



Today's and tomorrow's challenges in public relations: Comparing the views of chief communication officers and next generation leaders



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ABSTRACT

Most public relations research is focused on communication processes and the instruments, strategies and objectives in use. Less is known about the men and women who are and will be responsible for managing strategic communication in organizations today and tomorrow. Their understanding of strategic communication is crucial for the perception of the profession by different stakeholders and substantially influences the economic success and social acceptance of companies. This study takes a close look at leaders shaping the professional field now and in the future. Qualitative interviews with 20 chief communication officers and 20 future leaders (Generation Y) in the same companies were conducted. Comparing the views, experiences and expectations of the two age groups helps to identify cognitive patterns, routes of development in practice as well as new areas for research.

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1. Introduction

The field of public relations (PR) has undergone continuous differentiation, expansion and upgrading in recent decades. Communication is not seen as an end in itself anymore, but is accepted as a tool for positioning and legitimizing business in society. An analysis of the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics even showed that public relations are outpacing journalism, in both number of jobs and salary growth (Williams, 2014). However, most research is focused on communication processes and the instruments, strategies and objectives in use. Less is known about the men and women who are and will be responsible for managing strategic communication in organizations today and tomorrow.

The history of public relations has researched the influence of pioneers like Arthur W. Page (AT&T) in the United States, Albert Oeckl (BASF) in Germany and Lucien Matrat (Elf) in France (Bentele, 2005; Russell, 2014; Xifra, 2012). The experiences and visions of these pioneers strongly affected the institutionalization of the professional field. Their ideas are often quoted, and serve as popular subjects for teaching in university and further education. By contrast, current communication leaders are less well known – although their influence on the economic success and social acceptance of companies is substantially higher than that of communication leaders in the times of the pioneers mentioned above. The understanding of strategic communication of these current leaders is crucial for the perception of the profession by top management, internal business partners and other stakeholders. In addition, they are role models for employees and trainees in communication departments.

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This article takes a closer look at those communication leaders. First, a literature review will support the idea that the dynamics of an expanding field like public relations can partly be analyzed by understanding today's and tomorrow's leaders and their perceptions of the profession. On the basis of this assumption, a qualitative interview study was conducted to explore the views of 20 chief communication officers as well as 20 future communication leaders in the same companies. These individuals manage communications for prominent brands like Bayer, BASF, Bosch, BP, DHL, Microsoft, Pfizer, Puma, and Siemens. Comparing the views, experiences and expectations of the two age groups helps to identify routes of development in practice as well as new areas for research.

2. Literature review: researching leadership and leaders

While the general importance of leaders for the development of professional fields is well known in many different fields, leadership research in the field of public relations and corporate communications has only recently begun (Berger & Meng, 2014; pp. 3, 16). Leaders are generally defined as the people who engage in leadership (Northouse, 2007; p. 3), and the special case of leadership in PR is defined as:

A dynamic process that encompasses a complex mix of individual skills and personal attributes, values, and behaviors that consistently produce ethical and effective communication practice. Such practice fuels and guides successful communication teams, helps organizations achieve their goals, and legitimizes organizations in society (Berger & Meng, 2010; p. 427).

While there are different approaches to analyzing leadership, a major stream in the literature explores the mindsets and activities of chief communication officers (CCOs) and the ways in which these individuals manage the communication function (Röttger, Zerfass, Kiesenbauer, & Stahl, 2013; p. 5). This research tradition provides information about the leadership style of PR practitioners in the United States and in Europe (Werder & Holtzhausen, 2009; Zerfass, Verhoeven, Tench, Moreno, & Verčič, 2011), important issues affecting leadership today and strategies to manage these issues (Berger & Meng, 2014), excellent leadership and the required competencies of communication leaders (Jin, 2010; Meng, 2009), ethical aspects of leadership (Lee & Cheng, 2011), similarities and differences of leadership in communication management and other corporate functions (Meng, Berger, Gower, & Heyman, 2012) and gender-specific perceptions (Aldoori & Toth, 2004). Until now, the most comprehensive study in the field has been the *Global study of leadership in public relations and communication management* (Berger & Meng, 2014). It shows that the potential power of individual leaders and of professional and educational systems to affect practice should not be underestimated or marginalized (Berger & Meng, 2014; p. 301). In-depth interviews in 23 countries revealed that individual leaders can have a dramatic positive impact on what the profession does and on how it is viewed or supported in an organization. On the other hand, some respondents complained about a lack of great leaders across the profession in their countries and an absence of role models (Berger & Meng, 2014; pp. 301–302).

Addressing the leadership topic is all the more important because corporate communication is a practice characterized by rather weak regulations and standards. Acting in this professional field is not shaped by a consistent model but is subject to multiple negotiations between different groups inside and outside the organization (Cloos, 2014; p. 146). In other words, communication management is not characterized by a fixed set of tasks, by clear career paths, or by hierarchies. Therefore, individual professionals and the profession (as a collective actor) are supposed to demonstrate their capacities and performance in order to differentiate themselves from those in other positions and thereby create and expand their scope of action. In addition to organizational structures and processes, the identity negotiations and cognitive structures of the relevant actors are highly important. According to social construction theory by Berger and Luckmann (1969; pp. 151–152) public relations practitioners produce their identity by an interaction of their organism, individual consciousness and social structure. Their objectively tangible world is based on role-specific knowledge which is among other things acquired through vocational training and professional activity. The varying understanding amongst practitioners of the same field is caused by different individual experiences. Applying social construction theory to the field of public relations (Tsetsura, 2010) leads to the idea to identify changes in the professional field over time by studying discourses of professionals. In terms of new sociological institutionalism (Frandsen & Johansen, 2013; Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin, & Suddaby, 2008), based inter alia on the above mentioned social construction theory, cultural-cognitive institutions comprise common scripts and shared beliefs that constitute social reality. Factors such as the basic understanding of concepts (e.g., communication) and expectations of an organizational function (e.g., corporate communications) are typically not limited to single organizations, but are part of shared visions in peer groups. While it is difficult to identify all influencing factors, sociologists have been able to show remarkable and consistent patterns in the mindsets of top managers (see, for example, Pohlmann, Liebold, Bär, Schanne, & Schmidt, 2015).

Following this line, researchers in general management and some areas of public communication have used interview studies to explore the cognitive mindsets of leaders. Chief executive officers in the United States were portrayed by scholars from Harvard Business School (Wetlaufer & Magretta, 2000). Later, the idea was taken up for the executive levels in Germany (Nolte & Heidtmann, 2009) in order to give us an idea of the role enactments, worldviews and visions of general managers. In Germany there are also publications portraying professionals in the media industry (Sjurts, 2014), journalism (Pörksen, 2005; Rippler, 2007) and social media (Beyer & Rolke, 2013).

However, leaders in corporate communications and public relations have barely been studied so far. One of the first attempts to find out about the perceptions and experiences of leaders in the field was initiated by The Plank Center for

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