Rethinking power and influence in public relations: A case of reluctant leadership?

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Abstract
Public relations practitioners have been ascribed to wield immense invisible power for ‘manufacturing consent’ (Stauber & Rampton, 1995) or ‘creating organizational culture’ (Cheney & Dionisopoulos, 1989). And yet, practitioners perceive their power and influence are limited unless they are members of the dominant coalition. This paper confirms previous research that practitioners’ access to and successful influence of the CEO and senior management bestow them an aura of power. This paper also shows that while practitioners perceive they exercise upward influence, they tend to resist extending their influence. This paper argues that practitioners’ self-perceptions as compliance managers, rather than conscience leaders, constrain them from using their influence, thus denying them the opportunity to ‘do the right thing’ for their organisations.

Introduction
Several writers have alluded to the immense power public relations practitioners exercise in ‘manufacturing consent’ (Stauber & Rampton, 1995) or in creating organisational culture (Cheney & Dionisopoulos, 1989). Similarly, many scholars have argued that public relations practitioners should be the organisational conscience or ethical advisors of their organisations (Bowen, 2007). But do practitioners really possess enough power and influence to affect behavioural change in their organisations? Can practitioners use their power and influence in a leadership role to
advise their organisations to ‘do the right thing?’ Do practitioners perceive themselves as having organisational power and influence regardless of their membership in the dominant coalition? Based on the results of interviews with Australian communication practitioners, this paper argues that practitioners’ self-perceptions as compliant managers constrain them to use their power and influence to enact more leader-like conscience roles.

**Defining practitioner power and influence**

Public relations and communication practitioners are perceived to wield a lot of power in organisations by virtue of their knowledge, position and their work as ‘relationship managers’ and boundary spanners. But what defines power for practitioners? While different perspectives define power depending on their focus for example, resource dependency for systems-rationality, and gendered systems in the feminist perspective, this paper will use Berger and Reber’s definition of power as the ”the ability to get things done by affecting the perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, opinions, decisions, statements, and behaviours of others” (2006, p.5). Influence on the other hand represents an “effort to change the other’s behavior or thinking” (Kelman, 2001, p.12) or as some scholars suggest, the process by which power is exercised. Nevertheless, for this paper, power and influence will be used interchangeably.

Practitioners often regard dominant coalition membership, or positional power, as a necessary condition to practice ethical and strategic decision-making (Berger & Reber, 2006, pp. 5-6) and engender organisational change. Despite research showing that dominant coalition membership does not guarantee power, influence or being listened to, it provides practitioners with the ‘veil’ of power, access and the opportunity to express one’s voice among the key decision makers ((Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002; Berger & Reber, 2006). This ‘veil’ of power seems to drive practitioners’ fixation to become members of the dominant coalition.

As Cheney, Christensen, Zorn and Ganesh (2004) suggest, communication expertise became a source of power after power shifted from land to capital to “organized expertise” (p.250). They argue that communication practitioners gain power because there are very few individuals with the ability to construct communication and knowledge. Furthermore, if organisational power is the “ability of individuals and
groups to control and shape dominant interpretations of organizational events” (Mumby, 2001, p.595), then a public relations practitioners’ role as a management functionary gives them a clear access to power. And many practitioners have leveraged their communication expertise for access to the boardroom (Berger & Reber, 2006).

While most practitioners are known to exercise their powerful persuasive skills to gain compliance and advocate on behalf of the dominant coalitions, others could use power through resistance and activism (Berger & Reber, 2006; Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002), or to represent marginalised groups (Berger, 2005; Holtzhausen, 2000; Roper, 2005). The question here is how do Australian communication practitioners perceive their roles vis-à-vis their levels of power and influence in their organisations?

Practitioners need to decide whether they will use their power as a means of suppression or as a means of social change. Durham (2005) argues that practitioners can become powerful social actors, and “the opportunity for public relations practitioners is to become conscious of their ability to act for change, alone and together, apart from the working routine (p.33).” He contends that if practitioners see themselves as active agents who are able to engage in dialogue and interpret the crisis from several perspectives, they might be more reflexive and actually redefine the rules that will be more beneficial to society (Durham, 2005, pp. 44-45). Similarly, Moloney (2006) puts the onus back on individual practitioners. He posits that if practitioners practise ethically and reduce “deception in PR messaging”, they can “neutralize” the negative impact of public relations on democracy (pp. 96-97). This enactment of agency implies that practitioners are being socially responsible, ethical, performing their organisational conscience role and thus ‘doing the right thing’.

