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Communication or action? Strategies fostering ethical organizational conduct and relational outcomes

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the relationships between two public relations strategies, bridging and buffering, and their impact on ethical organizational conduct and relational outcomes. Bridging is a relationship-centric, action-based strategy for problem-solving while buffering is an organization-centric, messaging-based strategy for impression management. In explaining the impact of these two strategies on organizational outcomes, this study examined the role of ethical organizational conduct as a mediator between bridging, buffering, and two relational outcomes. Based on a survey of 105 organizations in Korea, a positive association between bridging strategy and ethical organizational conduct was found, along with paths to relational improvement and conflict avoidance with strategic constituencies. No association was found between buffering strategy and ethical organizational conduct.

1. Introduction

Instances of corporate malfeasance remind us of the significant role of ethics in business. As publics continue to be increasingly sensitive to organizational misconduct (e.g., [Huber, Vogel, & Meyer 2009](#)), organizations must consider corporate ethics in management decisions, particularly those affecting stakeholders (e.g., [Jones, Felps, & Bigley, 2007](#)). What specific public relations strategy would encourage ethical corporate behavior to avoid negative outcomes and foster positive ones, should be a key question of our scholarship, and one that is addressed in this research. While there is no consensus on the most desirable strategy to make businesses ethical, an organization's communicative efforts and ethics have shown to be interrelated, given that communication managers share an organization's ethical decisions with stakeholders and advise the management on such actions ([Bowen, 2004](#)).

Little is known empirically, however, about how the adoption of different strategies affects ethical conduct. In this study, we compare the impact of communication- and action-based strategies, or buffering and bridging strategies on ethical conduct to propose a normative theory for the ethical management of organizational conduct and for strategic stakeholder relations. Contingency theory scholars have suggested that organizations need to choose the “appropriate point along the continuum that best fits the current need of the organization and its publics” ([Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997](#), p. 35). However, whether adoption of certain PR strategies over others results in ethical conduct is yet to be investigated. This study aims to address the dearth of research pertaining to strategic decisions, ethical conduct, and their outcomes. By doing so, this study will contribute to the body of knowledge of public relations and organizational ethics. In the sections that follow, we situate our study in public relations literature, discuss our hypotheses and results, and advance theoretical and practical implications.

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2. Literature review

2.1. Bridging or buffering: which strategy fosters ethical organizational conduct?

An organization's strategy formulation is part of its deliberate decision-making process that affects its stakeholders (Mintzberg, 1977). Strategy can be seen as a plan, a position, or a perspective (Mintzberg, 1987). When Mintzberg's notion of strategy formulation is applied to public relations, an organization's strategy not only indicates its decision making orientation, but also its worldview of stakeholder management and communication. Clarifying what public relations strategy is and what its outcomes might be is a significant area of research (Steyn, 2003; Werder & Holtzhausen, 2009).

This study adopts Kim's (2014) notions of bridging and buffering strategy, or action-based and communication-based strategies, respectively. Although there is no denying the importance of communication, scholars have pointed out that organizational issues stem not only from what the organization has said but also from what it has done (e.g., Broom & Sha, 2013). It is therefore not enough to focus merely on organizations' communication-based strategies, but also their action-based strategies, paralleling what Kim (2014) conceptualized as buffering (communication-based) and bridging (action-based) strategies. The bridging and buffering strategies form the theoretical crux of this study.

The buffering strategy in this study is conceptualized as an organization-centric, message-focused strategy for image management. An organization adhering to the buffering strategy strives to create a positive image or impression of the organization through favorable messaging of its (even if they are problematic) behaviors among stakeholders, protecting the organization from stakeholder backlash. Gioia, Schultz and Corley (2000) further defined an organization's image management as "attempts to make organizations look good *regardless* of their conduct or the actual situation" (p. 72, italic emphasis added). However, because there exists a "disjunction between the firm's actual and expected actions" (Philippe & Durand, 2011; p. 973), the effect of the organization's strategic messaging efforts regarding its reputation may be limited as a result (i.e., symbolic reputation) (Kim, Bach, & Clelland, 2007). The intended beneficiary of this strategy is an organization (Laskin, 2012), and the product of public relations under this function is a symbolic relationship (Grunig, 1993).

It should be noted that the buffering strategy is different from persuasion or advocacy which still allows for ethical public relations (Porter, 2009). While persuasion or advocacy could be a professional and ethical form of organizational communication (Bivins, 1987) as far as it meets certain principles regarding discourse ethics (Burleson & Kline, 1979) and public interest (Messina, 2007), buffering is conceptualized to be unethical when an organization aims to manipulate publics' perceptions by image management while maintaining its problematic behavior (Kim, 2014; Kim & Kim, 2016).

In contrast, bridging is conceptualized as a relationship-centric, action-focused strategy for problem solving. An organization that focuses on the bridging strategy aligns corporate behaviors with key stakeholder needs or issues (Grunig, 2009; Krishna & Kim, 2016; Kim, Hung-Baesecke, Yang, & Grunig, 2013). Action-based strategies start from management's conscious efforts to assess potential consequences of its decisions, policies, or behaviors on stakeholders (Broom & Sha, 2013). A management inclined toward an action-based strategy tries to minimize negative consequences of its decisions or actions and is willing to revise its decisions or actions to address the issues of stakeholders (Broom & Sha, 2013). The intended beneficiaries of this strategy are both the organization and its stakeholders (Laskin, 2012). Philippe and Durand (2011) also found that an organization's communication efforts improve its reputation *only when* paired with its actual performance. The bridging strategy does not discount the role of messaging. However, it does re-focus the organization's priorities from being message-centric to behavior-centric and from being organization-centric to relationship-centric (Kim, 2014; Kim, 2016; Kim & Kim, 2016).

It is essential for organizations to identify effective strategies that help them be accountable, authentic, and ethical, and meet the basic goals for survival. To do so, we examine three outcomes of public relations strategy – ethical organizational conduct, conflict avoidance, and relational improvement.

2.2. Ethical organizational conduct

Arthur (1984) raised an interesting yet important question: "How does a businessman get a practical hold of the concepts of business ethics?" (p. 319). This study hinges on the belief that organizations can find the answer in the connection between an organization's emphasis on stakeholders and organizational ethics. Organizations that adopt the stakeholder approach seek to include their understanding of stakeholders' issues in their decision-making process to ensure the well-being of both the organization and stakeholders (Harrison, Bosse, & Phillips, 2010) and this approach is ethically imperative for favorable organization-public relationship building and maintenance (Bowen, 2008).

This study looks at ethics at the meso-level, as the management of an organization's own conduct, rather than as the management of employees' ethical behaviors (e.g., Gatewood & Carroll, 1991). To distinguish this organizational-level ethical management from the management of employees' behaviors, this study uses the term *ethical organizational conduct*. McDonald and Nijhof (1999) acknowledged the different levels of business ethics (i.e., political system, organization, and individuals). However, what constitutes ethical organizational conduct for key stakeholders is less clear than what organizational misconduct is (Szwajkowski, 1992). To set the boundaries of ethical conduct, Arthur (1984) suggested that "business ethics deal with relationships" and "their validity depends on mutual acceptance" (p. 321). Corporate ethics deals with patterns of organizational conduct, which involves stakeholder relationships and identification of the affected stakeholder groups (Arthur, 1984).

Public relations has been known to bring ethical value to management decisions. Several scholars have emphasized the two-way symmetrical communication model with stakeholders (Bowen, 2008), which holds the most promise for an organization's social

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