

**Getting Respect: How the Concept of Public Relations Orientation can
Transform the Client-Consultant Relationship from an Activity-Based to
a Results-Based Transaction**

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PRO to develop interventions with organisation-level outcomes

Abstract

The concept of public relations orientation (PRO) is advanced as a way of conceptualising public relations practice and transforming consultant approaches to client problems. Public relations orientation is defined as the possible philosophical stances organisations adopt when relating with publics. Public relations orientation, therefore, embraces the range of public relations goals, behaviours and transactions pursued by organisations. The three aspects of PRO and their sub-dimensions were elaborated through analysis of the public relations and management literatures. The article concludes by discussing how consultants can transform the client-consultant transaction model from an adult-child ego state to an adult-adult ego state by using PRO to develop interventions with organisation-level outcomes, rather than the usual program-level outcomes.

Introduction

Public relations (PR) consultancies are under threat from management consultancies, which are increasingly moving into services once provided exclusively by public relations people (White, 2001). White advises PR consultancies to learn from management consultancies by transforming their business bases and approaches to client problems. He suggests that consultancies should invest more in innovation, research and development [ibid].

Changing approaches to client problems, however, may require more than innovation, research and development since public relations is often marginalised in organisations (Hon, 1997). One of the battles PR consultancies must win, therefore, is the battle for respect. The prevalence of PR consultants continuing to define public relations as achieving discrete, program-level communication objectives, rather than strategic, organisation level objectives (ibid), however, works against this cause. This sobering reality suggests that public relations consultancies are unlikely to command either the fees or influence that management firms do until they can shift from activity-based consulting to results-based consulting and, from a program level focus to a organisation level focus.

In a results-oriented framework, interventions are linked to specific business needs in an environment prepared to support implementation (Phillips, 2000). In order for public relations to offer services that will be valued as much as management consultancy services, consultants will need to develop skills in diagnosing the level of support for public relations within a given environment, and, will need to develop

organisation-level interventions that demonstrate value for their clients. The concept of public relations orientation that we introduce in this paper is forwarded as a tool that PR consultancies can use to achieve this shift.

Drawing on the public relations and management literatures, we derive a theoretical model of the core dimensions describing an organisation's capacity to effectively use public relations for organisational goal attainment. The public relations orientation construct offers a method of diagnosing the organisational environment for public relations and developing organisation-level interventions designed to unleash the ability of the public relations function to add value to organisations. The concept of public relations orientation enables public relations to be linked with organisationally valued outcomes such as reduced stakeholder conflict, the license to operate, and organisational reputation.

We define public relations orientation as the possible philosophical stances an organisation can adopt to facilitate organisationally valued outcomes through relating with its publics (internal and external). The stance taken is manifested by the way that the organisation manages the process of aligning its relationships with publics. We begin by scoping the challenge that public relations consultancies face in moving from program-level service to organisation-level service. We follow with a theoretically derived definition of the concept of public relations orientation. We conclude with propositions identifying how consultants can use the PRO construct to develop value added consulting interventions.

The Problem with PR Consultancies

Consultants are in the business of solving organisational problems. However, the sad reality is that CEOs rarely want public relations consultants to play a role in strategy, do not value their contribution to corporate strategy, and do not want them to manage organisational responses to issues (Steiner and Black, 2000). Instead, PR consultants are expected to communicate with stakeholders according to strategies set elsewhere in the organisation, to play a media relations advisory role, and to persuade publics that organisations are right (ibid). In short, PR consultants generally service organisations at the program or tactical level by providing “short-duration, adaptive, action-interaction realignments ... to accomplish limited goals” (Mintzberg and Quinn, 1998, p. 4).

Exacerbating or entrenching PR’s relatively-low level role in organisations is client-consultant conflict driven, on the one hand, by client perceptions that consultants lack knowledge of the client’s business and lack sufficient research and, on the other hand, by consultant perceptions that clients do not facilitate information flows, are unwilling to provide time, and lack PR knowledge (Bourland, 1993).

A complementary problem may be the transactional model typically pursued by PR consultancies. This issue can be illuminated using the three general consultant-client relationships that Lundberg (1994) derived from social-psychodynamics. One relationship, the doctor-patient model, refers to relationships where clients typically feel helpless and give themselves into the consultant’s care. This model represents a

parent-child ego state, with the consultant playing the parent role. The second model depicts the consultant as expert supplier and the client as purchaser, with ego states reversed: the consultant, who is in a child ego state, has less power than the client, who is in a parent ego state. The third model defines the consultant as facilitator and the client as participant where both parties adopt adult ego states to jointly define problems and seek resolution.