**Factors affecting practitioner influence**

But what factors affect the communication practitioner’s ability to exercise influence within the organisation? The Excellence Study found that top communicators’ membership in dominant coalitions was instrumental in the communication department’s excellence. However the study also revealed that while membership in the dominant coalition by the top communicator helps within the context of power and
influence, it was not necessary for communication excellence (Dozier, Grunig, L. & Grunig, J. 1995, p.83).

Instead, practitioner’s access to top decision makers and individual attributes such as personal characteristics, relationship building, expertise and opportunity to gain power were found to be sources of organisational influence (Dozier, et al., 1995; Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002). Furthermore, dominant coalition membership was found to be a dangerous threat to the practitioner’s ability to enact an organisational activist role because of the power relationships that could occur in that elite group (Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002). For example, Berger’s study (2005) found that practitioners in the dominant coalition still faced barriers in ‘doing the right thing’ because they faced the pressure of organisational compliance. He cited a public relations executive who expressed difficulty toeing a ‘bad party line’ despite his own disagreement with it.

A study of upward influence among public relations practitioners found that those who based their tactics on rationality, coalition, and assertiveness wielded more organisational influence (O’Neil, 2003). Conversely, practitioners who used ingratiation, or making others feel good or important, did not increase their organisational influence. Furthermore O’Neil’s (2003) study suggests that upward influence comes from a combination of formal – reporting relationships, employee support, organisational role – and informal power – participation in the dominant coalition’s networks, and perceptions of value. The latter is most significant in this paper as it relates to how the dominant coalition perceives the importance of public relations practitioners relative to other employees in the organisation. Although the study respondents were senior public relations practitioners rather than the dominant coalition members, the practitioners’ perceptions of how they are perceived by senior management is useful in determining the mindsets of practitioners regarding their own roles.

**Leadership and courage: Using power to do the right thing**

While the Excellence Study found that leadership is one of the characteristics of an excellent organisation (not a public relations practitioner per se), only three other studies have explored the notion of communication and public relations practitioners
as leaders (Farmer, Slater & Wright, 1998; Aldoory, 1998; Aldoory & Toth, 2004). Many of the references to leadership and public relations are about public relations practitioners working for or working with organisational leaders, rather than being leaders. On the other hand, the leadership literature abounds with references to how leaders need to become excellent communicators (see for example, Barrett, 2006; Hackman & Johnson, 2004). This gap in literature, especially when compared to public relations research on manager-technician roles, exposes the question of whether public relations practitioners perceive themselves in leadership roles.

If leadership is defined to refer to people “who provide a vision and influences others to realize it through non coercive means” (Heifetz, 1994, p.15),” then leadership does not necessarily require positions of authority. As an “activity of a citizen from any walk of life mobilizing people to do something” (Heifetz, 1994, p.20), leadership is not exclusive to top management, and thus allows other influential people to become leaders. In contemporary organisations, cross-functional teams determine leaders by “an individual’s capacity to influence peers and by the needs of the team in any given moment” and can be shared and rotated among organisational members (Pearce & Conger, 2003, p.xi). Based on these definitions of leadership and their seeming influence in organisations, communication practitioners, especially those enacting organisational conscience or ethical advisor roles, seem to fit the leadership criteria. And yet public relations literature has focussed largely on public relations within the manager-technician context (Moss & Green, 2001).

Furthermore, public relations and organisational communication literature has hardly discussed courage within the context of leadership and followership (Jablin, 2006). In unpacking the concept of courage, he describes the range of terms associated with it including ‘doing the right thing’, ‘conscience’ and ‘commitment’. In defining courage, Jablin (2006) returns to its Latin roots of ‘having heart’ and notes that fear and risk appear in most definitions. He cites other writers in distinguishing between managerial courage—an expression of ideas different from the current consensus (Hornstein, 1986 cited in Jablin, 2006, p. 102) —and moral courage—as the capacity to overcome fear or shame and humiliation in order to admit one’s mistakes, to confess a wrong, to reject evil conformity, to denounce injustice, and also to defy immoral or imprudent orders” (Miller, 2000 cited in Jablin, 2006, p. 107). If Greek
philosophers say that courage, a virtue along with knowledge, is required to achieve the state of *eudaimonia* – which literally means the ‘good guardian spirit’ – then it seems reasonable to expect courage from practitioners enacting the organisational conscience role.

