



Research in brief

Strategic leadership in public relations: An integrated conceptual framework

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ABSTRACT

Although scholars have recognized the importance for public relations executives demonstrating strategic leadership in facilitating effective public relations practice, few have attempted to explain the multi-faceted nature of the leadership construct. In this paper, the author proposes an integrated conceptual framework to explain the leadership construct and its key dimensions. In addition, the author also proposes that leadership effectiveness can be mediated by a core set of organizational structure and culture as well as the social culture within which the organization operates. The paper also offers suggestions for future research to better understand how leadership influences public relations effectiveness.

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1. Introduction

For public relations efforts to continue generating impact on organizational decision-making process, it is important for both practitioners and researchers to assess the role of leadership in the communication process. The impact of communication efforts largely depends upon the recognition of opportunities, the appropriate employment of leadership capabilities, and the participative decision making by communication leaders. Although leadership effectiveness has been the focus for studies in management literature, efforts to synthesize existing findings to better understand the construct in the context of effective public relations practice have been virtually limited. As the field of leadership research becomes truly an interdisciplinary one, there remains a strong need for the exploration of the value of leadership to the profession of public relations. Particularly, a stronger theoretical argument is needed for scholars in this area to understand the role played by leadership in achieving communication effectiveness.

Therefore, this article attempts to open up the discussion within the public relations practice to better understand the meaning of strategic leadership in effective public relations practice and how strategic leadership affects communication process in organizations. The primary objective of this paper is to formulate a conceptual framework to examine the construct of leadership in the context of public relations. Such a framework could help us better comprehend the role of leadership and its influence on public relations value and effectiveness. Strategic leadership literature is used to identify the complexity of the construct. Increased emphasis is given to leadership dimensions of particular relevance to public relations practice. Moreover, in responding to a call for cultural influences on leadership effectiveness, the framework also discusses the moderating roles of cultures both at the organizational level and the societal level. Following the discussion of the conceptual framework, this paper offers suggestions for future research.

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2. The conceptual framework

Leadership is such an important consideration with respect to the competitive advantages and sustainable reputations of organizations. The literature of contemporary theories of leadership has exhibited a broad range from personal attributes, to behavior, to situational factors, to transformational styles, and to authentic leadership development (Nohria & Khurana, 2010). Developed from a comprehensive literature review, the conceptual framework identifies key dimensions of public relations leadership and also the major antecedent and environmental moderator of the leadership effectiveness in the context of corporate communication. The primary intent is to identify the constructs that could be most beneficial to examining and explaining the value of leadership to effective public relations practice. The rest of this section outlines the conceptual framework and the rationale for the inclusion of specific constructs within the framework.

2.1. Dimensions of public relations leadership

2.1.1. Self-dynamics

One major dimension that appears to impact leadership effectiveness is about individual leader's skills and traits (Bass, 1990). The dimension of self-dynamics refers to certain qualities, personalities, and attributes associated with successful leaders and considers the effective application and dissemination of those personal attributes across organization to be so important for demonstrating leadership. Leaders who do not understand themselves or do not present traits such as high self-confidence, emotional maturity, initiative, and stress tolerance are unlikely to create a compelling vision of the situations or to be sensitive to the environmental changes.

2.1.2. Team collaboration

A second important dimension to describe public relation leadership is team collaboration, which refers to the leaders' abilities to support the public relations team and the organization to execute public relations strategies in order to achieve excellence in communication management. The dimension of team collaboration should be integrated as one of the public relations leaders' role requirements to create a climate of trust and flexibility within the team, facilitate positive interdependence among team members, and between team members and leaders. Kouzes and Posner (2002) suggest that team cohesiveness increases with team collaboration which, in turn, would be expected to strengthen with productivity focus.

2.1.3. Ethical orientation

A third major dimension of public relations leadership is ethical orientation, which is a professional predisposition characterized by the extent to which public relations leaders believe in and enact professional values and standards when ethical and legal dilemmas arise and responsibilities and loyalties conflict. The idea that public relations professionals acting as the ethical conscience of their organization has contributed to the development of ethical knowledge in public relations (Heath & Bowen, 2002). Ethical leadership emphasizes an organization's actions to achieve goals of maximizing profits while creating the greatest good for the greatest amount of people.

