

## **Public Relations is not a private affair**

The question is not whether to communicate or not. The question is whether one will manage the communications or let it happen on its own. Often times, the result of not managing one's communication is unpalatable and everyone begins to look for reasons to explain the predicament one finds oneself in - once it is too late.

Information is king. Information drives success. Information also allows for unpalatable exposes. Managing information is the art of prescribing the right fix at the right time. The unnecessary speculation, disasters and breakdowns save us from post prescription surgery.

India innocently believed that as the Indo-Pak discussions were happening behind closed doors, the information would remain indoors in a highly controlled environment of security. Pakistan believed that this was the single most important opportunity to tell the world their story. And intriguingly India was surprised at being caught napping while the world was waiting....

Managing expectations is critical to success. Be it the expectations of spouses, various stakeholders and most definitely the people at large. There was a wide chasm in what the Indian government thought was their role as leaders of a democratic country and that of the expectation of the Indian people.

So, what should have been the game plan if we were to manage the expectations of our people, our stakeholders and the world at large?

To put the blame on journalists is highly unfair. They were doing their job. Did we manage their expectations? The answer is a simple - No. The External Affairs Ministry well before the Summit could have invited editors who are very responsible individuals and opinion leaders to a meeting. This could have included all the national media (who already follow the beat passionately and are quite knowledgeable) along with the international media and news wire agencies.

An off-the-record presentation outlining the critical issues, background papers and details of how news was to be disseminated would have provided the backdrop to the Summit. Other details such as access to a well-trained spokesperson, an information protocol officer who could easily provide historical details, press room with right to use internet, telephone, fax etc would have been appropriate at such a time.

At a pre-decided time India, along with Pakistan preferably, could have selectively put out press statement/s that didn't compromise the position of India and/or Pakistan but made known the status of the talks. What would one achieve by doing this? This would have helped manage expectations to some extent and saved wild speculation all around. A failed attempt remains a failed attempt.

How can we blame Pakistan for speaking out of turn? The simple fact is that Pakistan will do what it wants to do and India is free to choose its own path. We can't cry foul. There were no agreed rules. The important point is did we do what we needed to do to manage our own communications and thereby our reputation? Or did we live in the hope that India would manage the communication output of India and Pakistan? Having failed to manage the expectations of the media, our people and the world at large along with the fact that all communication channels were closed, our image took a beating. And this will continue to happen so long as India maintains that we are still living in an era where information and communication were in the hands of a few who controlled - who should know what and when.

The lesson to be learnt is how India should do things differently next time and not how Pakistan should have behaved! They did what they needed to do whether right or wrong by us. Since when



was all fair in love and war? May the smartest power survive? It is all about managing and creating perceptions in a world where communications is a wide-open channel.

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