An exploration of the institutionalisation of public relations at executive level in the top 100 companies listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE)

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Abstract

This article discusses the institutionalisation of public relations at executive level in large organisations, based on research applied to a purposive sample of the top 100 companies listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) in South Africa. Based on an examination of recent literature on public relations as a strategic management function, the study aimed to determine the extent to which senior public relations practitioners in the selected companies are involved in strategy formulation and decision-making at executive level. Current and recent literature provided a conceptual framework based on the premise that organisations have much to gain by involving senior practitioners in top-level decision-making and strategy formulation. The following theories informed the primary research, which took the form of qualitative semi-structured interviews with the participating practitioners: excellence theory, the dominant coalition, the relational approach, the reflective paradigm and roles theory, with the main focus on the strategic role of public relations. Apart from indicating the extent to which public relations is practiced as a top-level management function in the selected companies, the study also sought to identify barriers that prevent the participating practitioners from providing strategic input at an executive level, and to offer recommendations to overcome these barriers.

INTRODUCTION AND AIM OF THE STUDY

Current and recent literature on public relations reveals that the profession has evolved considerably since the days when it was viewed and practised as a technical function, to emerge as a full-fledged managerial function (Adanlawo & Chaka, 2022; Gregory & Willis, 2013; Grunig & Grunig, 2020; Holmström, 2002; Neill, 2015; Rensburg & De Beer, 2003; Steyn, 2007; Steyn & Niemann, 2010; Toledano, 2018; Verwey, Benecke & Muir, 2017; Vieira, 2019; Wilson, 2016).

With the above also came calls for the profession to be institutionalised at executive level, or, in other the words, to have a seat at the executive table and be part of the dominant coalition. However, Steyn and Niemann wrote in 2010 (p. 107) that the benefits of allowing public relations practitioners to contribute to organisational strategy formulation were still not fully understood. These scholars argued that there were at the time still managers who believed that management or executive decision-makers were better suited to make decisions that are in the best interests of the organisation. Kiesenbauer and Zerfass, in turn, noted in 2015 (p. 432) that public relations is still a nascent field and far from being institutionalised. Their research suggests that communication management is less advanced in practice than what is suggested by theory (Kiesenbauer & Zerfass, 2015:432). More recent research indicates that there is still work to be done to fully institutionalise the profession. For example, research by Knight and Sweetser (2021) in a global organisation, revealed a 25% gap in the non-communicator management view of public

relations competence in career practitioners, underestimating both technician and management skills by approximately 25%.

The literature indicates that there are knowledge gaps regarding the extent to which public relations in its managerial role is institutionalised, that is, whether it informs top-level strategy formulation in large organisations. According to Valentini and Sriramesh (2014:3), there is little empirical evidence, beyond that of developed nations such as the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and Germany, regarding the extent to which public relations is practised strategically and whether it contributes to the strategic management of organisations. Later research by Mykkänen and Vos (2015), Knight and Sweetser (2021) and Anani-Bossman (2022) confirms this knowledge gap.

In South Africa, it is not known to what extent South African organisations currently embrace the multiple benefits of involving public relations managers at executive level. This is evident in the lack of published research on the topic, as reflected in repositories such as Sabinet and the National Research Foundation (NRF). It is also not known to what extent the top 100 JSE-listed companies in South Africa involve senior public relations practitioners in strategic managerial processes, and if these practitioners contribute to and influence top-level strategy formulation and decision-making.

This article attempts to offer a contribution to help fill this knowledge gap. It reports on research undertaken to address this knowledge gap in respect of the top 100 JSE-listed companies.

The aim of the research was to determine to what extent the public relations function contributes to strategic decision-making and enterprise strategy formulation in a selection of the top 100 companies listed on the JSE in South Africa.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The context of this research is the strategic contribution of public relations to strategy formulation and decision-making in driving the direction of a business. The study was completed from the perspective of public relations, a sub-discipline of the broader field of corporate communication. The research was based on the premise that organisations have much to gain by practising public relations in a strategic manner and as part of the executive function of an organisation to achieve not only organisational goals, but also those of society.

