

# **Excellence Theory in Public Relations: Past, Present, and Future**

*James E. Grunig & Larissa A. Grunig*

The programme of research known as the excellence theory began in the 1960s with J. Grunig's research on publics found among Colombian farmers. Research then followed on the role of public relations in organizational decision-making, the symmetrical model of public relations, public relations measurement, and how the structure and environment of organizations shape public relations behaviour. The IABC excellence project added theories of public relations roles, operations research, and gender and diversity to the paradigm. The excellence theory has evolved into a general theory of public relations as a strategic management function, and ongoing research now is adding concepts and tools that public relations professionals who serve in a strategic role can use.

## **1 Introduction**

The “excellence theory” is the name our colleagues and we gave to an integrated collection of middle-range theories that we used in a 15-years' study sponsored by the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) Research Foundation. These integrated theories, developed in the 1970s and 1980s, helped us to explain the value of public relations to an organization and to identify the characteristics of a public relations function that increase its value (J. Grunig, 1992b; Dozier with L. Grunig & J. Grunig, 1994; L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). Our use of the term “excellence” often has been misunderstood or misinterpreted (e.g., by McKie, 2001) as an iconic term that no one “could rationally oppose” (p. 76) or an imperialistic term suggesting that our theories were better than those of others.

In actuality, we chose the term “excellence” quite innocently during a research-planning meeting with board members of the IABC Research Foundation in 1984. At the time, Peters and Waterman's (1982) book *In Search of Excellence* had sold more than 5 million copies in 16 languages; and one board member suggested that the research we were about to conduct had a similar purpose. Everyone at the meeting agreed that we were searching for excellence in public relations and communication management, but we dropped the words “in search of” from the name of the study to avoid copying Peters and Waterman's title.

Peters and Waterman (1982) conducted their research to identify characteristics of management in companies they described as excellent. They defined “excellence” as having been continuously profitable. Peters and Waterman studied 43 continuously profitable companies and identified eight attributes of management that these companies shared. Peters and Waterman were not the only management scholars at the time to use the term “excellence” or something similar to develop indicators of best practices in management.

J. Grunig (1992d) reviewed this literature on excellence as part of our broad literature review for the study and identified 12 managerial and organizational attributes of excellence that were related to public relations. We followed Peters and Waterman's example of searching for best practices in our excellence study, although we defined excellence differently and conducted large-scale survey research along with qualitative interviews rather than case studies, as they did. We defined excellence as a set of characteristics of a public relations function that were correlated with organizational effectiveness. We defined organizational effectiveness as occurring when an organization achieves goals chosen in consultation with stakeholders – goals that served the interests of both the organization and these strategic constituencies. We defined excellence in public relations as a set of attributes and practices that helped to “build quality, long-term relationships with strategic constituencies” (L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Ehling, 1992, p. 86).

We chose the term “excellence” not to suggest the superiority of our theory or its universal acceptance. Rather, we chose the term because it was fashionable; and it placed our research in the mainstream of management research. Instead of “excellence,” we could have used terms such as “best practices in public relations;” “benchmarking public relations practices;” or, descriptively but blandly, “characteristics of an organization's public relations function that contribute to organizational effectiveness.”

To understand the excellence theory, it helps to place it into the research context that preceded it. Before the 1970s, few theories of public relations went beyond the descriptions of the practice found in classic textbooks such as Cutlip and Center's (1952) first edition. These textbook descriptions could not be considered theories because they were based on anecdotal examples rather than systematic research designed to gather evidence to support and revise theory. Nevertheless, these textbook descriptions provided a framework for our understanding of public relations that guided the research that preceded the excellence study as well as the excellence study itself (see J. Grunig, 1991, for an analysis of Cutlip's influence on the discipline).

When J. Grunig began doing public relations research in 1966, he was guided by the descriptions of public relations practice and the normative prescriptions for improving it found in Cutlip and Center's (1964) textbook. At the time, the little public relations research that existed was based on mass communication theories of media effects, attitude theories from social psychology (e.g., Lerbinger, 1972; Robinson, 1966), or highly practical research such as the characteristics of press releases most often used by editors. Most researchers then did not try to explain or criticize the behaviour of public relations practitioners. They accepted the work of practitioners as given and looked for ways to identify the effects of public relations work or to find ways to improve the effectiveness of public relations techniques (see J. Grunig and Hickson, 1976, for a review of this early research).

Few scholars asked, for example, what a public was or how the characteristics of an organization influenced how public relations practitioners behaved. J. Grunig (1966) began to construct the conceptualization that he now calls the situational theory of publics; and J. Grunig (1976) used organizational theory to identify how an organization's structure, environment, history, size, and technology affect the practice of public relations – research that eventually produced his four models of public relations (e.g., J. Grunig, 2001) and explained why organizations practice one or more of these models rather than others.

