



Developing a Preliminary Model of Situational PR Leadership: Empirical Evidence from Singapore

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Abstract

Most public relations (PR) leadership studies identify leadership attributes without contextualization to the profession. The purpose of this study is to investigate specific functions and behaviors of PR leaders in relation to their professional contexts (i.e. routine or non-routine) and organizational positions (i.e. decision-making or not). Three online focus groups were conducted with twelve PR leaders in Singapore. Findings revealed that leadership for PR decision-making positions included being proponents of their organization's values and mission under routine circumstances, and effective, empathetic and ethical spokespersons enforcing a consistent message under non-routine circumstances. Leadership for PR in non-decision-making positions included serving as advocates of the PR profession under routine circumstances, and organizational supporters ensuring a consistent message under non-routine circumstances. This study contributes to the current PR leadership literature as a preliminary model of situational PR leadership is proposed. Findings also confirm a growing need for PR leaders to be active in dominant coalitions, holding important positions no lesser than leaders of other corporate functions.

Key words: public relations, leadership, situational, position, contingency

Introduction

While leadership has long been studied in management and psychology disciplines, it was not until recently that PR researchers attempted to study leadership specifically in relation to the field of PR and corporate communication. These scholars mostly agree that leadership in PR is an area of study that is underdeveloped, “little researched,” and “often overlooked” (Berger & Meng, 2014, p. 3). Werder and Holtzhausen (2009) call it “an area of scholarship that has received little attention” (p. 404) and is “minimally explored” (p. 407). Though more attention has been given to the study of PR leadership recently, the trait approach is more commonly used, with transformational leadership being emphasized (Men, 2014). Most studies of PR leadership, in other words, merely attempt to identify ideal PR leadership traits out of the organizational and professional context of PR.

Public relations practitioners versus public relations leaders

“Managers are people who do things right and leaders are people who do the right thing (Bennis & Nanus, 1985, p. 21).” In the study of leadership, there has been differentiation made between managers and leaders. Similarly, in the study of the PR profession, it is important to note the difference between a PR practitioner and a PR leader. Public relations scholars generally agree that there are two major roles in this profession: communication technicians and communication managers (Wright, 1995). For purpose of this study, we define PR practitioners, or communication technicians, as those who perform their duties at technical level while PR leaders are those who are in managerial capacity, are able to make decisions within their department and/or are able to influence the dominant coalition. While these PR practitioners and managers take on different roles in their organizations, they could exercise their leadership in different ways and we hope to explore these different leadership styles. Gleaning from various definitions of PR leadership, we conceptualize PR leadership in this study as the ability of PR managers to manage a group of organizational stakeholders towards achieving a common goal, establishing positive relationships beyond the bottom line of merely getting their fundamental tasks completed. Despite this understanding, the question still remains: what specific leadership attributes do PR managers need to develop in relation to their situational contexts of PR profession?

Review of Literature

Public relations leadership has been studied in relation to various factors, including gender, culture, leadership styles, personality traits and behaviors of both leader and follower. It has also been studied in relation to situations, with scholars trying to explain leadership using the contingency approach. In this section, two major areas from previous studies on PR leadership are discussed. First, we summarize studies that investigated factors affecting PR leadership. Second, we depict the trail of PR leadership studies from traits to style and contingency approach.

Factors affecting public relations leadership

Gender. One of the factors that have been studied in PR leadership is gender. As like all other fields, gender and its perceptions affect the study of PR and of leadership. Aldoory’s (1998) study, for instance, found that the feminization of the PR profession has drawn some attention to how gender can affect leadership in this field. Dozier and Broom (1995) conducted a survey comparing the salaries and positions of male and female PR practitioners, and how they evolved from 1979 to 1991. Though males were given more opportunities for leadership and

generally received high salaries, this trend was reduced to an insignificant level around 1991, as compared to 1979. Their study showed that gender might have influenced PR leadership decades ago, but over time, as the world begins to give greater legitimacy to the role of women in society, this difference has been reduced till it is almost negligible. In another study, Aldoory and Toth (2004) determined how gender affects the nature of leadership in PR and how leadership was perceived. They found that there were little differences in how men and women perceived PR leaders – they both preferred transformational leaders. They also found that men considered themselves leaders and disagreed that women made better leaders, though leaders of both genders can be of equal capability. There was an overall preference for women leaders because of the feminine aspects of the PR field. However, there is still a trend of men getting better opportunities at leadership than women. In short, gender has been a factor affecting PR leadership over the years, but with evolving gender perceptions that now create more acceptability for women to be in leadership roles, the gender bias is dissolving to a point that it can almost be negligible. Though studies show that gender differences do exist in PR leadership, the differences are usually found to be insignificant (Choi & Choi, 2009). As Meng, Berger, Gower, and Heyman (2012) state, “major differences between leadership in public relations and leadership in other fields were not different based on gender” (p. 32). We can therefore see that gender differences may have impacted PR leadership to some extent in the past, but it is less critical now.

