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EDITORIAL

Adding Charisma to Science

Science: Dr. Noitall, you are the world's greatest promoter, the man who was able to convert Barnum and Bailey into extroverts, the man who can make corporate annual returns into best sellers, and the man who wrote William Jennings Bryan's speeches.

Dr. Noitall: A vast understatement of my true worth.

Science: We need your help because scientists are generally neglected and downcast over the lack of attention to their views these days.

Noitall: It is their own fault because they are such drab creatures, always sticking to the facts, and thus very uninteresting to anybody.

Science: But how could they change their image and their lives?

Noitall: I doubt whether they have much chance of changing their image unless they are willing to get involved in sex scandals, bankruptcies, political action committees, or testifying before Congress that cars can make 55 miles per gallon running on water.

Science: Well, could they make their lives more interesting in other ways?

Noitall: They certainly could, if they would just incorporate some theatrical devices into their work. For example, at concerts, audiences that applaud enthusiastically are often rewarded with encores. Scientists could enliven their presentations in a similar way. If the audience bursts into spontaneous applause at a particularly good slide or experiment the speaker should be allowed to give an encore, even a couple of times.

Science: But some people say scientists give too many speeches anyway.

Noitall: Well, of course, they are idiots to give speeches for what is usually called "a modest honorarium." That is entirely because scientists, unlike sensible people, handle their own appointment calendars. If Scientist X is invited to give a speech at University Y, he or she should immediately say, "I'm sorry, Professor Z handles all my appointments." When Professor Z is called, he or she should say, "Oh, no, the size of the honorarium you mention is much too low. He or she usually gets an honorarium five times that big, expects a motorcycle escort from the airport, and would like to be greeted by a drum roll while entering the auditorium."

Science: But even meetings of that sort could have rather boring speeches.

Noitall: That's true, but here again, scientists could borrow from sports and bullfighting examples. A panel of judges could be selected who, like Olympic diving judges, would hold up numbers evaluating the quality of a speech. Below 7, the speaker would forfeit his or her honorarium. Above an 8 he or she would get a top graduate student and the ears and tail of a dean.

Science: But I don't see how it's possible to reward professors with graduate students.

Noitall: That's another matter, and it would increase the efficacy of science. There are too many graduate students trying to make up their minds at a tender age. Hence, it is time to formalize the system of serfdom. If graduate students indentured themselves like baseball players, they might sooner or later work themselves up to baseball player salaries. A graduate student working for a certain professor would sign a contract that would allow the professor to exchange him or her at another university for a couple of other graduate students, a cloud chamber or amino acid analyzer, or whatever seemed worthwhile at the time. Of course, there would be thousands of protests, arguments about restrictive clauses, Supreme Court cases dealing with involuntary servitude, and so forth, and scientists would be in the headlines all the time, establishing themselves as celebrities and individuals to be reckoned with in society.

Science: Don't you think celebrity style is inimical to the whole role of science in society?

Noitall: What nonsense! It is not necessary to have a white lab coat to achieve great results. Lab coats could be designed by great centers of fashion, could be colored, restyled for length and cut, and could make going to the office and coming home a real excitement. Laboratories could get funding based on style as well as productivity.

Science: Don't you think there's something to be said for just keeping the old stodgy ways, in view of the great success of science in turning out new products and technology?

Noitall: That is of course the ultimate error of scientists. If they simply go about their business from one success to another, it is irresistibly attractive for others to step in and explain how science really could be done much better. The critics then advocate minuscule changes costing large amounts of money that allow the critics to take credit for "rescuing science," but they really want to attach themselves to its success. Only by becoming celebrities themselves can scientists repel phony reformers.

Daniel E. Koshland, Jr.