Shortly after, Broom (e.g., Broom & Smith, 1978, 1979) and later Dozier (e.g., Dozier, 1984) began a programme of research on the roles of public relations practitioners; Ehling

(1975, 1984, 1985, 1992) applied operations research and management science to public relations; White (as reviewed in White and Dozier, 1992) conceptualized the role of public relations in management decision-making; and L. Grunig began research on organizational structures and environments (as reviewed in L. Grunig 1992b), power in the public relations department (as reviewed in L. Grunig 1992c), and activism (as reviewed in L. Grunig, 1992a).

These, then, were the major middle-level theories of public relations that J. Grunig (1992a) integrated into a general theory of public relations in the opening chapter of our book, *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management*. He described the general theory in this way:

This chapter has presented a general theory of public relations as a theory of communication management. That theory specifies how public relations makes organizations more effective, how it is organized and managed when it contributes most to organizational effectiveness (i.e., when it is excellent), the conditions in organizations and their environments that make organizations more effective, and how the monetary value of public relations can be determined. (p. 27)

Today, we often call the excellence theory a theory of public relations as a strategic management function because the excellence study established participation of public relations in strategic management as the critical component that ties together the middle-range theories we integrated into our general theory. Researchers now continue to develop that theory of public relations as a strategic management function (see, e.g., Toth, 2007). This chapter, therefore, explores the development of theories that went into the excellence theory, specific findings of the excellence study, and research conducted after the excellence study. First, however, we briefly compare our approach to public relations to another way of thinking that often produces criticism of our strategic management approach.

## 2 Two Approaches to Public Relations

We believe there have been, and still are, two major ways of thinking about public relations both in practice and in the academic world. We call these approaches the symbolic-interpretive paradigm and the strategic management, or behavioural, paradigm.

In her textbook on organizational theory, Hatch (1997) identified three perspectives on organizations – the modernist, symbolic-interpretive, and postmodernist perspectives. The modernist perspective is based on classic theories of management that viewed reality as objective and management as a set of activities designed to achieve organizational objectives – which could be measured objectively. The symbolic-interpretive paradigm sees reality as subjective and views concepts such as organizations themselves, their environments, and the behaviour of managers as subjective enactments of reality rather than observable and measurable reality – enactments whose meanings can be negotiated through communication. According to Hatch, postmodernism “found its way into organization theory through applications of linguistic, semiotic, and literary theory via the interest in meaning and interpretation introduced by symbolic-interpretive organization theorists” (p. 44). Postmodernists reject general theories and favour fragmentation of theorizing. They prefer to “deconstruct” theories to determine whose interests are served by the theories and whose

way of thinking has been incorporated into them. Thus, challenges to power are a major theme in post-modern thinking.

Critical scholars such as L'Etang and Pieczka (1996) and Leitch and Neilson (2001) and post-modern scholars such as Holtzhausen and Voto (2002) have derided the excellence theory as modernist, functionalist, and positivist and as a theory that serves only the interest of management or organizations and not the interests of publics or society. For the most part, these criticisms reflect a misunderstanding or misinterpretation of our work. Although the middle-range theories incorporated in the excellence study originally were based on "modernist" organizational theories, we integrated elements of both symbolic-interpretive thinking (e.g., J. Grunig, 1992d, 1993) and postmodernism (e.g., L. Grunig, J. Grunig & Dozier, 2002, p. 143) into the excellence theory. In particular, we described strategic management in post-modern terms:

Our view of the empowerment of the public relations function also fits well with Knights and Morgan's (1991) and Knights' (1992) post-modern view of strategic management as a subjective process in which the participants from different management disciplines (such as marketing, finance, law, human resources, or public relations) assert their disciplinary identities. Public relations has value in this perspective because it brings a different set of problems and possible solutions into the strategic management area. In particular, it brings the problems of stakeholder publics into decision-making – publics who make up the environment of the organization. (p. 143)

Likewise, critical or post-modern scholars who have described the excellence theory as "organization-centered" (e.g., Leitch & Neilson, 2001) simply do not understand or have misrepresented our research on publics (e.g., J. Grunig, 1971, 1997), activism (e.g., J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 1997), or power (e.g., L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Dozier, 2001, chap. 5). Throughout our careers, we have seen public relations as a means of giving voice to and empowering publics in organizational decision-making (a post-modern perspective), while at the same time developing explanations of why empowering publics also benefits organizations (a semi-modernist perspective).

