



Is Strategic Communication too important to be left to Communication Professionals? Managers' and coworkers' attitudes towards strategic communication and communication professionals



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 12 November 2016

Keywords:
Management
Communicative organization
Communication professionals

ABSTRACT

The article is based upon empirical data from a Swedish three-year research project entitled "Communicative Organizations", investigating the value of communication for organizations. The project is involves eleven organizations. Based upon empirical data from a quantitative survey (n = 6486) the perceived value of strategic communication and communication professionals, mainly among managers and co-workers, is analyzed. Two conceptual models are used for analysis: the communicative organization and the four-by-four model of strategic public relations. The results shows that the self-identity of communication professionals and the normative model of strategic public relations partly mirror and partly collide with the perceptions of managers and coworkers. The study confirms that managers and coworkers find communication crucial for their organizations at a strategic level, but that the role of communication professionals is rather unclear. A majority of the respondents do not understand the core role or roles of communication professionals.

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1. Introduction

The value and prominence of strategic communication is attracting more and more attention in society and corporations.¹ There is also a growing understanding of the vital importance of strategic communication for the survival and success of organizations. Yet, communication professionals and communication departments around the world continue to struggle with a rather low status in organizations. Georges Clemenceau (1841–1929), France's president during the later years of World War I, once quipped that war is too important a matter to be left to the generals. Clemenceau's aphorism has become a favorite with writers who want to point out that truly important affairs best not be left to experts. Along that line of thought, the following article explores the perceived importance of communication *in contrast* with the perceived expertise

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¹ In this paper we use public relations and strategic communication as synonyms. We are aware of the different traditions and schools (and other concepts such as corporate communication and organizational communication) that exist, but our aim in this paper is not to discuss the differences.

and status of communication professionals. It raises the question whether communication is on the verge of becoming too important to be left to communicators?

Earlier research indicates that managers in general do not perceive strategic communication as important as sales, marketing or HR (e.g. Brønn, 2014; Zerfass & Sherzada, 2015). Earlier research (e.g. Sandhu, 2009) has also discussed whether strategic communication is institutionalized in contemporary organizations. (Grandien & Johansson 2012; cf. Schultz & Wehmeier, 2010) propose a model of how to study the institutionalization process, but that the status of communication professionals is still an open question. Many practitioners experience that strategic communication often is taken for granted and that managers do not understand the complexity of communication (Axley, 1984), and the fundamental role that communication play in the continuous production and reproduction of organizations (Putnam & Nicotera, 2009; Weick, 2009). At the same time, communication professionals have been criticized for being stuck in an old communication paradigm emphasizing media, content and information distribution, leading to that strategic communications does not become a critical part of the organizational core activities (cf. Cowan, 2014). In the old communication paradigm, communication professionals were “doing as they were told rather than recommending or being a key strategic partner” (Cowan, 2014; p. 12). According to the same critique the old communication paradigm is ruled by the media logic, which leads to a strong focus on publicity and external messages. The anchoring in media logic prevents communication professionals from becoming core and strategic actors in organizations, according to this reasoning. In this paper we propose a mindset shift among communication professionals: from the media logic to the *communication logic*.

The aim of this paper is to discuss two important issues regarding the problems sketched out above: (1) How do managers and co-workers value and view strategic communication? (2) How do managers and co-workers value and view communication practitioners?

The theoretical framework is based on two conceptual models that will be developed and discussed: *the communicative organization* (Falkheimer, Heide, Simonsson, Zerfass, & Verhoeven, 2016; Nothhaft & von Platen, 2015) and the *four-by-four model of strategic public relations* (Gregory & Willis, 2013; Zerfass & Sherzada, 2015). The communicative organization is a normative concept developed by the international professional public relations community (Global Alliance, 2010, 2012). It is not yet a well-defined concept, but is used to describe the positive contribution that strategic communication might have for organizations and society. The four-by-four model of strategic public relations has similarities to the communicative organization since it is also a normative concept, but is a more clearly defined stakeholder-oriented model: “(…) a comprehensive methodology that allows for careful examination of any type of organization” (Gregory & Willis, 2013, p. 36). These two concepts and models will be further discussed after a short review of earlier research relevant to this study.

The paper is based upon empirical data from a current Swedish three-year research project entitled “Communicative Organizations” investigating the value of communication for organizations. The project is supported by The Swedish Association of Communication Professionals and involves eleven public (governmental as well as municipal) and corporate organizations. In the paper relevant results from a quantitative survey (N: 6486) among ten of the participating organizations are described and analyzed.² Differently from recent and similar studies we encompass both private and public organizations (e.g. Brønn, 2014; Zerfass & Sherzada, 2015). Further, and more important, is that we also involve coworkers in the study, since we regard them as important organizational communicators (cf. Heide & Simonsson, 2014; Heide & Simonsson, 2015). Many earlier studies have exclusively paid attention to communication professionals and managers, which leads to a biased understanding of strategic communication and the profession.

The paper is divided into four parts. First we present earlier research and the two theoretical concept or models. In the next part we describe our research project followed by a presentation about the data we have collected and which form the basis for this paper. In the third part, results are presented and analyzed. Finally, conclusions are drawn answering the two main empirical questions, but also reflecting on consequences for theory and practice.

2. Theoretical framework

In the paper *strategic communication* is used as a core concept, focusing targeted and formal communication processes planned and activated as means for organizations to reach overall goals (Falkheimer & Heide, 2014b; Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015). An organization in this context refers to private companies, public authorities and formal networks, associations and interest groups. Strategic communication has also been defined as “[t]he purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission [...]. The concept further implies that people will be engaged in deliberate communication practice on behalf of organizations, causes, and social movements” (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2007, p. 7). In other words, the objectives of a particular communication effort do not stand in the center, but the business-related and long-term goals. Hence, in order to achieve this strategic take on communication there is a great need of including the different forms of communication functions that exists in an organization, such as marketing, HR and IT. During the last decades there has been a large interest in intangible aspects and assets such as brands, organizational identity, reputation, image and legitimacy (Falkheimer & Heide, 2014a). In order to work successfully with these aspects both internal and external communication must work seamlessly and integrated (cf. Cheney & Christensen, 2001).

² The survey in the last organization will be conducted in September 2016 due to an organizational change.

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