Broom and Smith's classic practitioner role models (1979) add to our understanding of the merit of these transactional models. Clients in Broom and Smith's study viewed the "problem solving process facilitator" role, that is, a relationship built on collaboration, as the most effective. In this role, the consultant guides the client through a rational problem-solving process, in which the long-run objective is to increase the client's problem-solving and problem-avoiding abilities, rather than to solve a particular problem (*ibid*, p.52-53). This role, viewed through Lundberg's framework, requires both client and consultant to adopt adult ego states. This adult ego state, in turn, frames the consultant as a manager, rather than as a technician, an essential requirement for helping organisations adapt to their environment (Dozier, 1992, p.342), and delivering organisation-level outcomes rather than program-level outcomes.

The "communication technician role" was the second most effective role from the client perspective, and is described by Terry (2001, p. 248) as "a provider in a traditional consumer transaction. The client literally buys a service or set of services that the practitioner can perform or deliver." This transactional model may be understood in terms of Lundberg's "expert supplier-purchaser" model with the

consultant playing a child ego role to the client's adult ego role. The child ego state frames the consultant as a technician, able to deliver program level outcomes only as he or she is excluded from strategic decision-making.

The "expert prescriber" role, likened by Dozier (1992) and Broom and Smith (1979) to the doctor-patient relationship, was the least effective role. Broom and Smith (1979) point out that the success of this role depends, in part, on the adequacy of the client's problem diagnosis and needs assessment. This reduction in the consultant's control over the quality of outcomes, and the client's lack of ownership of solutions to problems, or lack of adult ego role participation in problem solving, may contribute to ineffective outcomes. It is interesting to note that this less effective role was described as the "agency role" in a study of trends in public relations roles (Toth, Serini, Wright, and Emig, 1998), that is, the role most likely to be typically played by consultancy practitioners.

Consultants can move between roles (for example, Terry, 2001), especially in the larger full-service consultancies. However, we suggest that as long as CEOs see consultants as failing to contribute significantly to organisational performance (Steiner and Black, 2000), consultancies will be unable to compete with management consultancies for higher-fee work or organisationally valued work. To win this work, we argue, consultants need methods for delivering valued organisation-level outcomes, rather than program level outcomes. This requires consultants to adopt a transactional role model where both parties assume an adult ego state (Lundberg, 1994) based on a collaborative approach to problem solving, and where consultants play a manager role, rather than a technician role (Dozier, 1992).

We suggest that using the concept of public relations orientation will enable PR consultants to change their role and the nature of their client transactions from the relatively powerless expert supplier-purchaser technician model where consultants are as “children”, to the relatively more powerful facilitator-participant manager role where consultants are as “adults”. In other words, consultants can “grow up” in the eyes of CEOs by using the PR orientation model as described in later sections of this paper. An adult role requires wider organisational access and, in turn, allows consultants to develop interventions that will deliver value at the organisational or strategic level, rather than at the program or tactical level.

Public Relations Orientation

The term “orientation” is described by the Collins English Dictionary (Hanks, 1986: 1085) as the act of “adjustment or alignment of oneself or one’s ideas to surroundings or circumstances” or “positioning” in relation to a specific direction. Several aspects of the definition are worth highlighting. First, the concept of orientation involves a specific goal (direction). Second, orientation provides a description of the way one acts as a consequence of the goal. Third, orientation describes the response one adopts when dealing with things external to one’s self. Thus, an orientation can be described in terms of the characteristics of the goal, the goal-directed behaviour, and the transactions with the environment and parties threatening or enabling the achievement of the goal (strategic constituencies). Public relations orientation, therefore, embraces the range of public relations goals, behaviours and transactions pursued by organisations.

If public relations is the managerial function that establishes and maintains mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics (Kitchen, 1997), then, public relations orientation reflects the degree of institutionalisation of organisational capability for public relations. In other words, an organisation's public relations orientation is the extent to which managing mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics is provided for in the conduct of the business, and is evident in "the mechanisms that aim to maintain coherence between management's strategic intent and operational activities" (Atuahene-Gima and Ko, 2001), such mechanisms being the public relations goals, behaviour and transactions. Drawing on the public relations literature, the hypothesised dimensions of PRO and their effects on organisational goal attainment are now described.

Characteristics of the Public Relations Goal

Public relations may have originated in impression management through media, but today its role in managing behavioural relationships is clearly recognised (Heath, 2001). Indeed, public relations is said to fail to deliver value to organisations when symbolic, image-making activity is disconnected from behavioural, relationship-making activity (Grunig, 1993). The goal of public relations can therefore be understood as occurring along a two-dimensional continuum with the quest for positive images (symbolic relationships) forming one axis, and the quest for substantive behavioural relationships between organisations and publics comprising the other axis. In organisations with low public relations orientation, symbolic relationships are disconnected from behavioural relationships. In organisations with

high public relations orientation, symbolic image making activity serves relational goals, that is, they are “intertwined like the strands of a rope” (ibid).