Thus, we believe the excellence theory contains elements of both modernism and postmodernism, although we do not adhere rigorously to the assumptions of either stereotyped approach. For example, although postmodernists dismiss general theories as metanarratives or "grand narratives" (Hatch, 1997, p. 44), we believe in the importance of integrating and enlarging theories. Thus, it is not possible to characterize the excellence theory (the strategic management, behavioural paradigm) as either a modernist or a postmodernist approach to understanding public relations as a strategic management function. We also embrace the centrality of subjectivity in both theorizing and communicating – the central assumption of the symbolic-interpretive approach. However, we believe the symbolic-interpretive paradigm devotes excessive attention to the role of communication and public relations in negotiating *meaning* and not enough attention to their role in negotiating the *behaviour* of both organizations and publics.

Scholars and practitioners following the symbolic paradigm generally assume that public relations strives to influence how publics interpret the organization. These cognitive interpretations are embodied in such concepts as image, reputation, brand, impressions, and identity. The interpretive paradigm can be found in the concepts of reputation management in business schools, integrated marketing communication in advertising programmes, and

critical and rhetorical theory in communication departments. Practitioners who follow the interpretive paradigm emphasize publicity, media relations, and media effects. Although this paradigm largely relegates public relations to a tactical role, the use of these tactics does reflect an underlying theory. Communication tactics, this theory maintains, create an impression in the minds of publics that allow the organization to buffer itself from its environment – to use the words of Scott (1987) and Van den Bosch and Van Riel (1998) – which in turn allows the organization to behave in the way it wants.

In contrast, the behavioural, strategic management, paradigm focuses on the participation of public relations executives in strategic decision-making to help manage the behaviour of organizations. Van den Bosch & Van Riel (1998) defined this type of public relations as a bridging, rather than a buffering, function – again using Scott’s (1987) terminology. It is designed to build relationships with stakeholders, rather than a set of messaging activities designed to buffer the organization from them. The paradigm emphasizes two-way and symmetrical communication of many kinds to provide publics a voice in management decisions and to facilitate dialogue between management and publics both before and after decisions are made. The strategic management paradigm does not exclude traditional public relations activities such as media relations and the dissemination of information. Rather, it broadens the number and types of media and communication activities and fits them into a symmetrical framework of research and listening. As a result, messages reflect the information needs of publics as well as the advocacy needs of organizations.

Critical scholars such as Weaver, Motion, and Roper (2006) tend to view the interpretive paradigm as the way public relations actually is practiced and the strategic management paradigm as “an unlikely rarity and even something of a fantastical ideal” (p. 15). We disagree. We believe the interpretive paradigm reflects the hopes of many of the clients and employers of public relations practitioners who prefer to make decisions in isolation from publics. It also represents the wishful thinking of many practitioners who still seem to believe that messages alone (and managed meaning) can protect organizations from publics and who promise clients and employers what they want to hear. Evaluation research (e.g., as reviewed by Dozier and Ehling, 1992), however, generally shows this interpretive paradigm to be ineffective because it does not deliver the effects its advocates promise or that critical scholars attribute to it. Most importantly, the interpretive approach does not provide a normative model for how public relations should be practiced – a model that can be taught to aspiring public relations professionals. The strategic management paradigm, we believe, provides such a normative model for an ethical, effective, and both organizationally and socially valued approach to public relations practice.

With this overview of the excellence theory and its evolution into the strategic management paradigm in mind, we devote the rest of this chapter to tracing the origins of the paradigm, its integration in the IABC excellence study, and the ongoing development and evolution of the paradigm.

### **3 Origins of the Strategic Management Paradigm**

We will explain the formulation of the behavioural, strategic management, paradigm by first tracing its origins in research that we have done with many colleagues and students. The first part of the paradigm was J. Grunig’s theory explaining the nature of publics and

how they develop. He has called this theory the situational theory of publics. This theory explains that people are most likely to seek information that is relevant to decision-making situations in their lives. He developed this theory in a study of how and why Colombian farmers seek information in decision situations, which became his doctoral dissertation (J. Grunig, 1968). Eventually, the situational theory developed into a tool to segment stakeholders into publics, to isolate the strategic publics with whom it is most important for organizations to develop relationships in order to be effective, and to plan different strategies for communicating with publics whose communication behaviours range from active to passive (J. Grunig, 1997). Thus, the situational theory of publics has provided a tool that strategic public relations practitioners can use to scan their environment for stakeholders.