**Methodology**

Interviews with Australian communication practitioners were undertaken to find out their perceptions of their power and influence within their organisations. Respondents were selected through two membership association lists, based on the following criteria: that their organisations published their values statements on their websites; they were in-house communication practitioners; and, they were willing to participate in the study. A total of 30 practitioners from Melbourne and Sydney were interviewed, the results of which were transcribed, coded and subjected to thematic analysis. Open coding was used by analysing, noting and marking each line of the interview transcripts for a category (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p.219). These coding techniques revealed several themes within each of the questions, and were then integrated as required.

The respondents were employed in large corporations representing various sectors including manufacturing, retail, finance and communications. Half of the respondents were between 35-44 years but more than half had at least a bachelor’s degree and an annual income of more than $100,000. They had an average of 16 years experience and most respondents reported to a supervisor who reported to the CEO. Only six reported directly to the CEO/MD and one had a dual report to the CEO. Interestingly, only one respondent had the term ‘public relations’ in his title. Pseudonyms are used herein to protect their anonymity.

**Results:**

*Senior management are influence targets of practitioners*

To examine how the respondents perceived their power within their organisation, they were asked the extent to which they think they were successful in influencing key stakeholders in the organisation – namely, the CEO, the Board, senior management, middle management, employees and external stakeholders – to accept their recommendations. They were asked to use a scale: 5 (a great deal), 4 (a good deal), 3
(some), 2 (a little), 1 (not at all). Where respondents insisted on answering “not applicable”, their responses were coded a ‘0’. Table 1 summarises the responses of 25 respondents.\(^1\)

Combining the responses (‘a great deal’ and ‘a good deal’) reveals that most of the respondents perceived they have been generally successful in influencing the CEO, the senior and middle management and the employees. Interestingly, many of the respondents felt they have not influenced the Board and a good number of them said either they were not at all successful or did not intend to influence them at all.

Table 1: Summary of respondents’ perceptions of their success at influence N=25

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influence with….</th>
<th>A great deal (5)</th>
<th>A good deal (4)</th>
<th>Some (3)</th>
<th>A little (2)</th>
<th>Not at all (1)</th>
<th>N/A</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CEO</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior management</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle management</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employees</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External stakeholders</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Board</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The two respondents who said they have been successful with their influence efforts with the Board are in fact the two most senior practitioners interviewed, who report directly to the CEO. However most respondents in this study identified the CEO, senior management and middle management as their key ‘audience’ for their persuasive and influence efforts. Combine this finding with the respondents’ relatively high degree of influence among employees relative to their success with external stakeholders would reveal a seeming shift towards a more internal communication focus.

\(^1\) These questions were only added in the final version of the questionnaire, after the interviews with the first five respondents had been completed, that is why the total number of respondents was 25. The additional questions were sent to five respondents by email but no response was received.
Upward influence prevalent among practitioners

The respondents were then asked in which areas of the business they had the most, and the least, influence. Table 2 briefly summarises their responses.

Table 2: Respondents’ perceptions of business areas they most influence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of business</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CEO/Leadership</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own department/work group</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Across all units</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The respondents’ perceived influence in these areas may be credited to their proximity with the CEO/Leadership team, their expertise, and their tenured position. The respondents who nominated having the most influence with the CEO/Leadership group credits their influence on their relationships with them, the familiarity, and the proximity of their working and reporting relationships.

For example, Kara pointed to her frequency of contact with and ‘duty’ to the executive: “… because I have the most contact, because my role is to serve them first so perhaps it’s an issue of familiarity”. Karen talked about the close working relationships she has with the leadership team, which includes the managing directors, the regional president and the HR Director. A close reporting relationship with the HR Director is the reason for her organisational influence, “I wouldn’t have experienced that kind of influence in other organisational structures because we weren’t together… I know it has many challenges but it also has some benefits as well”.

Mitch echoed the importance of good relationships the communication group has with the Managing Director’s office, “I think where we’re most persuasive, we’ve got very good relations with the general managers or the executive team and so I think we have really good vibes at the higher level in terms of what we’re trying to do.”

While admitting to being influential with the CEO and Executive team, Marge preferred the word ‘support’ to ‘influence’ and trades on the CEO’s support when she makes a recommendation or encounters resistance:
Our CEO told us that internal communications is the most important thing that Corporate Affairs does. And I have his full support in anything that I do in terms of, if I need, or are encountering a blockage, I can go to him. So I was thinking (if) he agrees with me, he’ll support me… influence is probably the wrong word… a good support… If it’s a big change that would just have to put the line guys going in and saying, “I believe we should be doing this,” more often than not, they take what we say and they do what we say. And where that doesn’t happen, that’s where (name), our CEO “Well, no, I know that I would generally agree with what you’ve got to say so I’ll support you” so across the company, we have a reasonable level of influence.

