Strategic, Symmetrical Communication: The Essence of Excellent Public Relations

Larissa A. Grunig
Associate Professor
James E. Grunig
Professor
Department of Communication
University of Maryland
College Park, MD  20742
The Effectiveness Question

How, why, and to what extent does communication affect the achievement of organizational objectives?
Organizational Effectiveness

For many years, organizational scholars have debated the question of what makes an organization more effective. To show that public relations has value to the organization, we must be able to show that effective communication programs and functions contribute to organizational effectiveness.
Value of Public Relations To an Organization

Public relations contributes to organizational effectiveness when it helps reconcile the organization's goals with the expectations of its strategic publics. This contribution has monetary value to the organization. Public relations contributes to effectiveness by building quality, long-term relationships with strategic publics.
Societal level

Organizations have an impact beyond their own bottom line. They also affect other individuals, publics, and organizations in society. As a result, organizations cannot be said to be effective unless they also are socially responsible; and public relations can be said to have value when it contributes to the social responsibility of organizations.
The Excellence Question

What characteristics of a public relations/communication department increase the likelihood that it will contribute to organizational effectiveness?
Generic Principles

The public relations unit is headed by a manager rather than a technician.

Empowerment of public relations in the dominant coalition or a direct reporting relationship to senior management.

Involvement of public relations in strategic management.

Integrated public relations function.

Public relations is a management function separate from other functions.

Two-way symmetrical/mixed-motive model of public relations.

Symmetrical system of internal communication.

The department has the knowledge needed to practice the managerial role and symmetrical public relations.

Diversity embodied in all roles.

Ethics and social responsibility.
Public Relations Unit Headed by a Manager Rather than a Technician

Communication technicians are essential to carry out day-to-day communication activities. Yet, excellent public relations units must have at least one senior communication manager who conceptualizes and directs public relations programs or this direction will be supplied by other members of the dominant coalition who have no knowledge of communication or relationship building.
Empowerment of Public Relations in the Dominant Coalition or a Direct Reporting Relationship to Senior Management

In effective organizations, the senior public relations person is part of or has access to the group of senior managers with greatest power in the organization.
Integrated Public Relations Function

Excellent departments integrate all public relations functions into a single department or have a mechanism to coordinate the departments. Only in an integrated system of public relations is it possible for public relations to develop new communication programs for changing strategic publics.
Public Relations a Management Function Separate from Other Functions

Many organizations splinter the public relations function by making it a supporting tool for other departments such as marketing, human resources, law, or finance. When the public relations function is sublimated to other functions, it cannot be managed strategically because it cannot move communication resources from one strategic public to another—as an integrated public relations function can.
Involvement of Public Relations in Strategic Management

An organization that practices public relations strategically develops programs to communicate with the strategic publics, both external and internal, that provide the greatest threats to and opportunities for the organization.
Public Relations and Strategic Management at the Organizational Level
1. Stakeholder stage

An organization has a relationship with stakeholders when the behavior of the organization or of a stakeholder has consequences on the other. Public Relations should do formative research to scan the environment and the behavior of the organization to identify these consequences. Ongoing communication with these stakeholders helps to build a stable, long-term relationship that manages conflict that may occur in the relationship.
2. Public stage

Publics form when stakeholders recognize one or more of the consequences as a problem and organize to do something about it or them. Public Relations should do research to identify and segment these publics. Communication to involve publics in the decision process of the organization helps to manage conflict before communication campaigns become necessary.
3. Issue stage

Publics organize and create issues. Public Relations should anticipate these issues and manage the organization's response to them. This is how Issues Management fits into public relations. The media play a major role in the creation and expansion of issues. Communication programs at this stage usually use the mass media but should include interpersonal communication with activist publics to try to resolve the issue through negotiation.
Strategic Management of Public Relations at the Functional Level

Public Relations should plan communication programs with different stakeholder publics at each of the above three stages. In doing so, it should follow steps 4-7.
4. Public Relations should develop formal objectives in the form of relationship indicators for its communication programs.

5. Public Relations should plan formal programs and campaigns to accomplish the objectives.

6. Public Relations, especially technicians, should implement the programs and campaigns.

7. Public Relations should evaluate the effectiveness of programs in meeting their objectives and in reducing the conflict produced by the problems and issues that brought about the programs.
Strategic Management Model of Public Relations

Organizational Reputation

Consequences

Relationship Outcome

Achievement of Business Goals

Crisis Management

Organization's decisions at corporate, business functional levels

Symmetrical Comm. + Relationship Maintenance Strategies + Conflict Management

Stakeholders
P1
P2
P3
Pi

Consequences

Issues

Behavior of publics creates
Techniques of Environmental scanning

Monitoring of management decisions for implications on stakeholders

Qualitative observations of activists, advisory groups, contacts

Monitoring of media and political processes

Electronic databases

Internet discussion groups and listservs

Organizational boundary spanners

Situational theory of publics
Kinds of Publics

All-issue publics

Publics active on all of the problems.

Apathetic publics

Publics inattentive to all of the problems.

Single-issue publics

Publics active on one or a small subset of the problems that concerns only a small part of the population. Such problems have included the slaughter of whales or the controversy over the sale of infant formula in third-world countries.

Hot-issue publics

Publics active only on a single problem that involves nearly everyone in the population and that has received extensive media coverage (such as the gasoline shortage, drunken driving, or toxic waste disposal).
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Two-Way Symmetrical Model of Public Relations

Two-way symmetrical public relations is based on research and uses communication to manage conflict and improve understanding with strategic publics. Excellent public relations departments model more of their communication programs on this model than on the press agentry, public information, or two-way asymmetrical models. However, they often combine elements of the two-way symmetrical and asymmetrical models in a "mixed-motive" model.
A Symmetrical System of Internal Communication

Excellent organizations have decentralized management structures that give autonomy to employees and allow them to participate in decision making. They also have participative, symmetrical systems of internal communication. Symmetrical communication with employees increases job satisfaction because employee goals are incorporated into the organizational mission.
Organizational Structure

Mechanical

Centralized
Stratified
Formalized
Low Complexity
Low Participation in Decision Making

Organic

Decentralized
Low Stratification
Low Formalization
Complex
High Participation in Decision Making
Knowledge Potential for Managerial Role and Symmetrical Public Relations

Excellent programs are staffed by professionals--people who are educated in the body of knowledge and who are active in professional associations and read professional literature.
Diversity Embodied in All Roles

The principle of requisite variety states that effective organizations have as much diversity inside the organization as in the environment. Excellent public relations includes both men and women in all roles, as well as practitioners of different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds.
Organizational Context for Excellence

Excellent public relations departments are nourished by participative rather than authoritarian cultures, activist pressure from the environment, and organic rather than mechanical management structures.
Ethics and Social Responsibility

Public relations serves as the ethics officer of the organization by monitoring the consequences of its actions on publics and practices public relations ethically through disclosure and the obligation of dialogue.