When J. Grunig returned to the United States from Colombia in 1969, he was convinced that most of the failures in the communication programmes of agricultural agencies in Colombia resulted not from the backwardness or resistance of farmers but because of the nature of the communication programmes that organizations developed to communicate with them. Organizations that he studied were more likely to give information than to seek information. They also were unlikely to listen to or engage in dialogue with their publics. This one-way information giving typically resulted in policies and programmes of agencies that did not work well for farmers in the situations they faced.

J. Grunig believed that characteristics of organizations would explain why so many of them practice public relations in this ineffective way and why others practice it in a more excellent manner. A monograph (J. Grunig, 1976) and a great deal of subsequent research (reviewed in J. Grunig and L. Grunig, 1989) extended this research to all kinds of organizations doing public relations in the United States. First, he identified *independent variables* from organizational theory that seemed likely to explain why public relations was practiced differently by different organizations. These variables included organizational structure, environment, technology, size, age, culture, worldview, and power structures. The first *dependent variables* were simply one-way and two-way communication; but he eventually identified the now well-known four models of public relations: press agency/publicity, public information, two-way asymmetrical, and two-way symmetrical (J. Grunig, 1984).

For the most part, this programme of research failed to identify organizational variables that explained why organizations practiced public relations as they did, although top management's worldview about the nature of public relations and organizational culture seemed to explain the most variance in public relations behavior. The knowledge of public relations practitioners also had a major effect.

The next stage of J. Grunig's research, therefore, was an intensive programme of studies on the two-way symmetrical model of public relations. The symmetrical model stated that individuals, organizations, and publics should use communication to adjust their ideas and behaviour to those of others rather than to try to control how others think and behave. Twenty years of research have produced a great deal of logical, empirical, and ethical support for the symmetrical theory (see L. Grunig, J. Grunig, and Dozier, 2002, chap. 8, for a review of the criticisms, theoretical development, and empirical evidence in support of the model).

In the late 1970s, at the same time that J. Grunig was working on the theories of publics, public relations behaviour of organizations, and the symmetrical model of communication, the AT&T Corporation asked him to work on a project to develop measures for and means of evaluating the effectiveness of public relations programmes, such as media

relations, community relations, employee relations, educational relations, and marketing communication. This research on the evaluation of public relations at the programme level provided another critical element of the theory of public relations and strategic management. Public relations could not have a role in strategic management unless its practitioners had a way to measure its effectiveness.

Schneider (aka L. Grunig, 1985) attempted to unify many of these concepts – such as roles, organizational structure, environment, and models – into a general theory of public relations. In her doctoral dissertation, she focused on how the structure and the environment of organizations, in particular, shape public relations behaviour. Her research, which found no single best way to practice public relations, did establish that two-way, balanced communication allows for systematic scanning of the environment that leads, in turn, to a sound basis for decision making. This managerial role for practitioners, she argued, becomes increasingly important in an era of intense activism.

At this point, we had developed several crucial middle-range theories that have become part of the strategic management approach to public relations: publics, the role of public relations in organizational decision-making, the symmetrical model of public relations, and concepts to define objectives of public relations programmes and measure their accomplishment. The excellence study, which began in 1985, then provided the means for unifying these concepts and adding other theoretical building blocks to the strategic management theory of public relations.

#### **4 The IABC Excellence Study**

When the IABC Research Foundation issued a request for proposals in 1984 for research on “How, Why, and to What Extent Communication Contributes to the Achievement of Organizational Objectives?,” we first thought of the opportunity to move beyond the programme level of evaluation, where J. Grunig had worked in the AT&T research, to construct a theory of the overall value of the public relations function to the organization. Thus, the excellence study offered the possibility of constructing a theory of how public relations contributes to organizational effectiveness.

At the same time, L. Grunig and our collaborators on the project (David Dozier, William Ehling, Fred Repper, & Jon White) pointed out that the project also would make it possible to integrate a number of middle-range concepts that explained how the public relations function should be organized to increase its value to the organization. J. Grunig brought his concepts of publics, organizational theory and decision-making, models of public relations, evaluation of public relations, and research on employee communication to the project. Dozier contributed his and Broom’s roles theory. Ehling contributed his knowledge of operations research and his views on the controversy over public relations and integrated marketing communication (IMC). L. Grunig brought her knowledge of gender, diversity, power, and activism. White contributed his ideas about public relations and strategic management. To this mix, Repper, our practitioner member, added his understanding of how our theories worked in practice. The package became what we now know as the excellence theory.

