and efficacy is through harmony. So the question now becomes: how can we reach and maintain harmony in our job? To answer this question I have selected seven ingredients of harmony. All together they shape the concept and the content of harmony and they help us to give balance, and effectiveness to any profession, especially to the Public Relations practitioner.

Let me start with the first ingredient, the note C, Hope or, as Barak Obama says, *yes we can*.

### **Hope**

It is considered a truism that hope is essential to life: in good times it is a stimulus to achieve higher goals and better outcomes; in bad times it is a comfort sustained by the idea of future relief, rescue, reward or even

justice. Hope is an anticipatory emotion through which, even though we fear the worst, we strive for the best. It is both a passion and a virtue, directed toward something important we would like to achieve. It is a passion because it sees many possibilities of an open future. It is a virtue independently of its realizations. It is an intrinsic value allied with courage and imagination, a positive attitude full of trust, possibilities and aspirations.

Hope is never in a hurry. It knows that, on certain occasions or for certain jobs, we need time, patience, endurance, and perseverance. We also need to keep in mind that we are free to choose our own path. Actually, "*we are forced to be free, and there is no amnesty*" (Sartre). When we are sustained by hope, we don't feel tired, but strong; we don't complain, but feed our desire; we don't flee, but fight. Hope awakes our indignation and courage (St. Augustine). Indignation for the way things are and courage to change them, strongly believing that we are right, and that "*we can*".

Hope helps a Public Relations practitioner to carry out an ethical and economically relevant job, teaches him/her to deal with uncertainty and complexity, and to change what should be changed. It is based on the awareness that we cannot predict the future because too many unexpected things can happen and surprise us. Hope is stronger than despair because it reminds us that we have so many human still to-be-discovered potentialities, and that we have the flexibility to metamorphose as human butterflies, according to the many seasons of life. (Morin E. 2005).

And the more we realize that we are living in chaos, the more we search for harmony, flexibility and creativity through a process of awareness. Awareness is the second component of harmony, the note I.

### **Awareness**

Awareness is the ability to know ourselves. It is the mastery of understanding what is going on inside us, inside our mind and body, heart and brain, bones and flesh. Awareness is based on mindfulness, the ability of paying attention to what is happening in the here and now, moment by moment, in the present of the circumstances (Kabat-Zinn J., 2004). When we are aware of our inner feelings and thoughts, we are able to control them as well as to control our behavior. And we can communicate with others with more efficacy. Awareness about what we feel is the essence of intrapersonal intelligence, while awareness of other's feelings is the essence of social intelligence (Goleman D., 2006).

Neuroscientists have recently discovered that we have some neurons, called neuron-mirrors, that are able to understand the intention behind movements made by the hands and feet of others and to give proper meaning to facial expressions. Neuron mirrors are the neurological base for understanding the feelings of others, and to be empathic (Rizzolati G., Sinigaglia C., 2006). Research in the fields of neuroeconomy and neuroethics also indicate that our neurons prefer equity and that many economic and ethical choices are based on cooperation and trust.

Public Relations practitioners are aware of the importance of their role as communicators on behalf of the reputation and the success of the organizations they work for. Awareness of what we feel and what others are feeling is essential in the interpersonal communications of a Public Relations consultant. As Goleman says in his book on Emotional Intelligence, if we want to create a better future we need to enhance our awareness, control our negative feelings, be optimistic, perseverant and empathic, take care of others' needs, and improve our cooperative style and relationships.

Emotional intelligence is related to self-control, enthusiasm, perseverance and ability to motivate ourselves. Social intelligence has to do with the ability to organize and lead groups, to cope with conflicts and negotiate solutions, to establish bonds and to analyze social situations. Social awareness is based on empathy, attention and understanding of the subtle implication of implicit rules in social situations, while social ability has to do with prestige, presentation of self, influence, leadership and care for others.

Since one of the aspects of emotional intelligence is the ability to maintain motivation and perseverance despite frustration and failures, we are now ready to present the third component of harmony, the note E, that is, Resiliency.