Culture. Cultural values certainly affect how PR leadership is perceived. Different cultures affect the lifestyle and thinking of people in many aspects, and PR leadership is no exception. For example, Shin, Heath, and Lee (2011) surveyed how culture creates differences in the leadership styles of PR professionals in United States (US) and South Korea. Results showed that characteristics and functions such as “engaging in skillful communication”, “thinking strategically”, “recognizing problems” and “coordinating communication plans” (p. 178) were generally agreed by both groups as important for a PR professional, but US professionals significantly perceived overall leadership functions as more important than Korean professionals. These researchers therefore concluded: “culture accounts for leadership characteristics and functions of strategic or effective communication competency” (p. 182), and that “leadership behaviors and actions are inevitably tied to culture” (p. 175). Wu (2010) surveyed 104 Taiwanese PR practitioners to investigate culture and gender influences on leadership styles. It was found that while PR practitioners from the west significantly preferred transformational leadership above transactional leadership, Taiwanese practitioners have high preferences for both transformational and transactional leadership, leaning only slightly more towards transformational leadership. Also, the way transformational leadership is operationalized was somewhat different in Taiwan, with more emphasis being placed on collective than individualized considerations. These two studies illustrate that PR leadership is influenced by culture, as culture shapes the way people do and perceive things from young, and defines their value system to some extent, beyond the basic senses of right and wrong. Cultural diversity also affects crisis communication management, with many professionals feeling that they are unprepared to handle the challenges of a multicultural crisis (Fatima Oliveira, 2013). Public relations practitioners are generally aware that cultural differences pose a challenge to their work, and also to their leadership, especially at an international level.

Public relations leadership traits, behaviors, style and approach

Personality traits and behavior. Primarily, previous studies investigated factors affecting PR leadership and attempted to extract the traits and behaviors of PR leader as their primary goals. The focus of the trait approach is to identify attributes or qualities that PR leaders possess, and how these translate to actual behaviors and actions that help them fulfill their job function. For instance, an online survey of over 200 PR senior executives, designed to explore what leadership means to them and what they should possess to be effective, showed that

they typically valued these three key leadership traits: self-insight, visionary ability, and team collaboration ability (Meng, Berger, & Heyman, 2011). A further study was then conducted to understand the important qualities of excellent PR leadership (Meng et al., 2012). A survey of 222 PR mid- and senior-level PR executives revealed that “strategic decision-making capability”, “ability to solve problems and produce desired results”, and “communication knowledge and expertise” (p. 30) were considered the three most important qualities. Building on these two studies, Meng and Berger (2013) proceeded to define constructs that would lead to effective communication and PR leadership. Their online survey of 384 mid- and senior-level PR professionals revealed that these six qualities are essential for PR leadership: “self-dynamics, team collaboration, ethical orientation, relationship building, strategic decision-making capability, and communication knowledge management capability” (p. 158). To understand the role of PR as an organizational management function, a questionnaire was conducted with 159 members of the Public Relations Society of America. It revealed that “providing vision” and “acting as change agents” (p. 300) are behaviors that were most strongly associated with PR leaders (Choi & Choi, 2009). As a result, they advocate that “public relations practitioners eventually need to influence dominant coalitions, namely, the decision making circle” (p. 293). These studies concur on the point that the qualities and behaviors that PR leaders exhibit are associated with higher-level management duties. As revealed in studies that explore PR leadership using the trait approach, qualities like being “visionary” and able to engage in “strategic decision-making” are some of the common expectations of PR leaders. For PR leaders to therefore carry out their function as expected of them, it would require that they have some influence in the dominant coalition.

Styles. Leadership styles are also studied in PR, as scholars attempt to understand what type of leadership styles PR leaders usually adopt, and how the relevant styles are suited to the profession. “Transformational and transactional leadership styles have provided a paradigm for leadership studies since 1990” (Wu, 2010, p. 38). Werder and Holtzhausen (2009) observed that the transactional and transformational leadership styles have been most studied in the studies of organizations and suggested that an inclusive leadership style might be one that is unique to PR leaders. These authors conducted an online survey among the members of the Public Relations Society of America. Their study found that both the transformational and inclusive leadership styles were used in the PR industry, but the transactional leadership style was less commonly applied. Jin (2010) surveyed PR leaders and also found that those leaders significantly preferred transformational leadership to transactional leadership as their leadership style. The study also showed that empathy is a key trait that is required of PR leadership, contributing towards the preference for transformational leadership. Thirdly, a web study of 400 employees conducted by Men (2014) attested to the opinion that transformational leadership was preferred for PR leaders within their own organizations, for it exerts a positive influence on an organization’s internal communication and employee satisfaction. As seen from these studies, it is generally agreed by scholars that transformational leadership is a more preferred approach when it comes to PR leadership, largely because of the nature of the profession. Strategic communication is better conducted using a transformational approach than a transactional approach, as stakeholders need to be motivated to action, not forced into action.