IABC’s emphasis on explaining the value of public relations stimulated us to put measurement and evaluation into a broader perspective than the programme level. Although

programme evaluation remained an important component of our theory, we realized that it could not show the overall value of the public relations function to the organization. Our review of the literature on organizational effectiveness first showed that public relations has value when it helps the organization achieve its goals. However, the literature also showed that it has to develop those goals through interaction with strategic constituencies (stakeholders and publics). We theorized that public relations adds value when it helps the organization identify stakeholders and segment different kinds of publics from stakeholder categories. Second, we showed that public relations adds to this value when it uses symmetrical communication to develop and cultivate relationships with strategic publics. If it develops good relationships with strategic publics, an organization is more likely to develop goals desired by both the organization and its publics and is more likely to achieve those goals because it shares those goals and collaborates with publics.

Although we concluded that placing a monetary value on relationships with publics is difficult, our interviews with CEOs and senior public relations officers revealed numerous examples of how good relationships had reduced the *costs* of litigation, regulation, legislation, and negative publicity caused by poor relationships; reduced the *risk* of making decisions that affect different stakeholders; or increased *revenue* by providing products and services needed by stakeholders. Those examples provided powerful evidence of the value of good relationships with strategic publics.

In addition to explaining the value of public relations, the excellence study provided solid theory and empirical evidence of how the function should be organized to maximize this value. The reasoning flowed logically from our general premise about the value of public relations: Public relations must be organized in a way that makes it possible to identify strategic publics as part of the strategic management process and to build quality long-term relationships with them through symmetrical communication programmes.

Based on our research, we developed what Fleisher (1995) called a *generic benchmark* of critical success factors and best practices in communication management. In most public relations benchmarking studies, a researcher compares a communication unit with other units in its industry that are generally recognized as the best. The excellence study, by contrast, identified best practices across different types of organizations – corporations, government agencies, non-profit organizations, and associations. Generic benchmarking is more valuable than benchmarking a single case because it is unlikely that one organization will be, in Fleisher's (1995) words, "a world-class performer across the board" (p. 29). In the excellence study, we found that a few organizations exemplified most of the best practices, many exemplified some, and others had few of these characteristics. A generic benchmark does not provide an exact formula or detailed description of practices that a communication unit can copy to be excellent. Rather, it provides a set of principles that professionals can use to generate ideas for specific practices in their own organizations.

In our first book, *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management*, Repper (1992), the practitioner member of the excellence team, explained how the theory of excellence could be used to audit communication programmes:

One thing communicators never have been able to do is to compare our communication programs with a program that is considered the best and most effective. However, the normative theory provided in the book gives us an opportunity to measure the effectiveness of our communication programs against that of an ideal program (p. 112).



We tested the excellence theory through survey research of heads of public relations, CEOs, and employees in 327 organizations in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. The survey research was followed by qualitative interviews with heads of public relations, other public relations practitioners, and CEOs in 25 organizations with the highest and lowest scores on a scale of excellence produced by statistical analysis of the survey data. Three books were published from the research (J. Grunig, 1992; Dozier with L. Grunig & J. Grunig, 1995; L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002).

The characteristics of an excellent public relations function can be placed into four categories, each containing several characteristics that can be audited.

#### 4.1 Empowerment of the Public Relations Function

For public relations to contribute to organizational effectiveness, the organization must empower public relations as a critical management function. Empowerment of the public relations function covers four characteristics of excellent public relations. The first three consider the relationship of public relations to the overall management of the organization:

- *The senior public relations executive is involved with the strategic management processes of the organization, and communication programmes are developed for strategic publics identified as a part of this process.* Public relations contributes to strategic management by scanning the environment to identify publics affected by the consequences of decisions or who might affect the outcome of decisions. An excellent public relations department communicates with these publics to bring their voices into strategic management, thus making it possible for publics to participate in organizational decisions that affect them.
- *Communication programmes organized by excellent departments to communicate with strategic publics also are managed strategically.* To be managed strategically means that these programmes are based on formative research, that they have concrete and measurable objectives, that varying rather than routine techniques are used when they are implemented, and that they are evaluated either formally or informally. In addition, the public relations staff can provide evidence to show that these programmes achieve their short-term objectives and improve the long-term relationships between the organization and its publics.
- *The senior public relations executive is a member of the dominant coalition of the organization or has a direct reporting relationship to senior managers who are part of the dominant coalition.* The public relations function seldom will be involved in strategic management nor will public relations have the power to affect key organizational decisions unless the senior public relations executive is part of or has access to the group of senior managers with the greatest power in the organization.

The fourth characteristic of empowerment defines the extent to which practitioners who are not white males are empowered in the public relations function:

- *Diversity is embodied in all public relations roles.* The principle of requisite variety suggests that organizations need as much diversity inside as in their environment if they are to interact successfully with all strategic elements of their environment.

Excellent public relations departments empower both men and women in all roles and they empower practitioners of diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds.

