

Elevating the role of public relations in management

This Vuelio paper examines the role of public relations as a management discipline and sets out the conditions and opportunities for its practice as part of modern management.

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Overview

Public relations, as part of the overall set of management tasks and practised as a management discipline, has the potential to support and to protect the creation of value at board, senior management and organisational levels. It also contributes to strategic planning and management decision making. However, the potential of public relations is frequently unrealised, and it is limited to a tactical delivery function.

Public discourse and concerns related to society, the environment, international developments and the current cost-of-living crisis, mean that it is more critical than ever for organisations to understand the scope of its role. Public relations has an important contribution to make to organisations, to their success and to the part that they play in society.

This contemporary paper for Vuelio examines these issues and sets out the conditions and opportunities for public relations as an essential part of modern management. The paper draws on Dr Jon White's career as a practitioner and researcher, and Stephen Waddington's PhD research at Leeds Business School.

The paper draws on comments from Vuelio customers from a short survey which examined issues related to public relations and management. The paper is intended to be shared directly to customers and promoted via social media and a webinar.

Public relations and management

To read a classic textbook dealing with public relations, *Cutlip and Center's Effective Public Relations* (2012) is to be quickly informed that public relations is a management function:

"[Public relations] is the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organisation and the publics on whom its success or failure depends."

Over the years since the book was published, this statement has been criticised as aspirational. Is it really the case that public relations is an accepted part of the recognised list of management tasks, which include giving direction, managing resources and working through people to get results?

A cursory examination of the coverage given to management topics in business schools will show that public relations is usually dealt with as a small part of marketing activities, having to do with promotion or

bound in with marketing communications.

A recent study by the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) of the UK's leading companies suggested that public relations is not recognised as either a strategic issue or management function.

Worse, prejudices against the practice – fed in part by examples of bad practice – prevent many business and other leaders from taking the practice seriously.

In this paper, we argue – axiomatically – that public relations is a part of management, that its contribution is essential to good leadership and management practice, and that it is significant in building value in and for organisations.

Stakeholder analysis and the management of relationships

In making the case for public relations as a management function, we've drawn on several starting points – visualisations of organisations in their social setting, work carried out by Tomorrow's Company (2014) and a consultation published in the same year by the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA). Neither of these studies have been mined sufficiently for their findings as they relate to public relations.

First, visualisation. This graphic represents an organisation in its social setting. It can be reproduced as a unique picture for any organisation, or if necessary, an individual or group. It shows the organisation networked in with groups affected by or affecting the organisation as it goes about its business, pursues its activities. In public relations, it is often referred to as a stakeholder map. Its potential as an aid to explaining public relations and to planning and carrying out public relations' work is not fully exploited.



The full scope of public relations practice is set out in the image, ranging from internal communication, with groups making up the organisation, to specialist areas of practice such as investor or government relations.

The image prompts several questions fundamental to public relations and also to management practice. The answers to these questions are elaborated as analysis becomes more thorough and, ideally, informed by the research.

What is the current state of the relationships represented in the picture? Is the organisation perceived accurately, accorded an appropriate reputation and given necessary support (or subject to indifference or strong opposition)?

Given the organisation's objectives, how do the relationships need to develop over time in order that the organisation achieves its objectives (here, while awareness, perceptions, opinions and attitudes are important, the end interest is in behaviour – how will groups' behaviour need to develop over time in support of objectives?)

Looking forward, what might happen to, in some ways, disrupt the relationships represented?

What, over and above legal obligations, are the obligations that the organisation may have or choose to take on, in relation to the groups with which it interacts?

Organisations, and those who lead and manage them, have several choices that can be made about the management of important relationships. They can decide that by pursuing the main activities of the organisation, relationships will take care of themselves – they will develop as they may. There are enough examples of organisations that have found themselves in serious difficulties because of taking this approach – most recently, the UK Government opting for disruption without taking sufficient account of the likely effects on important groups in the financial sector.

Table: Organisational stakeholder analysis

Our argument is that good management requires that close attention be given to relationships; of course to avoid difficulties, but more importantly to realise value and make better decisions and plans that will be more likely to be carried through, with support from important groups.

Other choices available to management become a matter of delegation – who should be responsible for attending to, influencing and, as far as possible, managing important relationships? The task can be delegated to a member of the management team, or to specialists within or outside the organisation. Each of these choices carry with them advantages and disadvantages.

Public relations, then, is responsible for a range of activities in management related to the value of relationships around an organisation.