Contingency approach. Another important method of studying PR leadership is the contingency approach, which is an interpretation of how situation affects one’s leadership. In their study on how culture affects PR in two vastly different countries, namely the United States and South Korea, Shin et al. (2011) also studied the contingency approach as a function of cultural factors. They found that “situation accounts for practical or resourceful enactment of leadership styles contingent to specific challenges” (p. 182). When conflicts arise, PR leaders are expected to engage in strategic thinking that will balance the ecosystem of the company’s

stakeholders, and to provide prompt and appropriate information and resources, much more than when performing their routine tasks.

Much of the studies conducted on PR leadership focus on generic leadership traits and that can be applicable in most settings, and are usually not purely specific to PR. There has been little forays into the efforts to “conceptualize the meaning of leadership to effective communication and PR practice” (Meng & Berger, 2013, p. 142). The above study on contingency approach serves as a starting point, but insights and analyses on how PR leaders respond to a combination of situational factors specific to corporate communication profession are still lacking. Originally developed by Hersey and Blanchard (1969), the Situational Leadership Theory posits that effective leaders match their leadership styles (i.e. telling, selling, participating, and delegating) with the motivation and readiness for task completion of the followers. This model was further developed as it had been observed that followers’ development of competence and commitment when entering new tasks must be taken into consideration as leaders select their leadership style in a given situation (Blanchard, Zigarmi, & Zigarmi, 1985).

Based on academic literature in PR discipline, two major situational factors appear to be relevant in examining leadership strategies among PR practitioners. The first factor is when they are in normal and unexpected/crisis situations, which Shin et al. (2011) describes as routine and non-routine situations. In the routine circumstance, PR leaders are required to communicate with stakeholders to establish and maintain positive relationships in general. In the non-routine situation, PR leaders assist organizations in risks, crises, and conflicts with various stakeholders. The second situational factor is when PR managers are placed in positions with substantial amount of decision-making authority, in other words, whether they are a part of the dominant coalition of their organizations. Substantial literature has indicated the importance of PR managers’ roles in serving on the decision-making board for organizational effectiveness (Berger, 2007; Bowen, 2009; Grunig, 1992). Yet, in many organizations, PR managers are not involved in the dominant coalition group or are requested to be part of this decision-making team only in certain circumstances (Berger, 2005). These two situational factors seem to be applicable across all types of organizations regardless of their for-profit or not-for-profit orientation and thus would influence PR leadership styles differently.

The purpose of this study is, therefore, to investigate how PR managers exercise their leadership in routine or non-routine situations, and when they are decision-makers or non-decision-makers in these situations. Insights on PR leadership under these circumstances would benefit PR managers in adopting appropriate leadership functions based on the two primary situational factors in their profession. In addition, developing a framework of situational PR leadership could be useful to educate novice PR practitioners. Since this area of study is still in an exploratory stage in the scholarly field, this study aims to develop a preliminary framework for situational leadership for PR managers. We pose the following research questions:

RQ 1: What are the leadership behaviors a PR leader exhibits in routine and non-routine circumstances?

RQ 2: What are the leadership behaviors a PR leader exhibits while in decision-making roles and non-decision-making roles?

Method

Data gathering

As little research has been done in this area, and we have no preconceived idea on what to expect, we adopted an inductive and exploratory approach. Qualitative research was conducted using asynchronous online focus group as a method (James & Busher, 2009). Participants who were PR managers working in Singapore both in private and public sectors were approached using theoretical/purposive sampling (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), which allowed the discovery of themes or categories as well as their properties based on the genuine experiences of participants in relation to the investigated phenomenon, and hence the deduction of interrelationships into a framework.

Online focus group was selected in this study since the method allows participants, who were busy professionals, to share their answers at their own free time asynchronously, and with the ease of anonymity. When compared to other qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews or observations, this approach seemed most appropriate, given the busy schedule of participants who were working as full-time PR managers. The traditional focus group was also not a suitable method because anonymity was promised to the participants so as to elicit honest answers and more explicit examples. Google Groups were used as a forum platform for participants to join the focus groups for a period of one week. Each participant was required to spend 1-2 hours answering questions and responding to others' comments during the week. The researchers facilitated three online focus group sessions during late September 2014 to early October 2014.