#### 4.2 *Communicator Roles*

Public relations researchers have conducted extensive research on two major roles that communicators play in organizations – the manager and technician roles. Communication technicians are essential to carry out most of the day-to-day communication activities of public relations departments, and many practitioners play both roles. In less-excellent departments, however, all of the communication practitioners – including the senior practitioner – are technicians. If the senior communicator is not a manager, public relations cannot be empowered as a management function. Three characteristics of excellence in public relations are related to the managerial role:

- *A strategic manager rather than a technician or an administrative manager heads the public relations unit.* Excellent public relations units must have at least one senior communication manager who conceptualizes and directs public relations programmes. If not, other members of the dominant coalition who have little knowledge of communication management or of relationship building will supply this direction. In addition, the results of the excellence study distinguished between two types of senior managers: a strategic manager and an administrative manager. Administrative managers typically manage day-to-day operations of the communication function, manage personnel, and manage the budget. They generally are supervisors of technicians rather than strategic managers. If the senior public relations officer is an administrative manager rather than a strategic manager, the department usually will not be excellent.
- *The senior public relations executive or others in the public relations unit must have the knowledge needed for the manager role or the communication function will not have the potential to become a managerial function.* Excellent public relations programmes are staffed by professionals – practitioners who have gained the knowledge needed to carry out the manager role through university education, continuing education, or self-study.
- *Both men and women must have equal opportunity to occupy the managerial role.* The majority of public relations professionals are women. Research also has established that female practitioners are the best educated in this field and most likely to take advantage of professional development opportunities. If women are excluded from the managerial role, the communication function may be diminished because the majority of the most-knowledgeable practitioners will be excluded from that role. When that is the case, the senior position in the public relations department typically is filled by a technician or by a practitioner from another managerial function who has little knowledge of public relations.

### 4.3 *Organization of the Communication Function and its Relationship to other Management Functions*

Many organizations have a single department devoted to all communication functions. Others have separate departments for programmes aimed at different publics such as journalists, employees, the local community, or the financial community. Still others place communication under another managerial function such as marketing, human resources, legal, or finance. Many organizations also contract with or consult with outside firms for all or some of their communication programs or for such communication techniques as annual reports or newsletters. Two characteristics are related to the organization of the function:

- *Public relations should be an integrated communication function.* An excellent public relations function integrates all public relations programmes into a single department or provides a mechanism for coordinating programmes managed by different departments. Only in an integrated system is it possible for public relations to develop new communication programmes for changing strategic publics and to move resources from outdated programmes designed for formerly strategic publics to the new programmes.
- *Public relations should be a management function separate from other functions.* Even though the public relations function is integrated in an excellent organization, the function should not be placed in another department whose primary responsibility is a management function other than communication. Many organizations splinter the public relations function by making communication a supporting tool for other departments such as marketing or human resources. 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.

### 4.4 *Models of Public Relations*

Public relations scholars have conducted extensive research on the extent to which organizations practice four models of public relations—four typical ways of conceptualizing and conducting the communication function—and to identify which of these models provides a normative framework for effective and ethical public relations. This research suggests that excellent departments design more of their communication programmes on the two-way symmetrical model of collaboration and public participation than on three other typical models: press agency (emphasizing only favourable publicity), public information (disclosing accurate information but engaging in no research or other form of two-way communication), or two-way asymmetrical (emphasizing only the interests of the organization and not the interests of publics).

Two-way symmetrical public relations is based on research and uses communication to enhance public participation and to manage conflict with strategic publics. As a result, two-way symmetrical communication produces better long-term relationships with publics than do the other models of public relations. Symmetrical programmes generally are conducted more ethically than are other models and, as a result, produce effects that balance

the interests of organizations and the publics in society. Four characteristics of excellence are related to models of public relations:

- *The public relations department and the dominant coalition share the worldview that the communication department should base its goals and its communication activities on the two-way symmetrical model of public relations.*
- *Communication programmes developed for specific publics are based on two-way symmetrical strategies for building and maintaining relationships.*
- *The senior public relations executive or others in the public relations unit must have the professional knowledge needed to practice the two-way symmetrical model.*
- *The organization should have a symmetrical system of internal communication.*

A symmetrical system of internal communication is based on the principles of employee empowerment and participation in decision-making. Managers and other employees engage in dialogue and listen to each other. Internal publications disclose relevant information needed by employees to understand their role in the organization and to provide employees a voice in management. Symmetrical communication within an organization fosters a participative rather than an authoritarian culture as well as improved relationships with employees – greater employee satisfaction, control mutuality, commitment, and trust.