The outcomes of its work are – it is hoped:

- mutually beneficial relationships;
- support where it is needed;
- minimal opposition;
- an organisation sensitive to the concerns of the groups it is involved with and willing to change if necessary to respond to their concerns;
- trust; and
- easier routes to the achievement of organisational objectives.

The Tomorrow's Company study suggests that relationships are a source of significant value to an organisation and should be the responsibility of a chief relationship officer operating at the highest levels. The suggested role is in fact the role that credible senior public relations practitioners have been playing for many years.

Relationships, uncertainty and risk

We are living in an age of radical uncertainty where the requirement for public relations is more important than ever. This is the basis of the VUCA planning tool that references four attributes of organisational risk: volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. Anne Gregory and Paul Willis writing in *Strategic Public Relations Leadership (2022)* add deceit as a fifth risk to represent misinformation.

The call for organisations to consider a broader scope of stakeholders beyond financial, so called Environmental, Social and Governance metrics, are also driving demand for practice. The Business

Roundtable, an association of the CEOs of leading companies in the US, recently stretched the obligations of business to a recognition of interests of stakeholders beyond investors.

The mediation of media, first by platforms giving rise to social forms of media and most recently by algorithms, places a new threat to the reputation of organisations.

In this content, public relations provides management with contextual intelligence. Making its full contribution, public relations improves management decision-making and strategic thinking and planning. The

research cited in the ACCA consultation suggested that decision-making ahead of the financial crash of 2008 was limited by thinking and characteristics of decision-making groups, made up of individuals from similar backgrounds and limited in their thinking accordingly.

Public relations 'imports novelty' into decision-making: the perspective, contacts and participation in channels of communication which underlie public relations provide a rich source of alternative viewpoints and hints of difficulties that can be drawn into decision-making – if allowed.

It also enables an organisation to build legitimacy to operate within society including reputation and trust.

The Page Society, a professional association for senior public relations and corporate communications executives and educators, suggests that the role of the public relations function is also to support management in building corporate character. It suggests that public relations can assist the alignment of mission, purpose, values, culture, business model, strategy, operations and brand to create the unique, differentiating identity of the enterprise.

Table: Insights from Vuelio customers on the alignment of public relations and management

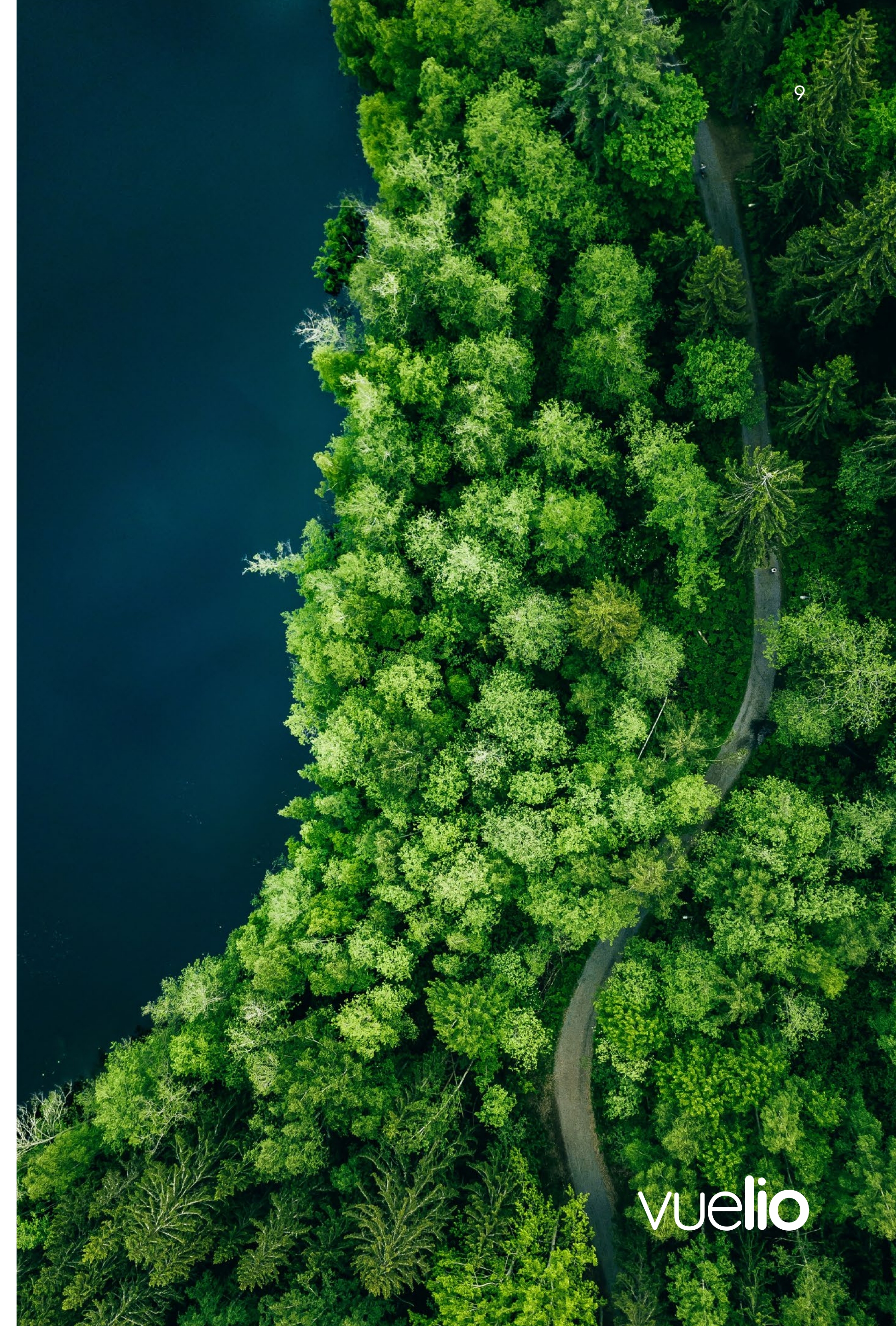
As part of our preparation for this paper, a survey of Vuelio clients explored some of the barriers to public relations being accepted as a management function. Their comments – feedback was received from 47 clients – suggest that most public relations work remains focused on content creation, with only a small number involved primarily in strategic planning work.