Online focus group is a relatively new and unexplored method to use. Stancanelli (2010, p. 4) aptly stated, "Technological advances will continue to influence the research process. As researchers, we must remain open and flexible to these advances and explore how technology can increase the credibility of the qualitative research process." She found that online focus groups were in fact a variation of traditional focus groups and had more similarities than differences when compared with the latter. In her usage of online focus groups, there were higher response and retention rates as there was lesser pressure on participants as compared to that within a traditional focus group setting. An online focus group can also bring about cohesive bonds within the group as a traditional focus group does (Watson, Peacock, & Jones, 2006). Im and Chee (2006) also support the use of online focus group, as it allows access to participants in different geographical areas, thereby increasing the diversity of participants. As this study was conducted in Singapore, this geographical benefit might not be as clearly realized, but considering that PR leaders were generally busy white-collar workers who had varying schedules, an online focus group was a considerably good option in this context. While this approach might have some limitations as it is text-based and researchers could not see nonverbal cues of participants, a credibility check to ensure that data interpretation was consistent with participants' views was conducted. This process is elaborated in the last portion of this section.

Participants

Participants were asked to sign up using an online Google Form. Selection criteria included: being 21 years old and above, working in the corporate communications/PR field in a managerial capacity, leading a team of at least 2-3 people, and having at least three years of working experience in the communications field. We obtained a sample of 16 participants who met the criteria and proceeded with registration for the study. The participants were then divided into three groups such that each group would have a good distribution of varied

demographics. Through the course of the study, four participants dropped out, and 12 participants remained. We acknowledge that 12 is a small sample size, but richness of data is the primary concern in qualitative research. We therefore aimed to elicit real-life experiences of our participants to achieve data saturation in our online focus group interviews. As claimed by Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006), data saturation in qualitative research can occur during the first 12 interviews.

To ensure confidentiality of participants' responses and protect their identity, the following measures were strictly observed: First, participants were identifiable to each other purely by self-selected pseudonyms. Second, participants were informed not to reveal real names of people or organizations when citing examples in the forums. Finally, forums were moderated to ensure that any specific mentioning was not left on the forum. These strategies were explained on the front page of the site, shown every time participants log on to the online focus group.

Data analysis

Data analysis was performed following grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1965). The focus group transcripts were coded for themes that answered the two research questions until a point of saturation and no new categories emerged. Participants' answers were first paraphrased and summarized; themes were then abstracted from the entire transcript. The themes that were consistently repeated and agreed upon by most respondents were sieved out as the most obvious attributes of leaders in different positions and different situations.

Credibility checks

After the findings were filtered out into a table that summarized what we distilled and analyzed from the online focus groups, we sent out the table to all 12 respondents, along with a short survey to gather their responses on whether they concur with the results and on any improvements or comments they might have. The survey consisted a scale from 1-5 to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with the results in each quadrant, and a space for them to comment on the quadrants individually, as well as the entire table on the whole. Respondents were in favor of the results, mostly agreeing with the results derived from this study. We have also improved on our findings based on the remarks given by respondents. To add to the credibility of our study, memos (Maxwell, 2013) were kept throughout the entire process, from conception of the idea, through the process of data gathering, right down to the stage of writing the report. The entire study was documented step-by-step. Procedural and analytical memos (Esterberg, 2002) recorded the steps taken and the observations made. As Patton (2001) suggested, different categories of memos were used, for example, operation memos, coding memos, and theoretical memos.

Findings

RQ1 was targeted at investigating the leadership behaviors a PR leader exhibited in routine and non-routine circumstances. RQ2 asked about the leadership behaviors a PR leader exhibited while in decision-making roles and non-decision-making roles. In this section, we answer these two research questions based on the data analysis of the focus group transcripts.

1. Attributes of leaders in decision-making positions under routine circumstance

A total of ten respondents participated in addressing this scenario. We found that PR leaders who were in a decision-making position possessed the following three attributes and demonstrated these behaviors when they were in routine situations: they are skilled in developing relationships with various stakeholders; they facilitate strategic and regular communication with various stakeholders via the appropriate media; they are knowledgeable about their organization and have data and facts to back their knowledge.

1.1 Developing relationship with stakeholders.

Respondents generally agree that one of their most important tasks is to build long-lasting relationships with both internal and external stakeholders and promote goodwill for the organization. To illustrate, respondent 10 stated that PR leaders have to “express themselves sincerely and in an approachable manner,” stressing that the building of a good relationship with stakeholders works for the good of the organization. Respondent 8 also noted, “Employees can perform the best word-of-mouth marketing and be good spokespeople for the organization.” To influence the internal stakeholders, respondent 4 gave examples of reaching out to them at a personal level, like “having tea sessions, discussions, informal meetings, meals, and parties” with staff within the organization. All such gestures give the staff a sense of worth and belonging to the organization and when carried out with sincerity, can achieve a quid pro quo relationship between the PR leader and the internal staff.