For the purpose of this article, the new definition accepted by the International Public Relations Association (IPRA) Board in 2019 to reflect the new context of the profession is used as a working definition:

> Public relations is a decision-making management practice tasked with building relationships and interests between organisations and their publics based on the delivery of information through trusted and ethical communication methods (IPRA, 2022).

The kind of public relations focused on was strategic public relations. The term "public relations" was used to differentiate this function from the other forms of strategic communication, such marketing, advertising and management communication. It should be pointed out, though, that the term "strategic communication" is often used in the literature when referring to strategic public relations. Many authors consequently use the two terms interchangeably. As far as this study is concerned, when using the term "strategic communication" it is used interchangeably with public relations and does not include other forms of corporate communication, such as marketing, for instance.

The following is a synopsis of the theories that were used to provide a conceptual framework for the primary research.

Excellence theory

The excellence theory is a general theory that explains how the public relations function should be structured and managed to provide the greatest value to organisations, publics and society (Kim, Hung-Baesecke, Yang & Grunig, 2013:198). According to Grunig (2006:159), the excellence study provides a

solid theory, as well as empirical evidence of how the public relations function should be organised to maximise its value:

> The major premise of the excellence theory is that communication has value in an organisation because it helps to build good long-term relationships with strategic publics … Excellent public relations and an excellent context for public relations increase the value assigned to the function by the dominant coalition (Grunig & Grunig, 2000:314-317).

The most excellent public relations departments participate fully in strategic management by scanning the social, political, and institutional environment of the organisation to bring an outside perspective to strategic decision-making (Grunig, 2006:162). Tyma (2008:202) therefore argues that it is up to the public relations theorists, researchers and practitioners to employ the excellence theory to create emancipatory spaces for otherwise silenced voices within the practice of public relations, while ethically serving their organisation to their best abilities (Tyma, 2008:203).

The dominant coalition

There are numerous factors that allow and empower individuals to influence decision-making processes within a large organisation. One such factor is whether the individual is part of the dominant coalition or not. The dominant coalition is defined as a coalition of individuals, including top management, who shape organisational behaviours (Cyert & March, cited in Berger 2005:6). Kanihan, Hansen, Blair, Shore and Myers (2013:141) state that both theory and practice indicate the need for communication managers to belong to the dominant coalition for them to be most effective within an organisation. The more the dominant coalition values a communication manager, the more seriously it considers communication concerns (Kanihan et al., 2013:142).

Yeo and Sriramesh (2009:424) believe that more efforts are needed to educate senior managers and the dominant coalition about the true contribution that public relations can make to organisations. Bowen (2006:331) contends autonomy in public relations is vital to how much practitioners can contribute to strategic management. Autonomy can involve freedom from encroachment, reporting directly to the CEO, having input in strategic management and planning, and being able to make decisions without having them ratified through levels of bureaucracy.

The relational approach

According to Invernizzi and Romenti (2011:20), there has been a paradigm shift in public relations practice from simply communicating to stakeholders to building mutually beneficial relationships with strategic stakeholders. It is the interdependence between an organisation and its environment that creates the need for public relations (Kim et al., 2013:203). If an organisation communicates effectively with its stakeholders before decisions are made, issues and crises may never occur and good relationships should be secured (Kim et al., 2013:204).

When organisations are perceived to care about their stakeholders and strive to achieve reciprocal relationships, they will build a reputation for being concerned about their stakeholders and therefore encounter less opposition and more support from their publics over the long term (Hung, 2005:397-398).