Only one in five described public relations as fully integrated into senior management, with the majority working in organisations where integration is partial. Nine work in organisations where public relations is not integrated into senior management.

Over half attribute lack of integration into management to a failure to appreciate the scope of public relations on the part of senior management and, for nine of the group, to limited expertise on the part of management preventing them from making full use of public relations. One client felt that integration of public relations was hindered by lack of credibility on the part of some public relations advisors.

In comments, clients felt that public relations was seen more as a means of limiting risk and dealing with crisis situations than as a practice to be called into play to bring about behavioural change. It is not seen as part of decision-making and is only able to become strategic ‘after the horse has bolted’ in times of difficulty.

Elevating the role of public relations in management



Defining the public relations role in management

Public relations is frequently conflated with publicity and media relations within management. It is seen as a means of message delivery, to create perceptions, to raise awareness or to enhance reputation. This fails to recognise its potential as a management function to support planning and decision making.

A range of alternative terms has developed as alternative means to describe the public relations function. These include communication management, corporate communication and integrated communication.

There are strong arguments that public relations is not a communication practice.

The late Harold Burson, founder of the Burson Marsteller public relations consultancy, said in 2012: 'A major problem for us public professionals nowadays is that too many of us believe the communications part of our job is the totality of what we do. Many of us fail to realise public relations consists of two major components. The first (and most important) has to do with influencing our employer's behaviour.'

He went on to argue: 'Appropriate behaviour in the public interest underlies

every successful public relations initiative. This means that the public relations 'process' starts with behaviour. Acting in the public interest is an absolute essential for long term success; that's why the public relations professional must have a voice in the decision-making process; it's – or should be – part of the job.'

Public relations is a practice which makes use of communication as it seeks to understand, work with and influence relationships and the behaviour of individuals in groups involved. In this work, expertise in communications in all its aspects, from listening through to understanding the possibilities, limitations and strengths of communications channels

and abilities to work within them, is essential, a starting point for effective practice in public relations but not the end of practice.

Public relations is a strategic management function first and foremost rather than the tactical communication activity that it does become when its contributions to decision-making and planning are implemented.

A management bridge between internal and external perspectives

The role of the public relations practitioner is frequently explored in research in relation to the tension between acting on behalf of the organisation versus acting in the public good. Jim McNamara (2015) suggests that all organisations should build a listening architecture.

Public relations provides the bridge between internal and external aspects of an organisation. Its function is to link the two spheres and this aspect of public relations practice has been explored thoroughly in studies of the roles of so-called 'boundary-spanning' individuals, who work across organisational boundaries – internally and externally – to provide, gather and return information.