Respondent 6 also agreed with such manner of building personal relationships, even with external stakeholders. She referred to periodic engagement meals with media personnel as a means to build relationship with them. Influencing larger external stakeholders, like the public, can also include corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives. Respondent 1 referred to CSR efforts as a means to “portray the company as a responsible member of the business community with a keen sense of public accountability and social mores.” Such involvement in society can promote goodwill toward the organization and put the organization in good position with its publics.

A PR leader’s building of sincere relationships with internal and external audiences can put the organization in good stead amidst its stakeholders, increasing their influence in every message they communicate. This is a task specific to PR leaders, as building of relationship with stakeholders is beyond completing technical functions. The PR leader has to have some level of position within the organization so that he or she can represent the organization to establish ties with other stakeholders.

1.2 Communicating strategically and regularly via various media.

According to respondents, updates to various stakeholders are done via various media, commonly print and online. Under routine circumstances, these updates include news of the company's current business focus and future plans, and information on products and organizational programs. Such communication of updates has to be done regularly and with strategic planning in terms of content and dissemination. Respondent 6 also gave an indication of how important this was for the internal audience, “Regular engagement internally does help to reinforce our brand, ensure adherence to our corporate image which is reflected in the way employees carry themselves, or in the work and collaterals produced.”

More than just being regular, communication has to be strategic in terms of content and dissemination. Content across all boards should be uniform and clear. Timing in dissemination is critical as releasing news too early to any one set of stakeholders can result in “naysayers and affect the confidence the public has of the organization,” respondent 5 explained. The method of dissemination was also an area that requires careful planning, as

the PR leader also has to strategically identify the right medium for communications and match it to the target audience for the message to be effective. Communication has to be strategically “sequenced and synchronized to achieve the desired organization outcome.” For critical and major updates, respondents found face-to-face engagement with stakeholders to be more useful. To stress the importance of communicating strategically, respondent also 5 gave an example of a forum in her organization, where various departments had to make proposals for plans that would affect the organization’s image. The PR department was the secretariat of that forum. Such forums “emphasize to the rest in the organization that plans put up would need to address reputational and communications issues.”

1.3 Being confidently grounded in facts and knowledge of organization. Respondents also advocated that an ideal leader in such position and circumstance is one grounded in the knowledge of the company’s business, vision, mission, and values, promoting them on behalf of the organization whenever opportunity arises. As respondent 2 stated, an ideal PR leader “carries the image of the company and embodies its values to the public.” Three respondents noted that to be able to do so, the PR leader must first be firmly grounded in the mission, vision, and values of the company, and should also believe in them so as to represent them to the public with conviction.

For communication to be impactful, four respondents agreed that they had to use factual data to influence their target audiences. Respondent 1 believed that all statements made “must be based on research and facts” to be credible and trustworthy, and messages have to be uniform and clear. Public relations leaders should also be confident and able to provide factual backing to support all statements made on behalf of the organization. Two respondents stated that a PR leader should never say, “no comments”, to the press. “I don’t know” is also not an advisable answer. Therefore, the function of the PR leader in being a liaison point between the organization and the public requires him or her to be always in-the-know, and it will be befitting for such a person to be involved in the dominant coalition, so as to give him or her a clearer and deeper connection to the organization. As respondent 2 stated, the PR leader “needs to be kept abreast of the company’s strategy, direction, performance and work closely with top management, as well as management from different divisions.”

2. Attributes of leaders in decision-making positions under non-routine circumstance

Upon analyzing the responses of PR leaders who were in decision-making positions, we found that these attributes and behaviors were prominent when they were in non-routine situations: they are often the spokesperson for their organization, or the person crafting the messages for the spokesperson; they are expected to give timely and accurate updates; all at the same time, they have to be providing ethical sensitivity and empathy to all stakeholders. Seven participants participated in discussion of this scenario.

2.1 Being a spokesperson for the company.

In times of crisis, the PR leader is usually the appointed spokesperson for the company, or the one who crafts the messages for the spokesperson, and who also determines when, how and to whom the message is delivered. To take a step further, it is also viewed as the responsibility of the PR leader to ensure that internal members of the organization do not become naysayers; there has to be as much control as possible over what news got out, and how it got out.

Respondent 3 mentioned that her role was to advice the dominant coalition on “how to communicate and when, so as to contain the anxiety” and to control the damage. There also has to be a uniform message that the committee agrees upon so that every department in the organization will be moving in sync and giving out a uniform message instead of confusing stakeholders with mixed signals.