Characteristics of the Organisation’s Goal-Directed Behaviour

Through a review of the literature on public relations effectiveness, the key constraints to effective public relations were identified. These were constraints on access to management, constraints on information collection and dissemination (Ryan, 1987), and the absence of a managerial role for public relations (e.g., Dozier, Grunig, and Grunig, 1995; Grunig, 1992). We therefore hypothesise the existence of two sub-dimensions describing an organisation’s behaviour towards public relations, namely, a strategic role for public relations and interfunctional co-ordination.

A strategic role for public relations

The largest-to-date study of public relations, the IABC-sponsored Excellence Study (Dozier et al., 1995), identified the ability to manage strategically as a requirement of “excellent” public relations. The ability to manage strategically includes access to top management, knowing how to set strategic goals and objectives, and the ability to manage budgets (ibid). Access to top management should lead to a shared understanding about the value of communication, especially when the perceived competence of public relations practitioners is high (Moss, Warnaby, and Newman, 2000).

Interfunctional co-ordination

Interfunctional co-ordination describes the presence of co-ordination mechanisms and interaction between functional areas of public relations (Cornelissen, 2000) and the ability to disseminate public relations intelligence throughout the organisation. This ability is a key aspect of fulfilling public relations' boundary spanning role (Leichty and Springston, 1996). Extending the literature on interfunctional co-ordination in marketing (Maltz and Kholi, 1996), interfunctional co-ordination for public relations can be described as the integration of efforts by all parts of the organisation to achieve the PR goal (high, intertwined symbolic and behavioural relationships) through the systematic generation, analysis and dissemination of intelligence across functional boundaries about relationships with strategic constituencies (publics or stakeholders).

Characteristics of Transactions With the Environment and Stakeholders

Given that "relationship formation and maintenance represents a process of mutual adaptation and contingent responses" (Broom, Casey, and Ritchey, 1997: 95), it follows logically that responsiveness towards stakeholders and a dialogic approach ought to be key elements of an organisation's transactions with stakeholders.

Responsiveness

Responsiveness describes the response philosophy adopted by the organisation (Carroll, 1979) to the requirements for nurturing behavioural relationships with publics. The management literature offers some insight into the concept of responsiveness. For example, Oliver (1991) advanced a typology of strategic

responses enacted by organisations in the face of external demands that vary along the dimensions of proactivity and reactivity. Namely, organisations can acquiesce (habit, imitate, comply), compromise (balance, pacify, bargain), avoid (conceal, buffer, escape), defy (dismiss, challenge, attack), and manipulate (co-opt, influence, control). Clarkson (1995) offered a simpler typology of responsive alternatives called ‘fight all the way’ (reactive), ‘do only what is required’ (defensive), ‘be progressive’ (accommodative), and ‘lead the industry’ (proactive). The public relations literature describes response choices as symmetrical and asymmetrical relationship maintenance strategies (Grunig and Huang, 2000). Contending, avoiding, accommodating and compromising are described as ineffective asymmetrical responses because, in the end, no-one is happy. In contrast, the effective, symmetrical responses are co-operating, being unconditionally constructive, and saying win-win or no deal.

A synthesis of the management and public relations approaches suggests that responsiveness choices might vary along two dimensions. The first is the intensity of activity; on a continuum from do little to do much (e.g., defensive or avoiding at the ‘do little’ end, to, proactive at the ‘do much’ end). The second dimension relates to the nature of activity along a continuum from adversarial to collaborative. Thus, an organisation with high responsiveness would adopt a proactive approach to collaboration with strategic publics or stakeholders.

Dialogic approach

Dialogue is a core value in public relations and has a key role in creating conditions for “legitimate corporate conduct that affects the public of that organisation”

(Pearson, 1989: 128). Following Pearson, dialogue is composed of respectful attitudes towards the dialogic partner, mutual agreement about the structural attributes of communication, and mutual satisfaction with the rules of communication. Respectful attitudes comprise attributes such as genuineness, empathy, non-manipulative intent, encouragement of free expression and honesty. Structural attributes of communication include equal control and initiative in the communication process. Mutual satisfaction with the rules of communication includes agreement about the way topics are selected for discussion and satisfaction with the framework within which discussions take place.