### **Resiliency**

Resiliency (from the Latin word meaning "to bounce back") is a process fed by the belief of being in control of oneself and being able to influence future events. It is a process that leads us to transform a difficulty into a challenge: if a difficulty forces us to lower our head, a challenge helps lift it up. Resiliency helps relate and contextualize, transform adversity into the development of our potentiality, realizing that we are stronger than despair,

discovering that struggle is an important agent of self-change and self-efficacy (Cyrulnik B.). *Kim Su Ki, Nelson Mandela and Ingrid Betancourt are only few exempla of resiliency.*

Resiliency signifies the ability to react with empathy, calm, courage, optimism and emotional intelligence to threats imposed by destiny. According to an ancient Zen proverb: *inclement weather does not exist, only unsuitable clothes exist.* Or according to Homer who points out that *not even Zeus can change what has already happened.*

Resiliency begins by accepting the reality basis of factual truths for what it is. The resilient person, well aware of his powerlessness against what has already happened, finds his true power by accepting it and finding in it the lever for change. Resiliency is the ability to fight back. Struggle, crises and worries are hot chilli to help digestion, and a wakeup call for sleeping talents. Everything is relative, contingent and temporary.

When we are fully awake, with all senses alert, we better understand the complexity as well as the mystery of life, which enables us to solve problems with deeper understanding and wisdom. Stupidity, blindness and deafness are only permitted in routine situations, and are absolutely banned in the presence of a problem. A facing problem fully alert and with all talents and resources at hand is vital.

Although the resilient person feels distressed and worried, he does not waste energy in sterile complaints. Instead he confronts the challenge as an ordeal that is both character forming and ego strengthening. The resilient Public Relations practitioner knows that, in every profession, bad moments can occur. So, when a problem or a crisis arise, he/she does not wonder “why did this happen to me” or “what have I done to deserve such a problem?” Rather she considers: “what shall I do with this difficulty? How can I manage it? What am I learning? How can I change the situation? What do I have to change about myself?”

The resilient person concentrates on his/her only true power, which is to react wisely, taking appropriate and good decisions. She does not allow struggles to stun her, she does not let unanswerable questions confuse her, nor does she look backwards. He concentrates on his own attitude and reactions and strives to act efficaciously in the crisis offered him by life or circumstances. He knows that the future begins soon after the problem

occurs, when what to do and how to use our talents, resources and energy is decided.

The resilient person can be recognized by his sense of responsibility, self-determination, and confidence. She cultivates an optimistic attitude so that difficulties are overcome and turned into advantages. He can verify that courage is stronger than destiny, and that every kind of problem teaches us vital lessons.

The resilient person knows that he or she is solely responsible for his own acts, so a moral stance must be followed. Moral stance is the forth ingredient of harmony, the note F. Let's examine it.

### **Moral stance**

The many codes of ethics Enron had for its employees did not hinder its management from acting in a dishonest way. In this case, as in many others, the code of ethics was not enough, especially when the temptations seemed impossible to resist. So what is moral stance and how can it help to reach harmony as an effective tool in communication for PR experts? Moral stance is an attitude towards ethics, values and virtues, and has to do with *mores*, with habits, behaviors, and actions.

Ethics studies human conduct, and the criteria to evaluate the behavior and choices made by people. It is the reflection on why we think something is valid and valuable. Value concerns what is good and useful, what is important to gauge and to assess during a decision making process. Virtue is the ability to govern life's circumstances according to our aims, to give power to our rationality and empathy. Virtue is not a speech, a mere declaration of our integrity, but it is expressed by true actions.

*While working for Enron, Sharon Watkins wrote a memorandum to her CEO expressing her worries about the lack of morality she saw around her. Unfortunately, nobody listened to her.*

Every virtue brings harmony to our life. Let us review the four cardinal virtues: temperance, courage, prudence and justice. Temperance teaches us to be vigilant, to avoid falling into temptation or sliding after taking a bad turn. Courage and its twin brother, prudence, are the virtues of an instant, of the beginning of a new action. Justice brings harmony to the life of individuals and of nations. *For example, Swiss citizens experience a sense*



*of justice every time they participate in a referendum. And they are happy as a result of that (Layard R., 2005).*

The criteria of ethical virtues are *medietas, nothing in excess*, a habit to be encouraged in personal and professional life. It is habit that creates order: living with order, acting with order, living in order so that, when we act well, we feel good.

How can a Public Relations practitioner in 2008 act according to his professional moral stances? Are we still following Ivy Lee's "declaration of Principles"? What are the values and the virtues of this profession in 2008? Be true, be honest, be transparent, be congruent, be loyal, and be trustworthy? How can a Public Relations practitioner gain trust and maintain a good reputation in his profession? Must he behave well to be a good practitioner and be a good practitioner to behave well? All of us can think of examples for either case.

We give trust if the other person meets our expectations. Trust depends on our own view of the other person. (Luhmann N, 2002.) It is a way of baring ourselves, accepting the risk of being betrayed. There can be no betrayal if there is no pre-existing trust. Truth is a virtue, but every virtue in excess negates itself. When we have excess trust we become open to deceit through our naiveté.