## **5 Extending the Excellence Theory to a Global Theory**

In several studies conducted around the world, our colleagues and we have extended the excellence theory into a global public relations theory based on what we call “generic principles and specific applications.” This theory is a middle-ground theory that falls between an ethnocentric and a polycentric theory. An ethnocentric theory would suggest that an organization should practice public relations in exactly the same way in every country – usually the way it is practiced in the country where the headquarters of the multinational organization is located. A polycentric theory would suggest that public relations must be practiced differently in every country because of overwhelming cultural and other contextual conditions. “Generic principles” means that in an abstract sense, the principles of public relations are the same worldwide. “Specific applications” means that these abstract principles must be applied differently in different settings.

As a starting point for research, we proposed that the principles identified in the excellence study are generic. We also proposed that public relations professionals must consider six contextual conditions when they apply the principles:

- culture, including language.
- the political system.
- the economic system.
- the media system.
- the level of economic development.
- the extent and nature of activism.

Our research to date has provided evidence supporting this theory of generic principles and specific applications. The most extensive test of the theory came in Slovenia. We replicated the quantitative portion of the excellence study by surveying 30 Slovenian firms that had

public relations departments. We found that the principles of excellence clustered into the same excellence factor in Slovenia as they did in the United States, Canada, and the UK in spite of a different cultural, political, and economic context (L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Verčič, 1998).

To deal with differences in contextual conditions, public relations practitioners in Slovenia found it necessary to apply the generic principles differently than in the Anglo countries. For example, we learned that they needed to counsel CEOs to support and empower public relations managers. They also developed continuing education in public relations to deal with the lack of public relations knowledge, and they had to emphasize employee relations because of the negative context inside Slovenian organizations.

## 6 More About the Strategic Management Role of Public Relations

Although the excellence theory is a general theory that incorporates a number of middle-range theories, its most important component is the contribution of public relations to strategic management. This component, in turn, points to the value of the behavioural, strategic management, approach to public relations. Since the completion of the excellence study, scholars working in this research tradition have continued to conduct research for the profession that has resulted in concepts and ideas that public relations professionals can use to participate in strategic decision processes. To conclude this chapter, therefore, we will elaborate on what the strategic management role for public relations includes and then briefly describe recent research that has been done to provide new tools for carrying out this role.

To contribute to strategic management, public relations should be an integral part of the management of every organization. The public relations function helps the organization interact with the stakeholders in its environment both to accomplish its mission and to behave in a socially responsible manner. In a strategic management role, public relations people manage *communication* with *top managers* and with *publics* to contribute to the strategic decision processes of organizations. They manage communication between management and publics to build *relationships* with the publics that are most likely to affect the behaviour of the organization or that are most affected by the behaviour of the organization. Communication processes can be managed, and processes that facilitate dialogue among managers and publics also can contribute to managing *organizational behaviours* – although public relations people cannot manage organizational behaviours by themselves. Dialogue among managers and publics, in turn, can produce long-term relationships described by characteristics J. Grunig and his students (e.g., J. Grunig & Huang, 2000; J. Grunig & Hung, 2002) have identified and defined – trust, mutuality of control, commitment, and satisfaction. Relationships also are affected much more by the behaviour of management than by one-way messages sent out by public relations or advertising people. Relationships also can be measured and evaluated to determine the long-term effectiveness and value of public relations (Hon & J. Grunig, 1999; J. Grunig, 2002; Scott, 2007).

An excellent public relations staff cannot serve in this role, however, unless research and measurement are an integral part of the function. Formative research is necessary to identify strategic publics with which an organization needs a relationship and to determine how to cultivate relationships with those publics. Public relations practitioners can use the

situational theory to segment stakeholders into publics. The excellence study showed that the most common categories of stakeholders are employees, customers, investors, the community, government, members of associations and non-profit organizations, the media, and donors to non-profit organizations. The situational theory can be used to segment each of these categories of stakeholders into publics that engage in different levels of activity that affect an organization. This range of activity includes activist (such as belonging to nongovernmental organizations), active, passive, or no communication behaviour. The more active the public, the more likely it is that communication programmes will have an effect. For example, the probability of an effect of communication on behaviour can be increased from 0.5% to about 50% by selecting an active public rather than a non-public (J. Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 156).

Evaluative research then is necessary to establish the effectiveness of public relations programmes and their contribution to organizational effectiveness. Evaluative research can be conducted to both measure the short-term effects of communication programmes on the cognitions, attitudes, and behaviours of both publics and management and the long-term effects of communication on the quality of relationships between organizations and publics (J. Grunig, 2008).