Effective, ethical dialogue also requires openness and a willingness to disclose information. The concept of openness has a critical role in the theory of public relations ethics (Grunig and Huang, 2000) and has emerged as a key dimension in empirical studies of organisation-public relationships (Ledingham, Bruning, and Wilson, 1999). Disclosure is also a key relationship maintenance strategy and is likely to predict a positive outcome in organisation-public relationships (Grunig and Huang, 2000).

The organisation-level effects of public relations orientation

It is hypothesised that an organisation's public relations orientation will predict its strengths and liabilities with respect to organisationally valued outcomes such as reputation, legitimacy or the social 'license to operate', and reduction of conflict with stakeholders. Such outcomes represent relationship-based aspects of sustainable competitive advantage that can be delivered by public relations.

Reputation

The value of reputation has been demonstrated empirically in a variety of settings. For example, it has been linked to future intentions to invest in a company (Lyon, 1997), future stock performance (Vergin and Qoronfleh, 1998), bottom-line performance (Kim, 2000), customer purchase intentions and employee satisfaction (Gildea, 1994/95). Reputations are also particularly important in service markets, because, “like experience goods, the pre-purchase evaluation of service quality is vague and partial” (Weigelt and Camerer, 1988, p. 450).

High PRO may contribute to an organisation’s reputation because public relations goals place symbolic relationships in the service of behavioural relationships. As Balmer notes (1997), reputations are formed by the aggregate of *messages and experiences* received about an organisation’s products and services by an individual, group or groups over a period of time (our emphasis). These “messages and experiences” can be understood as symbolic and behavioural relationships. Thus, we hypothesise that high public relations orientation will contribute to business performance through its effect on organisational reputation.

Legitimacy

Legitimacy, often described as the ‘license to operate’, involves the “capacity of an institution or system to create and maintain the belief that it is the most appropriate institution or system at a particular time for the particular ends that society seeks to achieve” (Votaw, 1965:101). At the organisation level, we may interpret legitimacy

as society's willingness to host and support a particular business establishment. Votaw suggests that public opinion, which provides a favourable atmosphere for the conduct of business, is one way of achieving legitimacy. A high public relations orientation may result in the license to operate because, it combines the pursuit of symbolic as well as behavioural relationships with stakeholders, based on a proactive, collaborative approach to these relationships. Therefore, we hypothesise that high public relations orientation will contribute to business performance by facilitating the social 'license to operate', which helps organisations survive in times of crisis.

Conflict reduction

The IABC Excellence Study (Dozier, et al, 1994) identified reduced conflict with stakeholders as one of the effects of public relations. We suggest that a high public relations orientation facilitates conflict reduction because it bestows public relations with the power and influence necessary to bring stakeholder concerns to the heart of organisational strategic decision-making (the strategic influence and interfunctional coordination sub-dimensions), and, because it fosters dialogue with and responsiveness towards stakeholders.

In as least these three ways, the concept of public relations orientation sheds light on how public relations delivers organisation-level value, which can result in sustainable competitive advantage.

Discussion

In this paper, we introduced the construct of public relations orientation, which can be described by the goals, goal-directed behaviour, and transactions of public relations in a given organisation. Sub-dimensions of each of the three dimensions of PRO were identified according to their ability to differentiate between an orientation that facilitates effective public relations, and one that does not. An effective PRO was characterised as the organisation-wide capacity to proactively develop and maintain a positive symbolic and behavioural relationship with strategic constituencies in the organisational environment. Effective PRO achieves these outcomes through providing a culture that removes constraints from the effective implementation of public relations and that takes a responsive and dialogic approach to stakeholder relationships.

Conceptualising public relations in this manner provides the opportunity for higher level consulting interventions than are typically carried out in most consulting assignments. Next, we discuss how the concept of PRO can be used to make PR consulting practices more valued in organisational planning and decision-making.

(insert Table I here)

Most consulting interventions begin with a situation analysis of the client's "problem" (Härtel, Härtel & Barney, 1998). This would typically be carried out via desk research and an interview, or several interviews, which sort information about the client into strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Next, we demonstrate how an analysis of the client's goals, goal directed behaviour, and goal-directed transactions

with stakeholders can reveal new consulting opportunities that deliver organisation-level value rather than program-level value.

Goals

A key consideration of PR consultants should be the managerial understanding of the goals of public relations. Is public relations seen primarily as image manipulation or as relationship building? Cross-functional facilitated management team workshops are one way of bringing management to a deeper understanding of PR to identify organisation-level PR needs and develop PR goals that will support organisational goals. This intervention also helps identify and remove the “constraint on public relations mission” identified by Ryan (1987) as a barrier to effective, responsible action. This type of intervention places consultants firmly in the “problem-solving process facilitator” role and, by allowing both client and consultant to transact with one another in adult ego roles, is likely to lead to both being more satisfied with the outcomes (Schein, 1969). Placing equally high emphasis on developing both good relationships and a good image means that measurable improvements in the client’s reputation are likely to follow.