The importance of crafting a uniform message is also not to be slighted. Two respondents noted that it was important to get internal stakeholders onboard and in line with the message of the organization. Respondent 11 suggested that face-to-face meetings with internal stakeholders are crucial in times of crisis – staff have to know the organization’s key message, them being “most important spokespeople to the people around them.” Respondent 6 also stated that PR leaders should “educate the employees on what they should say when they are contacted by members of the public or the media.”

2.2 Giving timely and accurate updates.

Time was of essence in a crisis or non-routine situation. Three respondents stressed the importance of PR leaders giving timely and accurate updates during a crisis. In this modern era, where technology is advanced to the point where communication is almost instant, respondents noted that instant communication is also expected of them during times of crisis. Respondent 6 supported the use of social media and online information dissemination methods “to dispel any misperceptions” fast and quickly. Timely communication during a crisis will also show that the company was not shirking responsibility. Respondent 10 mentioned that timely and accurate updates show the company is proactive and resolving the problem and the information provided can also “help stakeholders determine their actions or reactions to the issue.”

To be able to give accurate updates, the PR leader have to be in-the-know on all the details and specifics of the crisis and of any future plans. Respondent 11 stated that PR leaders have to “present the facts clearly, make it easy to understand, and also present the company’s rationale for certain decisions.” This requires that the PR leader not just knows the direction of the organization, but also understands the direction and if possible, has a say in it. It is ideal that the PR leader be personally convinced of the company’s direction in order to better convince and influence other stakeholders.

2.3 Providing ethical sensitivity and empathy.

In handling crisis, there could be times when the dominant coalition needed reminders on what was socially ethical beyond what was merely profitable for business. Bowen (2008), in her study of PR professionals in the United States, New Zealand, Israel, and Australia, found that “many PR practitioners indeed perform the role of ethics counsel or corporate conscience in their organizations (p. 271).” Her stand was that “the proper location of an ethical conscience in an organization is within the top echelon of the PR function (p. 272).” This was confirmed in our study, as mentioned by respondent 10, that PR leaders should “offer an ethical perspective of the issue, or even an overview of what the public is saying about the organization (concerns), which senior management may not have considered.” He cited an example of a non-routine incident in a hospital, where healthcare workers and the procedures of the hospital were blamed when a patient suffered a miscarriage. The PR leader handled this situation with ethical sensitivity and empathy, persuading the senior management to provide an explanation of the medical procedures, to waive the costs incurred, and to send a hamper to the victim of the unfortunate event. This showed that the organization cared for their patients and were empathetic; at the same time, it also strategically proved that the organization was not at fault. Once again, this scenario indicated that PR leaders do the right things, rather than doing things right.

Further, part of being empathetic was to understand the needs of the affected stakeholders. A PR leader should therefore appear confident, giving stakeholders someone they can rely on and trust in times of crisis. Respondent 4 mentioned the importance of having transparent systems, processes and plans for crisis management, so as to win the assurance and trust of stakeholders. Respondent 8 stated that providing “information to the public on what the organization is doing as preventive measures and what has been done currently to

mitigate future happenings” is crucial in gaining the public’s confidence. Respondent 3 noted how empathy is important in anticipating how stakeholders may feel, and therefore being able to produce answers that addressed and eased their concerns appropriately. It is also important that the PR leader appeared calm and composed while being empathetic, so as to give stakeholders a form of stability.

3. Attributes of leaders not in decision-making positions under routine circumstance

Six respondents participated in this discussion. We found that PR leaders who were not in decision-making positions have the following behaviors and attributes under routine circumstances: they work more at a tactical or operational level than at a strategic level, they demonstrate a good understanding of ground level needs, but they have to sometimes establish their legitimacy by borrowing from authoritative sources to make their messages more credible.

3.1 Making tactical and operational decisions or proposals.

When a PR leader is not in a position of influence within his or her organization, there is little that can be done at a strategic level. The PR leader will then have to operate at a more tactical level. Four respondents listed the senior management as among the top three most important stakeholders to influence as senior management had the final say in decisions.

Respondent 3 noted that being in such a position would mean that she has to organize her work around executing the instructions of the board, and will only be able to “list the various tactical measures required to address the issues”. Respondent 6 mentioned that all her proposals have to have the “approvals from the senior management before these activities are carried out”. Respondent 11 believed that influencing the dominant coalition had to be done, and he did so by persuading them of how his proposal would benefit the organization. PR leaders at this level are basically rather limited in the influence they can exert on various stakeholders; the buy-in and support of the dominant coalition is much needed to facilitate their jobs.

3.2 Understanding ground level needs and sentiments.

Respondents were found to be adept at understanding the ground level needs and sentiments through environment scans and surveys, both internally and externally. This is one method that is used to aid the performance of their jobs – knowing the various stakeholders’ emotions gives these PR leaders better leverage and influence over them.