Stakeholder theory contributes to how public relations practitioners would uncover who the relevant participants are in the communication process; that is, how to determine who the important stakeholders are. As stakeholders represent different points of view with respect to different issues, this is where the danger of misunderstanding and miscommunication becomes apparent (Brønn & Brønn, 2003:292 -293). They state:

> The ability to communicate with others who share similar mental models and understandings of the world is easier than communicating with someone who does not share a common conceptual structure ... A primary task of corporate communicators

with respect to organisational stakeholders is to work actively to attempt to uncover and understand the stakeholders' mental models. (Brønn & Brønn, 2003:295).

A later study by Brønn (2007:376-393) investigated the basis of reputation building through a relationship approach. The results indicated that the quality of relationships is a determinant of reputation.

Reflective paradigm

The reflective paradigm is pertinent to this research, as it explicates how organisations should communicate with, and view themselves within the new business paradigm. The reflective paradigm can be considered as the modern paradigm for public relations and guides practitioners on how to view their organisation within a broader societal context.

The public relations field saw reflection grow as a specific social communication pattern in the late twentieth century; it describes an evolutionary pattern in societies as a form of coordination towards self-regulation. Reflective organisations have the challenge of taking an open and understanding position towards perspectives that differ from their own, without losing their identity (Holmström, 2002:8). A reflective communicator will seek to find a balance between inquiry and advocacy. Too much advocacy will result in one-way communication with little room for feedback. The balancing act involves dimensions of telling, generating, asking and observing (Brønn & Brønn, 2003:300).

Van Ruler and Vercic (2005:262) explain that managers use a variety of strategies to get things done, even if or when there are conflicting interests that must be resolved. Sometimes these strategies include manipulation or persuasion of their stakeholders. Owing to public legitimacy, managers are now constrained to manipulate stakeholders, as increased public counteraction makes it necessary for businesses to survive. This broadened business paradigm requires a larger degree of self-control by management.

Invernizzi and Romenti (2011:15) state that the fact that public relations has a boundary-spanning role, gives public relations specialists a privileged position for observing and interpreting the context in which the organisation operates. They also link the reflective paradigm to the role of sense-making, applying it to both from the inside to the outside, and from the outside to the inside, of the organisation. The public relations manager understands the attitudes and behaviours of the organisation's stakeholders and can thereby predict the impact of a decision on corporate reputation and stakeholder relationships. Sense-making from outside to inside the organisation is essential, as it enables the practitioner to understand the impact and consequences of issues on the decision-making, production and managerial processes (Invernizzi & Romenti, 2011:16-17).

Roles theory

As the public relations industry evolved over the years, the role of the practitioner evolved with it. Research into public relations practitioner roles is not new. According to Moss and Green (2001:118), research into roles has been a dominant theme in public relations literature since the early 1980s. It is also evident in the literature that calls for public relations specialists to acquire managerial skills to elevate their role to the executive level are not new. Dozier and Broom (1995:5), for example, propagated that public relations specialists should act as the eyes, ears and mouthpiece of the organisation, and function as senior advisers to management. This view is supported by Moss and Green (2001:122), who wrote that if practitioners wanted a seat at the executive table, they also needed to demonstrate their capability in planning and managing budgets, supervising staff and reviewing research.

The strategic role of public relations as conceptualised by Steyn (2009:528), explains how public relations can contribute towards the development of an organisation's enterprise strategy. Steyn researched the role of the public relations strategist among South African chief executive officers (CEOs) according to the CEOs' expectations and perceptions of performance. In 2009 she relabelled this role as the "reflective strategist":

> By spanning the organisation boundary, gathering information by means of environmental scanning, transmitting this information to management, and providing it as input to the strategy formulation process, the reflective strategist enlightens management on societal/stakeholder values, norms, and expectations for socially and environmentally responsible behaviour (Steyn, 2009:528).

The reflective strategist acts as an advocate for key stakeholders by conveying their views to management to create awareness of the impact of the company's behaviour, organisational policies, and strategies on key stakeholders and interest groups. The reflective strategist should influence management to adapt their strategies to stakeholder values, norms, and expectations to balance the quest for achieving non-financial organisational goals (Steyn, 2009:529).

