Advancing tendencies? PR leadership, general leadership, and leadership pedagogy

David McKie [a],*, Paul Willis [b],[1]

[a] *Management Communication Department, University of Waikato, Hamilton 3240, New Zealand*
[b] *Centre for Public Relations Studies, Leeds Business School, Leeds Metropolitan University, 25, Queen Square, Leeds LS2 8AF, United Kingdom*

A B S T R A C T

What are the best ways to advance PR leadership? In exploring answers, we consider the last two decades of PR literature and identify two main tendencies. We link those two with general leadership literature and practices, as well as with literature on leadership pedagogy. We conclude that, rather than recent moves to look within the field, without self-reflection, to existing PR perspectives and figures for solutions, looking outwards has greater potential to transform not only the PR leadership literature, and PR practice, but also to create less hierarchical, and more democratic and "leaderful," PR workplaces.

© 2014 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction: a tale of two tendencies

Contemporary leaders face the challenge of operating in fast-changing, unpredictable, and unsettled environments where chaotic turbulence, "is the *new normality*" [italics in original] (Kotler & Caslione, 2009, p. xii). PR leaders confront the same conditions but have had less academic attention and there is little agreement on how to answer the question: what are the best ways to advance PR leadership in this context? In examining this question in the light of the last two decades of literature on leadership and PR we explore two main tendencies in the field that have implications for research, practice and pedagogy.

The first and most striking feature is that much of the writing on leadership has tended to emerge from scholarship where the subject of PR leadership is rarely central and even relatively peripheral to other topics. We suggest, however, that examples of this peripheral focused work have much to add to the PR leadership body of work. The second tendency is a predisposition toward insularity in existing PR research that does seek to specifically address the issue of leadership in public relations. Drawing out the strengths and weaknesses of both tendencies we favor interdisciplinary engagement over isolation and going beyond functional competence to benchmark leadership success in the PR field.

---

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +64 7 838 4197.
  E-mail addresses: dmckie@waikato.ac.nz (D. McKie), p.a.willis@leedsmet.ac.uk (P. Willis).
[1] Tel.: +44 0113 81 23578.

2. Advancing PR leadership (1): peripheral pathways

Providing valuable insights into PR leadership, and sometimes leadership in general, peripheral focused work is primarily concerned with areas other than PR leadership per se. Without mentioning a single leadership text, Heath and Waymer's (2009) analysis of Frederick Douglass' "Fourth of July Address," offers a detailed historical case study of how an activist leader used PR effectively in relation to the PR leadership legacy of the founders of the US Declaration of Independence. Demetrious (2013) considers how more contemporary activists defined as "special interest groups, lobby groups or NGOs (non-government organizations)" assume "moral leadership" on many global issues and create a "strong fear" (p. 25) among public relations institutions and practitioners. Another cluster of examples features such women-centered studies as Aldoory's (1998) article on "The Language of Leadership for Female Public Relations Professionals," Aldoory and Toth's (2004) consideration of gender in transformational and transactional leadership styles, and Grunig, Toth, and Hon's (2001) *Women in Public Relations: How Gender Influences Practice*. All three have gender and PR, rather than leadership or PR leadership as their main focus. This is reflected in the relatively small engagement with general leadership and limited range of leadership references. Even without making it a primary focus, each of those studies advances specific aspects of leadership. Most particularly, their concern is the ongoing issue, not just in PR but across private and public sector organizations alike (see Kellerman & Rhode, 2007), of the underrepresentation of women in leadership.

The relatively peripheral positioning of other PR leadership research also appears in books not concentrating on gender issues. Gilpin and Murphy's influential (2008) book, for example, does address the role of leaders – particularly in turbulent conditions – but is relatively marginal to their central concern with crisis management. Nevertheless, their adaptation of complexity theory to deal with uncertainty has clear applicability to the leadership challenges posed by the climate of ongoing change and uncertainty. They also usefully link leadership and PR issues directly though such references as Budd's (1993) *CEO Credibility: The Management of Reputation*.

In a later work, Gilpin and Murphy (2010) recommend that PR extend complexity theory beyond crisis communication to such areas as "media relations, stakeholder identification, issues management, and organizational reputation" (p. 71). Gilpin and Murphy (2010) note how this aligns with other PR scholars' calls for "more careful reflection on the linkages between public relations research and larger bodies of theory to expand the scope of the discipline and situate it more effectively within an interdisciplinary, pluralistic framework" (p. 71). Gilpin and Murphy (2008, 2010) practice what they preach by mobilizing a broad range of readings with wide linkages across different disciplines. This breadth enables them to avoid insularity and to attract a range of readers beyond PR practitioners and leaders while still being of importance to those audiences.

Their work also connects with a growing stream of research concerned that leadership – in both theory and practice – does not exclude others by being considered the sole province of CEOs and people in positions of hierarchical power. Specifically, they follow expert guidance recommending against "assigning all responsibility to a single crisis management leader because effective teams usually produce more positive outcomes" (Gilpin & Murphy, 2008, p. 133). This orientation to democratic shared leadership is captured in Raelin's (2003) book title *Creating Leaderful Organizations: How to Bring Out Leadership in Everyone.* It has grown in prominence not only to enable organizations to adapt quickly to change but also "because the new rules of relationships created by the advent of social technologies require that you develop new skills and behaviors that accentuate your own individual leadership style" (Li, 2010, p. 189) and because old ideas of attaching leadership to hierarchical positions can act as obstacles to more democratic and flexible workplaces designed to respond to turbulent environments.

Along similar lines, Holtzhausen's (2012) brief consideration of transformational leadership – often invoked as a response to radical change – is almost incidental to her book's concentration on postmodern PR and the role of the practitioner as activist. Yet she too draws from general leadership thinking and brings plural bodies of thought that range from postmodern ethics in sociology to activist leaders in South African history as role models. She sets them in a broad social and international, as well as a US organizational, context. Berger and Reber's (2006) book on gaining influence and resistance has only a few pages focused directly on leadership but deals with the central leadership issues of influence, power, and politics. Although, with only one leadership reading, they reference general leadership even less than the others. Indeed, none of these writers draw much more from the rich and vast leadership literature. Other PR books that do consult that body of work also tend to restrict their citations to a few readings relevant to their particular focus. McKie and Munshi's (2007) short account of learning from leadership for PR, for example, has 15 general leadership references but they form one small part of a larger project reconfiguring PR for contemporary challenges.

3. Advancing PR leadership (2): centering new research

In recent authoritative publications, the lack of direct focus on PR leadership, with one exception, is implicitly criticized. In his *Encyclopedia of Public Relations* (Heath, 2013) entry on "Leadership and Public Relations," Berger (2013) does not stop at correctly stating that although "general leadership research has proliferated in the past century, few of these studies have focused on leadership in public relations" (pp. 508–509), but situates that lack of a central focus on PR leadership as a problem. Indeed, he offers an emerging solution in "new research" which "is beginning to clarify leadership issues in the field, highlight key dimensions of leadership practice, and improve our understanding of how public relations leaders might be better prepared for a dynamic and uncertain future" (p. 509). For Berger (2013), the "new research" advanced "more