Trust means accepting uncertainty. It is fragile but essential scaffolding: without it we are precarious and alone. Trust is a harmonic component because it creates the foundation for our bonds. Without trust every transaction would be difficult, if not impossible. With basic trust every transaction is reinforced. Trust creates a virtuous circle, that is, it nurtures as well as engenders trust, fidelity and loyalty.

In order to act according to our moral stances it is important to stay vigilant and observe what needs to be done so that we can take the opportunity to act harmoniously. So our fifth ingredient, the note G, is taking advantage of opportunity.

### **Opportunity**

The Public Relations consultant knows the value of his individual actions based on his own free will. People have the freedom to act for better or for worse, for good or evil. They are free to act well even when they could do nothing or act negatively. Our freedom gives us the acrobatic flexibility to

capture the volatile instant and the agile thought that recognize the importance of an opportunity offered by an occasion. The occasion is an unheard of and unexpected opportunity, and we are able to capture its gracefulness only when we too are in a state of grace, which enables us to recognize it. We are in a state of grace when we are inspired and protected by Kairòs, the God of Opportunity, when we experience an *esprit de finesse* that helps us to see the diamond hidden in the coal.

*I am me as well as my circumstance. If I cannot safeguard my circumstance, I cannot safeguard myself.*  
(Ortega y Gasset)

The concept of opportunity is here considered not only in reference to equal opportunity for women, gender queers, religious and ethnic minorities, but as the ability to recognize the right moment to act, to speak, to intervene and to react. Life is full of opportunities that we are offered to accept, recognize, pick, and also create. In order to take the many opportunities life generously gives us, we need to be vigilant, use all our senses, and stay alert and trustful.

Sometimes we react in a passive way, accepting the negative. On certain occasions we become blind and deaf, we close our eyes and our ears, thus closing our heart to compassion and our brain to understanding. Or we say to ourselves that is not our duty or our task to intervene, that we are powerless, that it is not up to us. Or that what we can do is such a small thing that it is not worthwhile. We let things happen in front of us while we hide behind a thick veil of moral indifference that keeps us from action.

*On a hot (35°) summer afternoon on a street of downtown Verona, Francesca Martini, under-Secretary of the Ministry of Welfare, saw a beggar with a naked baby in the sun. Martini immediately called the police in order to stop the exploitation of the child. She happened to find out that the beggar had been there for two weeks and that all the passers-by had ignored the baby's exploitation.*

In order to reach harmony within ourselves, as social individuals we need to create and maintain harmony with others, help them to reach their wellbeing by being nice and courteous. So, we have now arrived at our sixth element of harmony, the note A, Niceness.

**Niceness**

Harmony can be associated with courtesy, kindness, respect for others, and niceness. A professional relationship based on courtesy helps to create, build and maintain solid and flexible relationships with different interlocutors. As experts in Public Relations, we are supposed to be sufficiently socially oriented and socially competent to find the right words so that the person we are with feels at ease. The recipe for this is very simple: a little bit of attention, a little bit of reflection, an empathic selection of positive words, the appropriate use of our intelligence sustained by affection, benevolence and respect for ourselves and for others.

Respect means knowing that the other person has his own dignity, interests, needs, values, rights, uniqueness, and deserves our best attention, positive intention and true care (Ury, W., 2007). Courtesy is the social ability to make others feel good when we are together. It is a sincere smile expressed through nice words. Courtesy means respecting the social position of the other person, never ignoring his human essence, never menacing his dignity, nor threatening his reputation, nor diminishing his prestige.

Although we, unfortunately, know how to offend, humiliate or disqualify a person, we also know how to transform a potential offence into a benevolent exchange. Courtesy is a mental attitude to cultivate sincere respect, polite softness, and care. Courtesy means acting in a moral way with beauty and elegance. Good manners and consideration for others are based on a sense of morality and love for human beings (Axia G. 1999).

Niceness is an important tool in interpersonal communication because it helps us talk about delicate topics, while taking into consideration the sensitivity and the receptivity of the other person. Niceness is a special way of treating the other person with kind words and elegant gestures, taking into consideration his feelings and anticipating the potential negative impact of offensive words and harmful acts. By talking and acting following the laws of courtesy, the Public Relations consultant expresses the intention to stimulate wellbeing in the other person.

