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Public Relations Review



Agile public relations planning: The Reflective Communication Scrum



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 29 July 2014

Received in revised form

14 November 2014

Accepted 17 November 2014

Keywords:

Public relations planning

Evaluation

Scrum

Dialog

Meaning construction

Communication theory

ABSTRACT

In this paper a new, agile, method will be introduced for public relations planning. Existing planning methods all suggest that research and analysis should be the first phase, followed by strategy, smart goals and a detailed action plan, and ending with an evaluation of the results. These models provide an undesirable illusion of control. That is why this approach is no longer suitable in a digitalized society in which organizations must function in a public arena of ongoing constructions of meanings done by (self-invented) stakeholders. Consequently, the context of modern public relations is much more complex than the rusted notion of two-way communication with relevant publics implicates. That is why preference should be given to the view that communication is not so much communication between two or more actors but is a multi-way diachronic process of ongoing constructions of meanings in which one cannot foresee who is – or will be – involved, in what way, and what the results will be. To be successful, a more flexible planning method is needed in which change is a defining part during the process. Scrum is such a method. To make it applicable in public relations, this agile method, well-known in IT, needed to be expanded by supplementing theory on communication, change and reflectivity, and by enrichment of the common notion of evaluation.

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1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the stream of research in public relations concerned with dialog (see, e.g., Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002; Pieczka, 2011; Kent, 2013) and with digitalization (see for an overview Phillips & Young, 2009) by presenting an alternative, more flexible method for public relations planning in which change is a natural part. Public relations research enhances the concept of dialog because it delivers an ethical orientation for positive organizations – public relationships (Kent & Taylor, 2002; Pieczka & Wood, 2013) and because it helps organizations activate a process of mutual understanding (Golob & Podnar, 2011; Grunig et al., 2002). Dialog is a sine qua non in the digital age, and dialog can be seen as a means to cope with the “battlefield of constructions of meanings” our organizations are living in today. Yet, caused by the digitalization of our society, in which the public sphere is enlarged to an almost un-endless space in which many spread their conversations, we need to go back to the original meaning of the concept of dialog, by defining it as dia-logos, which means “the flow of words and its meanings”. Following this reasoning, we can no longer see communication as communication between two or more actors but should define it as a multi-way diachronic process of ongoing constructions of meanings in which one cannot foresee who is involved, in what way, and what the results will be. That is why I propose to replace the

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classical models of public relations planning with an alternative model of iterative and more interactive planning, called the Reflective Communication Scrum.

2. Public relations¹ in the digital age

Phillips and Young (2009: 6) observe that “anyone with access to a computer, an internet connection and basic literacy can make his or her voice heard to a global audience (. . .). There is no defense mechanism behind which an organization can protect itself from the influence of the internet”. That is why many practitioner authors claim that public relations are changing (or should change) from influencing stakeholders into conversations with stakeholders (e.g., Gray & Van der Wal, 2012). The European Communication Monitor (Zerfass, Verčič, Verhoeven, Moreno, & Tench, 2013: 17) draws the same conclusion, although more moderately formulated: “The results show that social media seem to work in two directions: inside-out and outside-in”, as a two-way street.

The idea that public relations should be seen as a two-way street is far from new. Grunig (2009) describes how Cutlip – in the 1950s – showed to his students that public relations should help organizations interact with the environment, and therefore, public relations must be two-way communication. Grunig (1975, 1976) constructed the theoretical foundations for this concept of public relations by introducing his multi-systems theory of organizational communication, by theorizing that organizational communication is part of organizational behavior and, as such, relates to the organizational theory-in-use and the style of decision making. The organizational communication style can be seen as an outcome of the decision-making style and the concept of organization and management itself. According to Grunig (1976), only a certain style of decision making (interactive) and a certain concept of organization and management (open) delivers good organizational communication. Grunig used this type of reasoning as the basis for his symmetrical model of public relations and constructed his excellence theory of public relations on this fundamental theoretical approach (e.g., Grunig, 1989, 1992). It has become paradigmatic for public relations research ever since, although it evolved into a mixed-motive approach of asymmetrical and symmetrical public relations, being “as symmetrical as possible” (Grunig et al., 2002) and became based on the concept of dialog (e.g., Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002).

Additionally, Zerfass argues repeatedly that public relations are, at least, double sided. On the one hand, it is concerned with initiating communication processes with the aim of conveying the company’s point of view and influencing stakeholders (for an overview, see Dühring, 2012). On the other hand, public relations monitors relevant stakeholders and communication processes within the organization and in the organizational environment (Zerfass, 2010). Nevertheless, as Heath (2000: 2) concludes in the first edition of his seminal SAGE Handbook of Public Relations, an evening at a banquet of public relations professionals shows that they are more interested in the first concern than in the latter. The European Communication Monitor and numerous other research projects indeed show that professionals in public relations are often more concerned with influencing stakeholders than with bringing their perspectives into decision making. Thus, we have to conclude that public relations is often more (controlled) one-way communication than real two-way communication.

It could very well be that this unbalance has to do with first a shortcoming in the concept of two-way communication-in-use and second, a shortcoming in the public relations planning models-in-use. This can be seen as unacceptable because the theory prescribes a certain approach to two-way communication as a more ethical behavior, but it is also unacceptable because of the changes in the communicative environment of our organizations, and that is caused by the digitalization of our societies and the behaviors of the digital publics. Organizations can no longer try to shield themselves from influences from outside; they have to cope with it whether they like it or not. Digitalization has largely changed the power relations. That is why Phillips and Young (2009: 1) claim that “the internet has totally revolutionized the practice of public relations. This revolution has not only affected the way PR professionals communicate but has changed the nature of communication itself.” This sounds convincing although it might be better to call it an evolution, as Macnamara (2010) does. The character of the digitalized public sphere urges to expand the concept of communication as a two-way street into a concept of communication as a multi-way diachronic and ongoing development of meaning constructions, a diachronic process.

3. Communication as a diachronic process

In 1996, Castells labeled the 21st century “the information age” (Castells, 1996; see also Castells, 2010). Time or space no longer limits information, and it is hard to know who possesses certain information and who does not. Moreover, while internet use is increasing dramatically, it is quite impossible to know what information people have and who is submitting what information to whom, let alone the idea that organizations could even try to know what others are doing with that information, how they construct their meanings and convey these to whom. This is not new, but what is new is the expansion of the possibility of entering the public sphere, in the definition of “what is potentially available to all” (Raupp, 2004: 310). Thanks to the internet, the public sphere is exploding vigorously.

¹ Although communication management or corporate communication seems to be a common denominator for the field in Europe, I use the term public relations in this article to define the field of practice in which public relations, corporate communication, communication or information tasks are being done.

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