Van Ruler and Vercic (2005:263-265) assign five distinct functions to the role of the communication specialist: to advise, counsel, coach, conceptualise and execute. They describe counselling as the analysis of changing values, norms and issues in society and the discussion of these with the members of the organisation to adjust the point of view in respect of the organisation's values, norms and issues. This role is aimed at the development of the organisational vision, mission, corporate story and strategy.

They explain coaching as educating the members of the organisation to behave competently to respond to societal demands. The role of conceptualising is to develop plans to communicate and maintain relationships with stakeholders to gain public trust. This role is aimed at addressing commercial and other internal and external stakeholders, as well as the wider public opinion. Lastly, they explain the role of execution as preparing the means of communication for the organisation and its members, to assist the organisation in formulating its communication. This role is aimed at executing the communication plans.

According to Vercic and Zerfass (2016:275-276), current theories of public relations highlight the responsibility of communication managers to influence organisational decision-making through monitoring issues, stakeholders, and opinion building. This will enable the communication specialist to support organisational strategies by building relationships with, and conveying messages to, relevant stakeholders. Arcos (2016:269) claims that communication is now a component of the overall corporate strategy that needs analysis and insights for planning and implementing programmes, as well as an instrument for preventing conflicts that might affect the organisation and its stakeholders.

According to Van Ruler and Vercic (2005:264), what distinguishes a communication manager from other managers at the boardroom table, is that the communication manager will evince special concern for broader societal issues and approaches to organisational problems. This includes the implications of organisational behaviour towards and in the public sphere and towards stakeholder groups. Public relations therefore benefits organisations by helping them make decisions, develop policies and behave in ways that are accepted and sought by stakeholders; this in turn increases the organisation's revenue, reduces costs and reduces risks. Furthermore, it is not possible to truly manage an organisation's reputation without participation in management decisions and managing the organisation's behaviour (Kim et al., 2013:202). In addition, the presence of the most senior public relations specialist in the executive committee has its justification in the fact that decisions regarding communication must be evaluated in terms of the necessary resources, and the financial, human resources and communication impact thereof (Invernizzi & Romenti, 2011:20).

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research was employed in the primary research, as this approach enables the researcher to explore, interpret, discover and understand social realities (Tuli, 2010:101) and the meaning individuals assign to their experiences (Jansen, 2016:23). It was deemed the most suitable way to gather and analyse data to generate an understanding of the complex reality in which public relations managers operate.

To collect relevant data, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews were conducted with a group of senior practitioners employed in the top 100 companies listed on the JSE. The rationale for the inclusion of the top 100 JSE-listed companies was that it allowed the study to solicit input from senior practitioners working

in the largest corporations in the country, and who were therefore likely to have a wealth of knowledge and many years of experience, enabling them to share valuable information on the institutionalisation of public relations in their respective companies.

A purposive sampling strategy (Jacobsen, 2021:156) was used to target senior staff members who lead the public relations function of each of the top 100 JSE-listed companies. It was kept in mind that in this industry, various terms are used in the designations of staff heading up the public relations function. Each of the top 100 JSE-listed companies' individual corporate websites were searched to identify potential interviewees as persons with titles such as "head of corporate communication", "director of communication", "head of group media relations", "senior manager of public relations and communication", "director of public relations", and so forth. The names and email addresses of 57 such individuals were obtained from these websites and an email was sent to each of them to request voluntary interview participation on the topic. As the number of responses to such emails is generally low (Maree & Pietersen, 2016:176), a response was expected from 10–15 individuals. Five participants initially agreed to participate. Follow-up correspondence three weeks later yielded another two willing participants, and a final follow-up another two participants, bringing the total to ten.

Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions allowed the researchers to gather data relevant to the conceptual framework and to probe for more in-depth information where necessary. Anonymity was guaranteed to encourage participants to talk freely. The Interview questions were derived from the conceptual framework developed for the study. A mind map was created to extract summaries of the theory and to plan a question/s for each of the aspects of the theory in the summaries. Personal face-to-face interviews were conducted with the three participants who resided in the same city as the researcher conducting the interviews. Another interview was conducted at the airport, and telephonic interviews were conducted with the remaining six participants. Participants' responses were audio recorded and transcribed afterwards. The duration of the interviews ranged from 40 to 70 minutes.

A qualitative content analysis method was adopted to analyse and interpret the participants' responses. Qualitative content analysis is a method for systematically describing the meaning of qualitative data by assigning successive parts of the material to the categories of a coding frame (Schreier, 2014:171).

As a first step, all ten audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed to text to make it easier to discover the underlying meaning of the interview responses (Renz, Carrington & Badger, 2018:825). As not all raw data is always relevant (Bezuidenhout & Cronjé, 2014:236), the transcript was reviewed to eliminate irrelevant text. The rest of the data was grouped according to the themes identified in the theoretical construct that were adopted as the coding units for the analysis. This process is known as coding (Bezuidenhout & Cronjé 2014:235). The categories included:

- Excellence theory
- Dominant coalition
- Relational approach
- Reflective paradigm
- Roles theory
- Barriers to the above
- Suggestions on how to overcome the barriers

The text was analysed to extract repeated ideas, similarities, differences, connections and theoretical issues from the categorised data (Saldaña, 2009:143).

The coding method was tested by conducting the first set of coding pertaining to the excellence theory, as recommended by Bezuidenhout and Cronjé (2014:238). The coding method was found to be appropriate. The coding method was then implemented across the entire text. This enabled the researcher to reflect on and interpret the results in terms of the theoretical framework adopted for this research.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Participants' identities remained anonymous and they are referred to under pseudonyms allocated to each individual as indicated in Table 1 below. All of them work in managerial positions, but for the sake of

anonymity their job titles are not included in the table.

Table 1: Overview of interview participants

Pseudonym	Operating industry	Operating type
Participant A	Real Estate Investment Trust	Multi-national organisation
Participant B	Manufacturing	Multi-national organisation
Participant C	Financial Services	National organisation
Participant D	Investment Services	National organisation
Participant E	Mining	Multi-national organisation
Participant F	Investment Services	National organisation
Participant G	Processing	National organisation
Participant H	Telecom Services	Multi-national organisation
Participant I	Financial Services	Multi-national organisation
Participant J	Real Estate Investment Trust	National organisation

It should be noted that there is an overlap between the theoretical sections making up the theoretical framework of this research. In reporting the findings, the focus of the different sections has therefore been narrowed to avoid repetition. Furthermore, due to the limited space allowed for this article, a summary of the responses obtained in each of the theoretical categories is provided, rather than reporting the results for each individual participant. Some individual responses are, however, included to illustrate certain deductions. For the sake of brevity, the interpretation of the findings is included directly after discussing the findings in each theoretical section.

Excellence theory

The findings demonstrate that most of the participants' departments are structured optimally, as suggested by the excellence theory, to allow the individuals to make a strategic contribution to their respective organisations. Nine of the ten public relations specialists interviewed have a reporting line to the CEO, either directly or through a dotted line with their superior. However, only half of the participants serve on their organisation's executive committee (EXCO). This alone, however, is not a sufficient indicator of whether the function contributes meaningfully to the organisation or not, and is further discussed in the section on dominant coalition.

When asked about the job functions they fulfil, the interviewed practitioners used a variety of phrases to explain the responsibilities and tasks they fulfil, relating to the organisation's reputation, internal communication, customer issues, stakeholder engagement, investor relations, strategic guidance, community engagement, driving culture, and crisis communication. The data revealed that the roles that public relations practitioners assume are varied, but participants mentioned key phrases that relate to excellence theory, such as monitoring relationships, stakeholders, reputation, and community engagement, as well as fulfilling a strategic role in assisting the organisation to remain in business. All

the participants demonstrated in their responses an understanding of the fact that public relations is not simply one-way communication with one or a select number of stakeholder groups, but that it should play a strategic role in engaging with communities and numerous stakeholders to retain the organisation's licence to operate and foster a good organisational reputation.