Behaviour

The two sub-dimensions of interfunctional co-ordination and PR as a strategic function need to be assessed. Constraints on information collection and dissemination limit the ability of practitioners to do their jobs well (Ryan, 1987). The consultant should assess the frequency, accuracy, clarity, relevance, timeliness and usefulness of

internal PR communications through an internal communications audit and address gaps through development of an internal communications strategy. Empowering the public relations department in this manner will lead to more effective use of PR intelligence about the stakeholder environment to solve organisational problems, and once again, places both client and consultant in adult ego role transactions.

Second, the strategic role of public relations should be analysed. What sort of research is being undertaken by the PR department and how useful is it? Is the PR budget suited to the goal requirements? Does the top PR manager have appropriate access to top management? The consultant can work with the internal PR manager to develop monitoring and evaluation strategies that allow correlation of PR impacts with organisation-level performance data, as well as with effects on publics.

Transactions

Transactions of the organisation with its stakeholder environment are the third key area for analysis. Consultants should probe managerial understanding of the relevance of stakeholder groups to business success and help managers understand the differing needs of stakeholder groups. Workshops to identify stakeholder salience and predict possible stakeholder activity will help managers digest the potential impacts of stakeholders on business and lead to strategies for reducing stakeholder conflict. What are management attitudes to meeting stakeholder needs? How active is management willing to be and are they primarily adversarial or collaborative in their approach? Measurement of organisation-public relationships and development of appropriate relationship maintenance strategies are consulting interventions that can provide a

baseline for measuring subsequent improvements in relationships and identifying expectational gaps for improved issues management.

Communication with stakeholders can also be assessed, especially in terms of its respectfulness, structural aspects and mutual satisfaction with the rules of communication. Stakeholder needs and values audits can facilitate the development of formal mechanisms for ongoing stakeholder dialogue, which strengthen the client's license to operate. Consultants should also assess the willingness of the organisation to make relevant disclosures to stakeholders and develop a stakeholder reporting format to suit shared organisation-stakeholder needs. Reputation benefits for clients should follow. Once again, the consultant's "problem-solving process facilitator" adult ego role is apparent, however, opportunities for program level interventions that employ technical or junior staff to deliver stakeholder relationship management goals are also apparent.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have shown how the concept of public relations orientation can be used by consultancies to improve the value of their services to client organisations. Public relations orientation provides a method for understanding both the internal and external environments in which clients' public relations functions operate. It identifies constraints to effective public relations practice and allows identification of a range of consulting interventions designed to empower public relations to deliver organisation-level outcomes. Utilisation of the public relations orientation concept enables this expanded role for consultants by allowing consultants to change the nature of their transactions with clients through application of a facilitator-participant

model in which both parties enact an adult ego role. It thereby contributes to the discussion about transformation of consultancy practice to meet new marketplace challenges posed by management consultancies. The potential for in-house public relations managers to use PR orientation as a diagnostic tool should not be overlooked. An important task for researchers now is to operationalise this concept as a measurement tool for consultant and managerial use.

Table I: Public relations orientation as a consulting template.

Category of PRO	Dimension of PRO	How to diagnose	Possible interventions	Value-add outcomes
Goal	Goal of PR	Is the key task of public relations understood as primarily symbolic or primarily behavioural relationship management?	Cross functional management team workshops to identify organisation-level PR needs.	PR goals aligned with organisational goals.
Behaviour	Interfunctional co-ordination	Assess frequency, accuracy, clarity, relevance, timeliness and usefulness of internal PR communications. Identify weaknesses.	Benchmark interfunctional communication and develop internal communications plan	More effective use of PR intelligence to solve organisational problems.
Behaviour	PR as a strategic function	Assess strategic role of PR, use of research and adequacy of budget.	Develop monitoring and evaluation strategies.	Ability to assess organisation-level impacts of PR, correlate with soft and hard performance data.
Transactions	Responsiveness	Assess manager attitudes to meeting stakeholder needs.	Measure organisation-public relationships. Select or design stakeholder relationship maintenance strategies.	Improved stakeholder relationships. Increased effectiveness of issues management function.
Transactions	Dialogic focus	Assess structural and attitudinal aspects of stakeholder communication.	Audit stakeholder needs and values. Develop stakeholder consultation mechanisms.	License to operate and reputation benefits.

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