Influence among one’s workgroup was based on one’s expertise in reputation management, crisis and issues management, and employee communication. For example, Sam credited his influence on his responsibility in corporate reputation, his technical skills, plus his close relationship with the group executive:

…my areas of influence mainly revolve around my area of responsibility in that anything involves the (company) reputation in a capital R sense involves me. So all of the senior personnel, both in the businesses and the corporate sense, will come to me for my direction and advice on anything that might impact on the (company) reputation. Certainly the Managing Director, more the group executives, have quite a bit to do with the Chairman, and (name) will seek my advice around issues particularly at times when he will be speaking on behalf of the organisation like the AGM. I write his speech for the AGM, I write his message in the annual report and if he’s, for example, he’s having a lunch and he’s hosting politicians or media, he’ll seek my advice. The other board members, I don’t have anything to do with them in a personal sense. But all of the group executive members, I will have a close relationship.

Other respondents attributed their influence to their expert contributions in crisis and issues management, marketing communication, and corporate social responsibility. Kim believes her employee communication role and the small Head Office team enable her upward influence. She recounted how she would sit back and say that “as an employee I wouldn’t be happy with that, that doesn’t sound quite right… we need to write it a little bit better or direct it a little bit better” and ask him to go back to the executive meeting with her comments. She admitted that they enjoy the luxury of being able to go into the MD’s office and say, “that’s not true,” or “have you seen this” or “could we cut that”.

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The few respondents who believed they have most influence across the organisation credit their ability to work across all levels of the organisation to their position and tenure (Tom for his seniority and Caitlin for her ‘new insights’), and their work in internal/employee communication (Kim, Tess, Fiona).

Trading expertise, access and consultative style for influence

When the respondents were given a list of choices of why they think they were influential, they mainly chose those that relate to their professional skills and knowledge as their perceived sense of influence. Table 3 summarises the respondents’ perceived source of influence.

Table 3: Respondents’ perceived sources of influence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Frequency*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expertise – amount of knowledge in the area</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional experience – number of years working in area</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrated performance in company – reliability</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellent communication skills – persuasive, articulate, to the point</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrity – trustworthiness</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seniority – length of service in the company</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic qualifications</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Respondents were allowed to provide multiple responses.

Organisational influence seems to stem from some respondents’ problem-solving expertise. Kim rues how people who don’t listen eventually “come running to you… and you’ll fix up the problem anyway.” Sam, however, discourages this by warning his colleagues, “if they involve me in these issues, I in a sense take responsibility for them… if they don’t and it blows up, then they’re the one who’s responsible and accountable. It doesn’t mean that they don’t share the responsibility but it does mean to say that they have to share the accountability as well”.

Five respondents reported their collaborative and consultative styles as sources of organisational influence. Patricia articulated the sentiments of the others, as well as those who identify understanding the stakeholders’ needs.
I think it’s probably more my personal style, it’s to be consultative and understand what their needs are, not be… because I think that’s the problem in the past is, that’s the problem in a lot of corporates, people see you as the centre and say “oh, it’s corporate again putting stuff on me.” Whereas what I tried to do is be a bit of an interface between corporate and those people so that I understand what you want and I understand what they want, and together we got to find a solution to meet those needs…

Understanding the business language, the customer focus and the complexities of the business were also mentioned as sources of organisational influence.

One’s access to the CEO or reporting to an influential manager seemed to be a critical factor in the perceptions of the respondents’ influence. Paul explained the quid pro quo relationship between CEO access and the individual’s attributes.

Some of these figures in terms of being able to act directly and influence and so on can be supported by access to the President or the Chairman so it’s like a Catch 22. So if you have those attributes, it gains you access. If you have that access, then those attributes are respected. You are perceived to have that influence.

Similarly, Sam admitted that his access to the CEO lends to his ‘aura’ of influence. “I’m sure that people are well aware that I have direct access to the managing director so they know that on these matters I carry the imprimatur of the Managing Director.”

Julie, on the other hand, expressed her strategy of influencing the CEO as her way of ensuring her ability to influence the organisation.

If you want to influence the whole organisation, then I’d work with the CEO. Because he perceives the importance of communication and a number of activities we do with (name of department), he also sees them as priorities; as well as his own communication with staff.