The excellence theory specifies that public relations departments participate in strategic management through monitoring the organisation's external environment and bringing that outside perspective to the strategic discussions. This is in line with how the participants explained the broader role that they believe they fulfil in their respective organisations. All the participants agreed that they monitor or scan their organisation's external environment to take that intelligence back to the executive table for discussion, either directly or through their supervisors. The participants used affirmative phrases such as: "protect our stakeholders", "enable communication internally and externally", "community engagement", "reputation management" and "interplay between the internal and external environments".

These findings substantiate that the public relations practitioners understand their profession's potential contribution to society at large and not just to their employers. The findings further demonstrate that conditions exist to implement and practise excellence theory by the sampled public relations specialists, but that there is room for improvement in the extent to which they feel they can realise their full potential in the workplace. A lack of understanding of the role of communication in the workplace and the fact that public relations is still seen by some as part of the marketing function, were mentioned as possible reasons. It was also mentioned that, because public relations is seen as a support function, it is not always considered a core strategic function. Furthermore, two female participants believe that they are still seen as the stereotypical "PR poppie" in the workplace and therefore not taken as seriously as they should be. (The term "poppie" is an Afrikaans word for "little doll".) This makes it difficult to build trust with top management.

It was also noted that business decisions are usually made by the financial contributors to the business ("the guys making the money"). This is regarded as one of the biggest barriers. As one participant said, "It is extremely hard to prove communication and public relations' contribution in monetary terms. At the end of the day it is the rands and cents that talk."

Dominant coalition

The five participants who served on their organisation's EXCO were part of the regular top management meetings in their organisations. The five participants who were not involved in these meetings were represented by a supervisor who would convey the department's views to top management. The frequency of these meetings varied from weekly, bi-weekly, monthly to every second month. This was the main channel that the participants used to communicate with the dominant coalition and the participants who were not involved in these meetings submitted reports to raise issues with the dominant coalition.

As a result of the above, all ten participants indicated that they do have the power and authority to openly counsel the dominant coalition about ethical courses of action. One participant noted, "It is about having those tough conversations and sometimes they are really, really tough. It must happen in an open and honest way."

In response to the question on how top management responded when the sampled practitioners voiced their concerns and brought stakeholder views to the discussion, the majority of participants indicated that their opinions were respected within the business, but that their input or suggestions might not always be actioned. This, in part, depended on the leadership style of the CEO and the rest of top management, especially their commitment – or lack thereof – to act in the best interest of the stakeholders. A participant stated that the purpose might not always be to change the decision or to sway the views of top management, but rather to inform top management about the potential outcome of a decision. In her opinion, it allowed top management to make a properly informed decision. According to the participant, the most important consideration for a communicator was whether the stakeholders were represented. The stakeholders might not necessarily have the right or most popular view, but it was important for top management to be aware of the different views, as suggested by dominant coalition

theory.

The findings suggested that the sample of senior public relations practitioners provide valuable insights into stakeholders to facilitate tough conversations with the dominant coalition about how their organisation acts, and stakeholders' views and opinions about that behaviour. The fact that their feedback does not always get implemented, was identified as a barrier which hampered the participants' potential contribution to top management, as suggested by the dominant coalition theory. For the participants, it nevertheless remained important that the dominant coalition members knew how their actions affected stakeholders, in order for them to make informed decisions. As one participant suggested, "When an organisation's values and philosophy are about transparency and honesty, there is a strong argument for having public relations at the most senior level."

Relational approach

When asked whether their companies aimed to balance the interests of both the organisation and its stakeholders, as suggested by relational theory, all participants concurred that their organisations did strive to do so and that the public relations staff assisted them in this process to comprehend what was at stake and what would be in the best interests of all the parties involved. This showed that the public relations practice had evolved to focus on relationships with all stakeholders, as stipulated in relational theory, at least as far as the ten JSE-listed companies were concerned.