The external perspective that public relations practitioners provide to management is critical to the function in its strategic role. To operate optimally, public relations must be able to represent the external content and challenge and extend management views of the external environment, the risks and opportunities it presents.

Elevating the role of public relations in management

The management of relationships

The definitions and terms used to describe the nature of the relationships around an organisation, like the definitions of public relations itself, is also a topic of frequent discussion.

'Stakeholder' tends to be used to describe a known entity to an organisation such as an employee, supplier or customer. Stakeholders have a direct and identifiable relationship with the organisation and should be engaged directly through conversation.

To simplify the terms used, though, it is useful to fall back on a definition of stakeholders – as we have done earlier – as groups affected by or affecting the organisation as it pursues its activities.

Organisations, no matter how much they may seek to conceal their activities, operate in public, the societal context and sphere within which they operate.

As we described earlier, there are choices to be made regarding engagement with groups in the wider social context.

Audience is also used, frequently in marketing rather than public relations, to describe a target demographic with which an organisation wants to engage. This is usually with a view to selling a product or service. It is a misleading term in that it suggests a group of people, like a cinema audience, waiting to be informed or entertained, whereas the groups of interest in public relations practice will be active, concerned with their own interests and making decisions continuously about whether or not they wish to attend to what is being offered to them.

Engagement of public relations in management

Analysis of the boards and management teams of the FTSE 100 by the CIPR found almost half have no director of comms, director of corporate affairs or similar dedicated position at this senior level. It suggests that public relations is not recognised as either a strategic issue or management function.

The situation is markedly different for human resources. The CIPR reported that 80 of the FTSE 100 companies have a dedicated HR figure on their executive leadership team or management committee. The data suggests that the need for devoted senior communications expertise is still not seen as a board level issue by companies.

Public relations was elevated and frequently became part of the management decision-making function within organisations during COVID-19. Management teams recognised that it uniquely had the skills to provide support for rapid change and transformation related to issues such as remote working, supply chains and public engagement. The role of the public relations practitioner as the fixer is a recurring theme in research. It is consistent with the elevated role of practice during the COVID-19 pandemic. The function is called upon by management to help organisations in issues related to crisis and risk.

“Businesses across all sectors face more nuanced internal and external challenges than ever before. Skilled strategic communicators are worth their weight in gold. Plugged into every area of the business, a professional communicator can take a bird’s eye view of the stakeholder environment to deliver powerful insights for leadership.

“In recent years, studies have highlighted the need for emotionally intelligent leaders and executives. Emotional intelligence is a superpower for communications professionals. The best communications professionals listen actively; they have an excellent sense of perspective and an ability to put themselves in the shoes of others.

“These are now fundamental qualities in the modern business environment. That’s why communications professionals are now capable of leading – rather than simply influencing – organisations. Expect more communications professionals to step into Chief Executive roles in the years ahead.

“A new era of business is here, and we’re built to lead it.”

Koray Camgöz, Director of Communications and Marketing, PRCA

Alignment of public relations and management

The optimum situation for the public relations function is close to management. This sees it either as part of the board or management function, or directly reporting to the CEO.

This assertion is supported by a strong body of evidence including the Excellence Study commissioned on behalf of the IABC and led by James Grunig in the 1990s (1992) and the longitudinal European Communication Monitor study conducted from 2007 to 2016.

We know from the research carried out by Grunig and his colleagues that what is required to ensure better public relations practice is where it is fully incorporated into management. Despite the time that has elapsed since the comprehensive research that underpinned the conclusions of the study was conducted, its conclusions remain relevant today.

Senior management appreciation of the full scope of public relations, and preparedness to work with its advice and recommendations

Senior practitioners also understand the full scope of the practice, and are qualified and capable of delivering against its demands

Senior practitioners have credibility with, and close contact with, the dominant coalition within the organisation to provide their advice. An important point here is that the senior practitioner does not necessarily have to have a formal role in senior management, a so-called seat on the board, but they do have to have access

Table: Optimal conditions for the alignment of public relations and management

Tension between technical and managerial roles

Well established in research is the transition in professional practices from technical to managerial work, where entrants to a professional practice will at first learn and apply technical skills and later move on to supervising projects, teams and resources involving several individuals using those skills.

As a newer practice, public relations still does not allow for the smooth transition from the use of technical skills to more managerial roles. The insistence that public relations is a communication practice is a limitation on progress to management – it amounts to an invitation to view practitioners as technicians.