2.1.4. Relationship building

Evidence also suggests that the dimension of relationship building could be a critical dimension to explain leadership in public relations. It describes the importance of network resource sharing and relationship building as antecedents of facilitate mutually beneficial relationships between the organization and key stakeholders: it helps gain influence and maintain consistently high performance. The involvement of interaction, information exchange, and linkage between an organization and its publics makes excellence in communication management more pronounced.

2.1.5. Strategic decision-making capability

As a fifth dimension, strategic decision-making capability refers to the extent to which public relations leaders understand external sociopolitical environments and internal organizational structures, processes and practices, and are able to translate relevant knowledge into effective advocacy and become involved with strategic decision-making processes in the organization. More critically, public relations leaders should have the ability to stimulate new ideas, persuasively sell new ideas to higher-ups, and improve responsiveness in a rapidly changing, complex environment and information market.

2.1.6. Communication knowledge management capability

The last major dimension of public relations leadership is communication knowledge management capability, which describes the process of gaining, applying and converting public relation and communication knowledge and expertise into effective tactics and strategies. Sharing knowledge and expertise with dominant coalitions and outsiders is seen as an effective way to improve the value of public relations to organizations. The application of communication knowledge and expertise can be used to adjust strategic decision-making, solve new problems, and improve organization effectiveness.

In summary, the conceptual framework suggests six major dimensions as good candidates for describing the complexity of the leadership construct itself in public relations and corporate communication. All six dimensions appear to be highly relevant to effective public relations practice and could possibly offer public relations leaders distinct advantages in initiating communication efforts.

2.2. Antecedents of leadership effectiveness in public relations

It is well known that organizational culture plays a vital role in the success of organization (Tsui, Zhang, Wang, Xin, & Wu, 2006). In order to explain how strategic leadership leads to effective communication practice it is important to provide a necessary link between one major cultural antecedent, organizational structure and culture, and leadership effectiveness. It is not enough to just put an excellent communication team in place to wait for the chance to confirm the efforts they can bring to improve organization performance. Rather, the success of communication leaders should be linked to the flexibility in the organizational structure, a culture that embraces communication efforts, and a distinct process to encourage, value, and share open communication among members. These features help to translate aspects of leadership into processes and practices that facilitates better communication and organizational performance.

2.3. Environmental moderator of leadership effectiveness

The framework also suggests a major environmental moderator of leadership effectiveness, which is the social culture. Managerial leadership research indicated that leadership style in an organization is not only determined by the organization's legitimating principles and values but also largely moderated by the social structure and cultural norms within the society it operates (see Bass, 1990). Based on numerous cross-cluster and -country leadership studies which revealed the effects of social differences on leader behaviors and preferences, Dorfman and House (2004) suggest that social culture's influence on leadership is profound.

3. Conclusions and implications for future research

Overall, the central proposition of this leadership conceptual framework is that the attributes and entities that differentiate a specific culture are predictive of organizational structure and culture, which further becomes an important structural antecedent of leadership effectiveness in public relations. These structural variables provide environmental threats and opportunities for public relations leaders to apply attributes and behaviors that are most frequently enacted to achieve excellence in leadership in that particular culture. Within the concept of strategic leadership itself, public relations leaders can apply traits and explicit knowledge and take actions to reduce constraints, strengthen internal and external relations, and lead to strategic decision-making that make the situation more favorable.

Similar to many emerging concepts in the field of public relations and communication management, the construct of leadership and theory surrounding knowledge in terms of its content, use, and role within the organization are complex. This study uses an integrated approach to developing a conceptual framework to explain those essential dimensions and structural antecedents to strategic leadership in public relations. While this paper has provided a basic conceptual framework that could be useful to study leadership in the context of public relations, considerable potential and efforts exist for future research to improve the framework and operationalize the key constructs. Leadership spans many levels of analysis and can be approached from different perspectives. Future testing of the framework with respect to individual constructs at different levels would enable us to better understand the role played by leadership in the communication and public relations teams and provide specific leadership improvement recommendations to facilitate effective communication practice.

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