Respondent 7 cited one of her tasks as to “make sense of ongoing and potential issues and what the ground is feeling in order to be able to decide how and when to engage stakeholders.” She also accepted their feedback and genuinely considered them. Respondent 12 needed to “find out the needs of each stakeholder” to understand how to tailor the various communication messages for them. Respondent 6 considered that sincerely taking feedback from various stakeholders was an important thing to do, even organizing “periodic meet-ups and engagement sessions” for such purposes.

Being outside the dominant coalition likely allows them freer interaction with people at the ground level, thereby giving liberty to various stakeholders to communicate their needs and sentiments to them without the fear of any threat that a dominant coalition may hold in its authority. At the same time, they are seen as role models that are closer to employees down the organizational hierarchy; this gives room for better mutual understanding between the PR leader and the lay employee.

3.3 Establishing legitimacy of profession.

Leaders in this position also found it somewhat difficult and had to put in some effort to establish their legitimacy. Respondent 6 gave examples of how she borrowed credibility from authoritative sources so as to lend credibility to her communication projects. She cited “getting credible quotes from industry leaders” to substantiate press releases, and inviting “a suitable reputable guest-of-honor” to an events to gain better buy-in from the public. There had also to be a show of sincerity by her personal participation in events. Respondent 8 believed in influencing the internal audience in the right direction so that they too could help influence the general public. Respondents in this category generally need more assistance and are trying hard to establish their legitimacy internally and externally.

4. Attributes of leaders not in decision-making positions under non-routine circumstance

After analyzing the responses from seven respondents in this scenario, we found that PR leaders who were not in decision-making positions exhibited these attributes under non-routine circumstances: they give timely and accurate updates based on the information made available to them; they assist the spokesperson for the company; and ensure good dynamics among teams.

4.1 Giving timely and accurate updates.

The PR leader is expected to give timely and accurate updates, but unlike leaders who are in decision-making positions, leaders who are in non-decision-making positions have to give updates based on what was instructed to them by the dominant coalition, and based on the information that is made accessible and available to them. Respondent 7 believed that it was important that “facts are communicated fast and accurately to the various stakeholders.” While content for the updates are provided by the senior management, respondent 8 also stated that an ideal PR leader “knows the facts inside out and is able to speak with confidence to the various groups on what has happened.” Respondent 11 mentioned that information should be released with facts and there should be “no twisting of words or facts”, for it is a reflection of an organization’s sincerity.

Timeliness was again an important factor during crisis. Respondent 6 mentioned that “social media platforms have now become something we need to always consider and monitor especially when crisis happens as information is fast-moving.” Beyond just surveying the environment, leaders have to gather all such sentiments and give feedback to the dominant coalition, quickly deciding the best course of action toward any negative sentiment and then get back to the relevant stakeholders with appropriate updates.

4.2 Assisting the spokesperson for the company.

Not being in a decision-making position limits a PR leader’s capacity to act as a company’s spokesperson, as an authoritative figure in the company is better accepted as a spokesperson. Leaders in this category therefore often assist in the background works that supported a spokesperson, rather than be the spokesperson themselves. Respondent 1 gave an example of putting up a “communiqué at the company” so as to help employees better learn the organization’s stand and message, and be good brand ambassadors rather than naysayers. Respondent 6 was also cautious over this aspect; she stated that “proper advice ought to be disseminated to internal audiences to ensure they know what to say and what not to say when media approaches them for comments.”

4.3 Ensuring good dynamics within team.

Public relations leaders who were not in the dominant coalition are more concerned with how work is conducted at the tactical level. Two respondents also noted that it is crucial that a crisis

communications team be properly organized, with everyone knowing his role and taking the same direction, as set by the senior management. As respondent 6 put it, “Everybody should be aware of what one another is doing, to be on the same page so that as a team, work can be carried out smoothly.” Respondent 7 considered that it was important to “have prepared the team in anticipation of potential crises.” Processes and plans must already be in place before crisis hits. A person or a team specializing in answering queries is also considered as necessary, as respondent 1 put it, a “point of contact” has to be provided.

To sum up our findings, Table 1 shows attributes of PR leaders in different situations and in different positions.