In summary, respondents attributed their organisational influence on a combination of professional expertise and personal attributes, and access to the dominant coalition.
Limits and potentials of extending influence

When asked about the areas of least influence, the respondents reported areas where they had the least knowledge or expertise (e.g., logistics, finance, operations) or no existing relationships (e.g., shop floors, call processing centres, exploration).

When they were asked whether they wanted to increase their influence in those areas, 15 respondents said ‘no’ and 10 respondents said ‘yes’. Those who did not want any more influence reasoned: their lack of time, expertise and knowledge; there is no need; or, the organisational structure and job differentiations do not allow for additional responsibility. Three respondents stressed that their current responsibilities were already demanding enough that they would rather not extend their scope of responsibilities.

Not making a difference or a big enough impact was a common theme emerging from those who preferred not to increase their influence. For example, Chloe said, “(I’m) busy enough already. Not areas where I can make a big contribution.” Kara concurred, “I have no time, nor the scope to be able to do... I don’t see the need to get involved unless you’re going to make a big difference, just for the sake of it, doesn’t do anybody any good.” Paul weighed up what additional influence means on efficiency, “It’s really a matter of making best use of resource but in areas where it’s unlikely to make any fundamental change to the organisation, it’s no value”. He said that for his company of 4500 employees, it is best to deal with the top 100, who are the opinion leaders.

Organisational structure and the practitioners’ willingness seem to determine if they want to extend their influence. For example, Sam disclosed that his organisation’s restructure discouraged them to work beyond the scope of their job: “…people are forced to focus on the things that they can really do something about. And you’re encouraged not to get involved in other areas. So I’d only want to do those things I can help in.” Other respondents echo similar sentiments: “we are very separate, we’ve got different jobs to do. I’ve been working with them on the annual report but they’re just giving me the information. They’ve got the figures and they’re accountable,” (Caitlin); “we’ve got no reason to be involved,” (Hailey); and, “there’s someone else
whose job it is to influence those areas... someone else within corporate relations” (Mandy).

However, the potential to impact on the business through values change seem to drive the respondents who expressed an interest in extending their influence. Marge provided a commercial reason, to help “them to understand how our business is growing and how this fits into our strategy and basically, where we want to be as a company, is really important.” Justine meanwhile wanted to increase her influence in the operations area because she thinks it’s a “key leverage point for the change programme” and she needs to lobby their support. Patricia, on the other hand, believed getting more influence with one side of the business which still doesn’t see community relations as a core part of their business, is part of her being ‘more effective’. She ruminated, “If we could be more influential then hopefully we can have some better outcomes”. She felt that the business does not “operate using the values as their guideline”.

Employee engagement is vital in the area of organisational values according to Kalli and Donna. For example, Kalli said, “The only thing is you can have separate values on paper but if your engaged workforce only goes this far... I think there’s a lot of opportunity to engage our workforce. And I feel that my role is partly to do that.” Donna says that values and behaviours are difficult concepts to understand “in writing and live in the best of times” so “we have to really help people to understand what they are, why we have them and how to make them live. Right down through the business as far as we can go.”

To summarise, the majority of the respondents preferred not to extend their influence because they perceived that their lack of expertise, lack of time, and their job descriptions would not allow them to make a huge impact anyway. Meanwhile, the respondents who wanted to extend their influence believed that they can become change agents in the area of organisational culture and values. These responses support Scott-Ladd and Marshall’s (2004) conclusion that employees’ views on the gains of participation in decision making are negated by the accompanying increase in workload.
Discussion: Content with power, reluctant to lead?

The results presented in this paper support previous research that expertise, access to the dominant coalition, and personal attributes contribute to practitioner power and influence within organisations. However this paper also reveals a paradox. While the respondents successfully enact upward influence toward the dominant coalition, most do not seem comfortable extending their influence beyond their current role and expertise. This finding suggests that the practitioners’ perceptions of their roles as management functionaries determine how they will exercise their power and influence within their organisations. As Berger (2005) found in his study, public relations executives faced pressures of organisational compliance despite being members of the dominant coalition. And even so, these professionals are constrained to do the right thing even within the inner circle (Berger, 2005).

Similarly, this research revealed that positional power is not a sufficient condition for leadership, influence and social change. As the results reveal, the respondents who wished to extend their influence beyond the scope of their roles were interested to engage employees in organisational value and culture change. While the practitioners have to contend with structural and cultural obstacles to enact value change, they believe that using their personal attributes – conscientiousness, diplomacy, reliability, truthfulness and integrity – gives them a certain level of organisational influence and power.