The laws of courtesy follow the logic of politeness and are “don’t impose yourself on others; offer them alternatives; and help them feel at ease, be friendly” (Lakoff R. 1973). These laws teach us to foster others’ wellbeing by saving their social face, protecting their prestige. To avoid *face-threatening acts*, courtesy invites us to mitigate or weaken the negative effects of offensive words. Niceness is based on the understanding of

others' inner feelings, the emotional and the real cost of interaction based on power, friendship, collegiality, or familiarity.

And in order to achieve harmony through niceness we need to add the seventh and last ingredient, the note B, Yearning, the yeast that transforms a simple harmony of a few chords into *Estrous Harmonic* played by violins.

### **Yearning**

The PR consultant that is congruent with himself and consistent with his role knows the importance of his passion to perform. He is eager to do a good job: he yearns to be successful, to do his best, to fully express his potentialities and talents following the directives of his company and thus satisfy the stake holder's expectations.

Yearning to be harmonious is built on a strong sense of coherence so that every professional act is comprehensible, meaningful and manageable. The PR practitioner cultivates comprehensible actions so that each person can observe and judge whether his actions make sense. His actions can be clearly understood because they consist of order, structure, and method. His actions have clear meaning; they are not chaotic noise, or a disordered mixture of stimuli or an inexplicable accident. What he/she does makes sense, cognitively and emotionally, and is worth investing energy in, and is worthy of commitment. The Public Relations practitioner welcomes challenges and does not consider them burdens. What the Public Relations practitioner does is manageable because he has the necessary resources to meet the demands of the task and of the situation.

Yearning to be successful with harmony helps Public Relations consultants to search for clarity and avoid ambiguity. Ambiguity is expressed by putting the burden of responsibility on others, by discharging the consequences of our decisions on others. Some signs of ambiguity are saying one thing and doing another, not keeping promises, postponing commitments, not taking responsibility, and telling lies. Lying is an offence to the ability of others to think, to observe, to analyze data, to understand what is going on. It is opportunism and cynicism coming from the arrogance of misusing or abusing power.

Ambiguity is a sign of a deficient morality as well as of naiveté and arrogance. We are naive when we think others will not recognize our

ambiguity; we are arrogant when we do not care if others recognize our ambiguity, because they are indifferent to us. We do not care.

*The campaign NO SMOKING, BE HAPPY, promoted by Umberto Veronesi's Science Progress Foundation, is based on the ambiguity of parents who smoke and demand their children not smoke.*

When we feel a lack of sincerity, a lack of authenticity, we know that we are in the presence of ambivalence, a compromise, or an inner conflict. And when we face someone's ambiguity, we feel discomfort, perplexity, and bewilderment. In that moment we realize we are witnessing a little daily crime of conscience, social dementia whose infectiousness should be stopped (Argentieri S. 2008). In that moment we feel the urge to establish order and clarity, and search for integrity. Integrity means wholeness, and in a broader sense, morality. Moral integrity is based on inner sincerity, transparency, and openness.

When we accept ambivalence as a normal way of thinking, of acting and of living, we take the risk of becoming imbeciles in the meaning F. Savater (1992) gives to this word. Savater says that we become imbeciles when we think that we don't want anything; when we think that we want everything immediately; when we think that we don't know what we want; and when we think that we do know what we want but cannot find the energy to reach it. We become imbeciles when we put different things on the same level, when we think that everything has the same importance, and forget the primal value of responsibility for the consequences of our actions or of our passivity. Failing to do something can be worse than doing it.

Unfortunately, today we live in a paradox. We are full of civil indignation for what is going on, for all the scandals we read in the newspapers. But it seems that we are empty of energy to act and to commit to change.

The yearning for harmony and for using the appropriate tools in effective communication reminds us that our discipline and our task are to help the stakeholders. In this way we all can learn how to defend ourselves from injustice and exploitation and reach harmony within ourselves and with others.

Hope, Awareness, Resiliency, Moral stance, Opportunity, Niceness and Yearning are the seven notes of harmony as a tool in effective communication. When we forget or neglect one of these ingredients, our

voice may sound hoarse, and out of tune or become a plaintive sound without any trustworthy meaning. In order to be listened to and believed as consultants or educators, harmony is needed. Harmony inside us and harmony in our relationships with others can help us to become truly effective.

Harmony in our practice helps us gain and maintain a good reputation as Public Relations practitioners. Professional use of the ingredients of harmony helps us in our daily work. Now and in the near future, because of the growing importance of the Public Relations profession and its institutionalization in small or large organizations, we will increasingly need harmony.

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