Table 1. Leadership as a function of situation and position (Results)

	Routine (normal circumstance)	Non-Routine (crisis circumstance)
In decision-making positions	<p>1) Proponent of organization’s values and mission</p> <p>1.1) Developing relationship with stakeholders.</p> <p>1.2) Communicating strategically and regularly via various media.</p> <p>1.3) Being confidently grounded in facts and knowledge of organization.</p>	<p>2) Effective, empathetic and ethical spokesperson</p> <p>2.1) Being a spokesperson for the organization.</p> <p>2.2) Giving timely and accurate updates.</p> <p>2.3) Providing ethical sensitivity and empathy.</p>
Not in decision-making positions	<p>3) Advocate of profession, bridging communication gaps</p> <p>3.1) Making tactical and operational decisions or proposals.</p> <p>3.2) Understanding ground level needs and sentiments.</p> <p>3.3) Establishing legitimacy of the profession.</p>	<p>4) Organizational supporter, ensuring a consistent message</p> <p>4.1) Giving timely and accurate updates.</p> <p>4.2) Assisting the organization’s spokesperson.</p> <p>4.3) Ensuring good dynamics within team.</p>

Discussion and Conclusion

In order to develop a preliminary model of situational PR leadership, findings from this study highlighted two important aspects as the pattern of expected leadership among PR managers emerged from our online focus group data. First, since the tasks of PR practitioners were specific, situational factors derived from academic PR literature that this study has adopted seemed to be relevant identifying factors in predicting different PR leadership styles. In other words, the use of routine versus non-routine as well as whether being in decision-making or not allowed us to see different patterns of expected PR leadership in different circumstances based on the data. Arguably, these two by two factors were developed specifically from academic PR literature and hence serve as valid contextual factors that delineated situational PR leadership styles clearly.

Second, the attributes of PR managers from the findings of this study allowed us to differentiate PR leadership qualities from mere effective PR practices as they provide guidelines beyond completing PR tasks or their bottom line duties. Our results showed that a model PR leader in decision-making positions was typically a proponent of their organization’s values and mission and an effective, empathetic and ethical spokesperson – he or she did not just fulfill what was within his or her job scope but goes beyond, to the extent of being personally committed to be as an embodiment of the organization’s values and ethics. PR leaders who are given decision-making roles in their organizations need to develop a strong

sense of ethical practice, as they have to handle severe ethical tensions in non-routine circumstances and be good role models in advocating positive values and missions of the organizations in routine circumstances. Meanwhile, PR managers who were not given roles in the dominant coalitions could also exhibit their leadership both in the routine and non-routine situations by being strategic and advocating the status of their profession. Unlike other organizational functions (i.e. marketing, finance, human resource) where leadership in those areas has grown to be recognized with specialist knowledge and skills, PR leaders need to demonstrate their strategic thinking to legitimize the profession and educate dominant coalitions in realizing the importance of corporate communication for overall organizational effectiveness. The PR-specific attributes discovered in this study actually showed that the PR profession also required a set of specialized skills and knowledge set, and should therefore be more and more accepted as part of a corporate function like other functions mentioned above.

Practical implications

The preliminary model of situational PR leadership from this study also provided strong practical implications by justifying why the PR profession should be elevated to the management level in the organization. Consistent with previous academic literature in the field, there is good reason for PR leaders to be boosted to the dominant coalition and to gain greater internal and external legitimacies as executive-level leaders of their organizations (Berger, 2005; Bowen, 2009). With greater organizational authority, the PR leader can work with all stakeholders more easily. At the same time, it is also needful that while PR leaders advance up the corporate ladder, they do not forget to touch base with those lower down the ladder, as their role is to always maintain good communication between the organization and its stakeholders. As our findings have shown that the functions of PR leaders (e.g., crafting messages, being a spokesperson, developing relationships with stakeholders, etc.) were better-performed and accepted with greater legitimacy and decision-making power.

Directions for future research

Findings from this study serve as a preliminary depiction of situational PR leadership from our participants in the Singapore's context. In future research, this situational PR leadership model can be further developed and refined through different means of collecting data. Though online focus group was appropriate and practical for the present study, it is acknowledged that this approach has its own limitations in eliciting data from participants (Stancanelli, 2010). Future research can solidify and further develop the situational PR leadership model through quantitative approach.

We also propose getting respondents from more countries, as the results of this study were derived from participants who practice their profession in Singapore. To increase the credibility of the study, it would be useful to try and obtain more participants, and to also have respondents from different parts of the world as PR leadership styles may also vary in different cultural contexts. Further, we are aware that 75% of the respondents happened to come from the government sector. We therefore also propose that future studies can be done with participants who work in a more varied mix of sectors and industries.

Unlike majority of leadership studies that focus on specific demographic or personality traits of leaders across various careers, this study focuses on how situational factors can specifically affect PR leadership. This makes it unique and useful in understanding the behaviors PR leaders in their professional contexts. It is hoped that this study and its likes can contribute to the elevation of the PR profession and aid in the process of legitimizing the role

of PR leaders in their organizations. Effective PR leaders are essentially specialists in a field of its own merit. Their voices deserve to be heard in dominant coalitions, in crisis, and out of crisis. This serves for the overall good of the organization in this fast-paced society where word can get out and around ever so speedily.

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