Additionally, the move into management is not clearly signposted: how do practitioners, skilled in communication techniques, acquire knowledge and confidence in the use of management techniques? There may be a reluctance to look outside the practice, to spend time

in executive development courses and with managers in other areas of management, to learn that the tasks of management share common features – for example, campaign management in public relations can be improved through a study of principles of project management used widely in other areas of management.

This tension between technical and managerial roles can be addressed if the full scope of the practice is accepted and recognised as providing opportunity for career development. The opportunity can be taken up by seeking out suitable preparation for the next stages in public relations careers, such as advanced study as a preliminary to moving to more senior management roles.

Scope of the public relations role in management

The scope of the role of public relations within management is set out below.

Planning and management

Strategic thinking and planning require an understanding of the scope of an organisation's activities, its environment, the resources available to it and the possibilities it can pursue, looking towards the longer term.

Public relations, concerned with how relationships need to develop into the future and with anticipation of opportunities and disruption, is future oriented.

The contextual intelligence and understanding of relationships is unique to public relations practice within management. The practitioner can provide a reflective perspective supporting management with scenario planning, testing scenarios and modifying a plan.

Leadership

Overlooked in modern business leadership and leadership in other organisations is what can be described as the political dimension to modern leadership. Leaders must think in terms of winning support for their intentions, as political leaders have to think of leading

public opinion and gaining support through the electoral process. Modern leaders are a lightning rod for criticism within their organisations and from groups outside. Managers need training to prepare them for this aspect of their role, as the chief executive of BP recognised as he considered his response to the difficulties he encountered in leading the company's response to the Deepwater Horizon disaster in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010. Public relations supports management in understanding shareholders and communicating with society.

Coach and mentor

There is a specific aspect of leadership where practitioners act as mentors to management. The two roles share many complementary attributes. The practitioner can support management in understanding an operating environment and the development and delivery of communication activities. Part of this support now involves helping with understanding of relationships that are mediated through technology and social media, where senior management may not be digitally literate or confident in interactions through social media.

Governance

The public relations function has always had a key role in regulation and reporting around issues and legislation of public concern. The rising expectation of governance and the emergence of Environmental, Social and Governance has brought this aspect of the role to the fore.

The public relations function

The role and contribution of public relations within management is set out below.

Horizon scanning

Since Howard Chase identified issues management as part of a restructuring of management practice in 1976, the processes of issues management have been taken into practice, in particular the need for horizon scanning. This involves the use of techniques to recognise and monitor issues at the earliest stage in their emergence, so that responses can be planned accordingly.

Technology and the possibilities for monitoring discussion through social media have added to earlier techniques for horizon scanning, such as social research, tracking discussion in specialist publications, think tanks and pressure groups.

Decision-making

The results from horizon scanning and from maintaining close contact with important groups create a view of the social environment that can be fed into decision-making – if decision-makers have made this possible and are willing to work with the material provided.

Planning

In turn, information gathered in this way contributes to planning, and for the activities that need to be undertaken with important groups to make it more likely that objectives will be achieved.

Stakeholder engagement

Activities undertaken are aimed at engagement with important groups, to build relationships with them, to listen to their concerns and – as may be required to achieve objectives – to try to influence them to win their support or minimise their opposition.

Crisis management

One of the central questions in public relations practice relates, as we suggested earlier, to what may happen to disrupt relationships, with all the consequences that disruption may have. Crises – exceptional and difficult situations characterised by threat, high levels of stress and the need to act quickly – have shown how essential public relations, well-practised, can be. Experience during the management of COVID-19 bears this out and it has led to the practice developing deep expertise in crisis management.

Cost savings and efficiency

Less dramatically, public relations can lead to cost savings and efficiency, towards better use of public services, limiting unnecessary demands on these, and towards clearer communication and better relationships with customers and investors.

Measurement

The perspective taken in this paper refocused questions of measurement on to the quality of relationships, and on to the behaviour of individuals making up groups of interest. It also points to a need to measure the effectiveness of public relations management in making its contribution to decision-making,

planning and the overall management of the organisations which it serves. There is recognition of the need to judge the practice in these terms in large groups of practitioners such as the Government Communication Service in the UK, where the objective of the practice is seen as behaviour change.

Problem solving and conflict resolution

This is a rich area for investigation. Other more established professional areas will have a clearer idea of what constitutes problems in their areas of practice – medicine, law, architecture. Seeing public relations as a part of management helps to clarify what may or may not constitute public relations problems.