This level of organisational influence presents a clear opportunity for practitioners to extend their managerial roles to leadership roles. Having the ear of the CEO, having influence across organisational work groups and possessing specialist knowledge and expertise offer prime conditions to enact a leadership role as defined by organisational scholars (Heifetz, 1994; Pearce & Conger, 2003). But it seems practitioners are reluctant to pursue a leadership role.

This reluctance was exemplified when Patricia discussed the issue of power and job performance: “Sometimes you can do your job better if you give up some of your power.” When asked to explain, Patricia said that giving up some of the power can make communication practitioners do a more effective job because they can depend
on other people to contribute. In this instance she referred to the concept of ownership and accountability, which other respondents also mentioned.

Initially Patricia’s view about “giving up power” seemed like she was ‘surrendering power’ and in some way, giving up her chance to make a difference to make changes to her company. However, when pressed further about her response, Patricia clarified that she wanted to be, and has been, involved in making changes in her company. But she qualified her response that communication practitioners can actually make changes and influence the business depending on the mindsets of the people within the organisation. In her case she had the support of three business unit heads who ask for and take her advice, a situation, however, that doesn’t apply in other parts of the organisation.

To emphasise the power-control dimension in public relations roles, it might be useful to distinguish between ‘surrender’ and ‘devolution’ of power. The *Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines surrender as “hand over; relinquish possession of especially on compulsion or demand; give into another’s power or control” (Moore, 2004, p.1438), while devolution is defined as “the delegation of power, especially from a central government to local or regional administration” (Moore, 2004, p.318). The term ‘devolution’ implies that all parties have agreed that power will be distributed from the main ‘office’ to the ‘other offices’, and as such, all parties were involved in negotiation or a dialogue on how to reorganise the power structures, or what Berger (2005) referred to as the ‘power with’ dimension. And during this dialogue the parties could have been involved in an argument, a debate, and even a confrontation. On the other hand, the term ‘surrender’ suggests that one either gave up without a fight or submitted to a stronger force of law or position.

Furthermore, devolving power aims to involve other members of the organisation, redistribute the power among more people, which gives more people the opportunity to get involved and contribute to the organisational processes. On the other hand, one who surrenders power seems to do so to appease the people around or above the individual, and sees this action as a short-term solution that prioritises his or her survival and self-interest.
However, whether practitioners surrender or devolve power, this paper posits that public relations practitioners do not seem to pursue roles beyond the manager-technician dichotomy, nor recognise themselves as ‘thought leaders’. The problem seems to be ensconced in practitioners’ limited awareness of, and reluctance to develop, their leadership potential.

**Courageous leadership and followership among communication practitioners**

This study illustrated that communication practitioners engage in courageous acts of ‘confronting’ their superiors. Respondents recounted several robust discussions with their superiors, including their CEOs. Changes to organisational processes are areas where some communication practitioners can get involved and influence in a positive way. But doing so requires a certain amount of courage from the individuals. As this paper showed, one’s credentials, expertise, seniority and personality are important in gaining organisational influence. These personal attributes include diplomacy skills, a positive attitude, and courage. Courage is required not only to identify areas which need to be addressed or corrected but also to articulate these issues and open up the discussion on those possible issues. Oftentimes, the respondents are put in positions which test their integrity and loyalties and many of the respondents mentioned having to put up a ‘good fight’ to convince their superiors as to why their suggestions should be heeded.

Influencing one’s superiors to gain support, moving beyond one’s assigned responsibilities, and taking charge when required have been previously referred to as ‘leading up’ (Useem, 2001, cited in Hackman & Johnson, 2004, p.337). These ‘leading up’ activities reflect some of the current and potential roles enacted by the respondents. Knowledge of what is right and what is wrong is not sufficient for a practitioner to exercise a leadership role. One must also have the courage to act on what is considered wrong. In the same manner, organisations need to display courage in allowing non-traditional and innovative ways to receive feedback from their employees. As organisations of two respondents learned the hard way, the dependence on regular management channels to cascade information upward did not work because middle managers tended to select, filter and pass on only the good news because of the view that bad news reflects on their performance as managers.
Courage is viewed as the “most important virtue for followers” as it is for leaders (Kidder, 1994, cited in Hackman & Johnson, 2004; Jablin, 2006). Courage is required when assuming responsibility, serving, challenging, participating in transformation, and in leaving the organisation.

If public relations practitioners wish to enact an ethical and socially responsible role for 21st century practice, they must think of themselves as leaders who exercise courage and use their power and influence with senior management to ‘do the right thing’.

References


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