



PR in the ER: Managing internal organization–public relationships in a hospital emergency department

Trent Seltzer*, Elizabeth Gardner, Shannon Bichard, Coy Callison

Texas Tech University, College of Mass Communications, Box 43082, Lubbock, TX 79409-3082, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 May 2011

Received in revised form 20 October 2011

Accepted 3 December 2011

Keywords:

Public relations
Organization–public relationships
Internal public relations
Health communication
Organizational culture

ABSTRACT

Focusing on a university-affiliated emergency department, this case study investigates the antecedents and outcomes of internal organization–public relationships as well as the cultivation strategies used to manage internal organization–public relationships (OPRs). The case study includes interviews with members of the emergency department's (ED) dominant coalition and focus groups with ED staff, as well as field observations in the ED itself. Findings illustrate that structural and policy antecedents acted as barriers to relationship maintenance, that a reliance on asymmetrical cultivation strategies culminated in poor internal OPRs, and that these poor relationships fostered negative attitudes, non-compliant behavior, and an arguably toxic organizational culture. Also, there was some evidence of symmetrical cultivation strategies (e.g., positivity and networking) fostering positive OPR perceptions among some employees. This case study can be used to guide best practices in internal public relations and answers the call for more research on public relations and health communication. Moreover, the current study suggests avenues for extending the relationship management perspective by considering organizational culture as a possible outcome of internal relationships.

© 2011 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Employees are a key stakeholder group for any organization, yet internal public relations (i.e., managing relationships between the dominant coalition and staff) is an underdeveloped area in public relations research (McCown, 2007). Public relations efforts in effectively managing communication within an organization are vital to achieve the organization's mission and to adapt to changing internal and external environments (Kennan & Hazelton, 2006; Ledingham, 2006). Grunig (1992) suggested that excellent public relations practice improves employee morale, increases job satisfaction, and "allows organizations to build long-term relationships of trust and credibility with strategic employee publics" (p. 532). Excellent practice is most likely to flourish in organizations with organic structures and participative cultures in which employees engage in the decision-making process and public relations practitioners are able to implement internal systems of symmetrical communication (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2006).

In an effort to extend scholars' and practitioners' understanding of how internal public relations can foster organizational success, this paper reports a case study of internal public relations within one of the nation's busiest hospital emergency departments (EDs). Hospital EDs provide a particularly interesting venue for such a study for two reasons: (a) internal communication takes place in an environment where the communicators are under intense pressure and (b) these organizational

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 806 742 6500x274; fax: +1 806 742 1085.

E-mail addresses: trent.seltzer@ttu.edu (T. Seltzer), liz.gardner@ttu.edu (E. Gardner), shannon.bichard@ttu.edu (S. Bichard), coy.callison@ttu.edu (C. Callison).

structures frequently do not include a formal public relations practitioner despite having a clear need for internal public relations to guide effective communication planning and implementation.

Despite Wise's (2001) call for increased attention to the potential that public relations holds for health communication, there has been limited analysis of the use of public relations within the health care setting. The majority of health-related public relations research has focused on external communication, namely media coverage of health crises and media relations by hospitals. The existing research on public relations in a hospital setting has provided useful insights, however, such as the potential of hospital intranets to facilitate two-way communication between employees (Spurlock & O'Neil, 2009) and hospital public relations specialists' use of two-way symmetrical communication and strategic planning (Gordon & Kelly, 1999). Findings from these studies indicated that the use of two-way symmetrical communication techniques was correlated with improved communication effectiveness and bottom line measures of hospital effectiveness.

Focusing on a university-affiliated emergency department, this case study includes interviews with members of the ED's dominant coalition, focus groups with ED staff, and on-site field observations. Findings from the study can guide best practices in internal public relations and answer the call for more research on health-related public relations. Moreover, this case study extends theory by proposing changes in organizational culture as an outcome of relationship management practices.

1.1. Relationship management

The current study is grounded in the literature on relationship management that has been developed within the field of public relations. The relational perspective has its roots in Ferguson's (1984) proposition that the unit of analysis for public relations research should be the relationship between organizations and their publics. As Broom, Casey, and Ritchey (1997) explain, an *organization–public relationship* (OPR) forms between parties when they:

have perceptions and expectations of each other, when one or both parties need resources from the other, when one or both parties perceive mutual threats from an uncertain environment, and when there is either a legal or voluntary necessity to associate. (p. 95)

While OPRs are usually discussed within the public relations literature in terms of organizations' relationships with their external publics, the perspective is relevant for the consideration of internal publics' relationships with an organization, as well. Certainly, employees and other internal publics have perceptions and expectations of management and require resources from management, and the dominant coalition (i.e., management) similarly has perceptions and expectations of internal publics as well as requiring resources (i.e., productivity) from employees. Indeed, OPRs could comprise any relationships between employee publics working within different organizational units.

Public relations practitioners play an important role in managing these relationships, whether internal or external, through strategic communication efforts. Ledingham (2003) articulated a theory of relationship management that stated "effectively managing organization–public relationships around common interests and shared goals, over time, results in mutual understanding and benefit for interacting organizations and publics" (p. 190). Thus, public relations most effectively contributes to organizational success when OPRs are actively managed and the needs and goals of both the organization and its publics – both external and internal – are considered while planning and implementing public relations efforts.

Grunig and Huang (2000) and Broom et al. (1997) outlined similar models of OPRs; in general, the models propose antecedents to relationship formation, strategies for establishing and maintaining relationships, the resulting relationship state, and outcomes of those relationships. Antecedents include situational or structural factors such as time in the relationship, motives, and needs. Outcomes include behaviors (or behavioral intentions), attitudes toward the organization, and goal attainment (Grunig & Huang, 2000; Ki & Hon, 2007).

Relationship states can be assessed along several dimensions. Hon and Grunig (1999) identified four dimensions that have received support in the literature: trust, control mutuality, commitment, and satisfaction. *Trust* includes perceptions of integrity (parties will follow through on their promises), dependability (parties can be counted on to do what they say they will do), and competence (parties are capable of doing what they say they will do). *Control mutuality* is the degree to which parties in the relationship agree on who has the power to exercise influence within the relationship. *Commitment* is the degree to which parties are willing to expend effort to maintain the relationship. Finally, *satisfaction* is the degree to which parties perceive the benefits of staying in the relationship outweigh the costs of maintaining the relationship with the other party (see Hon & Grunig, 1999, for a more extensive discussion of the relationship dimensions and the development of quantitative measurement scales for assessing OPR dimensions).

Relationship cultivation strategies, also referred to as maintenance strategies, include both symmetrical and asymmetrical techniques used by the organization to manage the OPR. Symmetrical strategies, which seek to balance organizational and public interests, include providing access to organizational decision-making processes, fostering positivity among publics, practicing transparency and accountability ("openness"), assuring parties that their opinions are valued ("legitimacy"), networking with groups with which the organization's stakeholders interact, and working collaboratively to accomplish tasks that are important to one or both parties. Asymmetrical strategies, where one party tries to benefit at the expense of the other party, include *distributive strategies*, such as exerting dominance, expressing anger, blaming others, and making threats; *contending strategies*, where one side tries to persuade the other side to take its favored position, regardless of whether the

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/139449>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/139449>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)