## 7 Recent Research to Enhance the Strategic Role of Public Relations

Although research-based knowledge on publics and the evaluation of public relations has been available for years, other concepts and tools related to the strategic management role of public relations have been developed only recently. Research to develop these new concepts and tools includes:

- *Environmental scanning.* Research to identify publics and issues and to evaluate information sources that can be used to bring information into the organization (e.g., Chang, 2000; J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 2000).
- *Publics.* Research to develop the situational theory of publics and to explain the social nature of publics (e.g., Aldoory, 2001; Aldoory & Sha, 2007; Kim, 2006; Sha, 1995; Sriramesh, Moghan, & Wei, 2007; Tkalac, 2007).
- *Scenario building.* Research to develop this technique for explaining the consequences of the behaviour of publics to management and the issues created by the behaviour of publics (e.g., Sung, 2004, 2007).
- *Relationship cultivation strategies.* Research to expand the concepts of symmetrical and asymmetrical communication to include a number of strategies to manage conflict and cultivate relationships that are most effective in producing high-quality relationships with stakeholder publics (e.g., Huang, 2007; Hung, 2002, 2004, 2007; Plowman, 2007; and Rhee, 2004, 2007).
- *Interactions of relationships and reputation.* Public relations practitioners and management scholars have paid a great deal of attention to an organization's reputation in recent years, in the belief that reputation is an intangible asset that adds both monetary and non-monetary value to an organization. The research of J. Grunig and his colleagues (J. Grunig & Hung, 2002; Yang, 2005; Yang & J. Grunig, 2005) has shown, however, that public relations has a greater long-term effect on relationships than on reputation and that reputations are largely a by-product of management behaviour and

the quality of organization-public relationships. Thus, attending to relationships will ultimately improve an organization's reputation. Reputation, however, cannot be managed directly; it is managed through the cultivation of relationships.

- *Development of an ethical framework for public relations practitioners to use as they participate in strategic management* (e. g., Bowen, 2000, 2004, 2007; J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 1996).
- *Empowerment of the public relations function*. Research to clarify the nature of the dominant coalition in an organization and how public relations practitioners become part of or gain access to empowered coalitions (e. g., Berger, 2005, 2007).
- *Specialized areas of public relations*. Research to extend the generic principles of excellence to specialized areas of public relations, such as fund raising (Kelly, 1991), investor relations (Shickinger, 1998), employee relations (Kim, 2005, 2007), community relations (Rhee, 2004, 2007), and government relations (Chen, 2005, 2007a, 2007b).
- *Global public relations and global strategy*. Research to develop the global theory of generic principles that can be applied in many cultures and political-economic settings and specific applications to adapt them to different contexts (e.g., L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Verčič, 1998; Verčič, L. Grunig, & J. Grunig, 1996; Sriramesh & Verčič, 2003; Sriramesh, 2007; Wakefield, 1997, 2000, 2007). Recent research has applied this theory to a multinational military organization (NATO) (Van Dyke, 2005), public diplomacy programmes of governments in other countries (Yun, 2005, 2006), and globalized and localized strategies of multinational organizations (Ni, 2006).

## 8 Moving to the Future

The programme of research that began with research on publics among Colombian farmers in the late 1960s, that built on the skeleton of a general theory explored in 1985, that was integrated into the excellence theory in the 1980s and 1990s, and that now includes research on the details of strategic public relations conducted around the world has produced an elaborated, general theory of public relations. This general theory has provided concepts to teach to future public relations practitioners, tools that professionals can use in practice, principles and rules that will make public relations more acceptable to society and understood by both organizations and publics, and a conceptual framework that continues to generate research.

Throughout the world, however, public relations too often is understood as a symbolic, interpretive, function rather than as a strategic management function – an understanding of the profession that we believe reduces its effectiveness, both for organizations and publics, and limits its acceptance by society. In sociological terms, public relations has become institutionalized, i.e., commonly understood and practiced, as an interpretive function. Yi (2005) has made a compelling argument that research is needed to learn how to re-institutionalize public relations as a strategic management function so that organizations come to understand and accept public relations in this way rather than solely as a messaging, publicity, and media relations function.

We believe that a primary research challenge, therefore, is to learn how to convert public relations from a buffering role into the bridging role that modern organizations need

to be effective and that societies around the world need to become more harmonious. At the same time, institutionalizing public relations as a strategic management function can ossify its practice as much as its institutionalization as an interpretive function has frozen and limited the practice. We believe future research should be developed to help public relations *evolve* (L. Grunig, 2007) as a strategic management function and continually re-institutionalize itself to adjust to changes in organizations, communication technologies, and societal expectations. Thus, we believe the future of the excellence theory should be evolutionary change.

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