Expressed in terms of the relationships that need to be in place for progress to be made, with groups and organisations behaving to realise objectives, problems go beyond whether or not communication links are in place and whether or not messages are moving through them for predictable results. The solution to problems in relationships will involve the identification and conciliation of interests – to work for the mutually beneficial relationships mentioned earlier, and more attention to conflict resolution.

Specialist areas of public relations in management

In this section we have set out the role of specialist areas of public relations in management.

Employee engagement

An important function of the public relations role is the management of relationships with co-workers. Internal communications create the conditions for an organisation to operate and its employees to work with greater levels of engagement, motivation and productivity.

Public affairs

Returning to the graphic visualisation of important relationships, public affairs is concerned with the relationships that develop around public policy questions and issues, with groups such as pressure and interest groups, regulators, government at all levels, think tanks and the media. Public affairs practitioners – it is debatable whether they are regarded as specialists within the broader practice of public relations – provide valuable insights into policy makers' thinking to contribute to management thinking, decision-making and planning.

Community relations

We have already emphasised how organisations survive and thrive in their social context, acknowledging obligations to important groups. Among these are the communities in which the organisations operate. These relationships, at the local level, are vital to continuing operations, where organisations may be seeking employees from among the local community or may be trying to avoid conflict that may bring operations to a stop. Examples of the importance of local communities are found in the experience of oil companies operating in countries such as Nigeria, or of nuclear power facilities in several countries.

Media relations and use of social media

As we described earlier, there are choices to be made regarding engagement with groups in the wider social context. This may be through media, channels of communication, which are within practice a distinct area of study. Media may be paid for, through advertising or the publication of content paid for by the organisation, or access to them may be earned. Shared media have emerged as social media, which have enlarged the range of possibilities for communication. In some cases, channels may be owned by the organisation itself. Media possibilities are captured in the Paid, Earned, Shared and Owned (PESO) model.

Investor relations

Financial public relations is another specialist area of practice, changing as expectations of companies move on from delivering shareholder value to meeting the interests of a longer list of stakeholders and additional obligations towards the environment, social responsibility and better governance. Investor judgements will be coloured in future by information about how well companies are meeting these broader responsibilities. Financial public relations plays its part in helping companies meet these responsibilities.

Marketing and public relations

Too often, the value of public relations as a management function is lost when public relations is subsumed into marketing. It provides a broader perspective to decision-makers, which is complementary – and sometimes a corrective – to that of marketing. High level decision-making benefits from both perspectives, argued through on a case-by-case basis.

Closing the gap between public relations and management

There is no barrier to entry to working in public relations. Anyone can decide to work in the sector and call themselves a practitioner. There is little to distinguish it from the career path into hairdressing, pet day care or an estate agency. This is not to belittle any of these roles or their contribution to society, but it is a potential explanation for the failure of public relations to realise its potential both as a management discipline and function.

The characteristic and credibility of public relations practitioners is an important factor in the inclusion or exclusion of the public relations function in decision making within an organisation. This is partly due to misconceptions about the scope of public relations and prejudice against the practice mentioned earlier.

"The public relations industry is a recognised success story and yet, our fellow professionals and the public view us among the least trusted professions. It's no longer acceptable for us to be talking about public relations as a management discipline if we're not prepared to demonstrate it beyond our business performance.

"With challenges professional services face - whether automation or the rise of populism - the public is increasingly looking for some professional reassurance. Research by the Professional Associations Research Network (PARN) finds two-thirds (65%) would trust a professional more if they knew they were a member of a professional body, nearly half (48%) of the public have checked whether someone offering services to them belonged to a professional body, and the majority (71%) would trust a professional more if they knew they were a chartered professional practitioner."

“Yet we continue to see low levels of qualified and accredited practitioners. Why should business leaders take us seriously if we don't take ourselves seriously? If we want to close the gap with management we should start by collectively and electively raising our own professional standards.”

Alastair McCapra, CEO, CIPR

A study of CEO attitudes by recruitment agency VMA Group (2016) examined expectations of the public relations function. It identified a series of shortfalls:

1. Lack of business knowledge on the part of practitioners
2. Inability to deal with internal politics
3. Over reliance on technical skills
4. Gaps in domain knowledge and business capabilities
5. Personal attributes

Public relations practice has many of the attributes of a profession albeit practitioners commit themselves on a voluntary basis. It can be practised in a professional context, but it does not meet all the criteria to be recognised as a professional management discipline. The areas of competency and skill set out in the VMA study provide a solid basis for learning and development for any practitioner seeking to develop their role in management.

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