It was positive to note that the participants did have a level of influence in the decision-making processes that affected stakeholders, by providing insight into and intelligence on stakeholders. However, the findings also indicated barriers that might limit this influence. To balance the interests of the organisation and all the stakeholders could prove to be difficult. As Participant C said:

> A business is not an island and cannot operate in isolation. While you do not always have the answer to a certain stakeholder problem, or the issue is an industry-wide problem, it remains important to be respectful towards all stakeholders and engage appropriately to give stakeholders peace of mind that their concerns are being listened to and that the business will act where it can play a role.

Another participant noted that it was not always possible to satisfy all stakeholders, especially in South Africa, considering the country's economic, political and social environment. Another hurdle was the fact that the business's main focus on profit sometimes lead to stakeholder issues being neglected. This could result in a decision being implemented, even if it might damage relationships with certain stakeholders.

These hurdles further highlighted the need for senior practitioners to give input at the highest level, as it was important for top management of large organisations to comprehend what is at stake and what would be in the best interests of all the parties involved. This was critical for the business to remain financially stable and continue to provide employment to all its staff.

Reflective paradigm

When asked how they made sense of their organisation's external environment to reflect those issues internally, nine out of ten participants reported that they conducted environmental scanning or monitoring of some sort to understand what issues their organisation or industry were facing and to determine what the impact could be. It was noted by one participant that it was important to be sensitive to the larger political and social environment, as that this would affect how the organisation spoke to its market. Another participant agreed that reading the external environment allowed the communication department to align the business's objectives to the external environment to determine how the organisation could play a role as a corporate citizen in addressing societal imbalances.

Participants reported different methods of and reasons why they practiced reflection in the work situation. Participant D, for example, revealed that her external monitoring encompassed research areas

such as focus groups and surveys among key target audiences, including journalists, analysts, clients, employees and the general public. The results of the research assisted her department in determining how the organisation should respond to issues and external events. Another participant mentioned that there were mostly business and financially minded individuals around the table at the executive meetings, so having a communication or public relations expert in the room would bring the "softer" and more "human" themes to the table. This would allow for better reflection. Another participant concurred, "At the end of the day you're dealing with people, and without people who are into what you're doing, who support you ... and trust you ... you're not going to have a business."

Yet another participant reported that she wore the hat of the stakeholder to look at things from the stakeholder's view and played the role of "devil's advocate", explaining what might happen when things went wrong.

The findings also showed that all the participants had specific and set ways of conveying stakeholder views to the organisation's top management, either through in-person communication, formal meetings or reports they regularly submitted.

The above and the rest of the data indicated that the reflective paradigm was practised by all ten sampled practitioners within their respective organisations and that they fulfilled the role of Steyn's "reflective strategist" in practice. As reflective strategists, the interviewed practitioners monitored the external environment to identify issues and relevant trends to reflect on internally in terms of the potential impact on the organisation. The findings confirm that the participants addressed stakeholder issues with senior management and shared insights gathered through external monitoring. The participants reported that they also gathered intelligence on the context in which the organisation operated through monitoring and scanning activities, and that this enabled them to offer a strategic contribution in the workplace.

Roles theory

All participants agreed that they were the key individuals to make decisions in respect of public relations issues. However, when it pertained to non-public relations issues, only five participants participated in decisions regarding those issues.

In response to the question on whether the top management of the respective organisations understood how the organisation's policies, behaviour and strategies affected stakeholders, the data illustrated that there were some level of understanding among top management on these issues, but that the public relations managers were required to further educate them. The majority of the participants, because of their seniority, also mentioned that they expected senior management to acknowledge and comprehend why stakeholder issues were important.

The participants understood that profit remained a critical focus for the senior managers, but highlighted that it was the public relations specialist's role to ensure that, in the quest for profit, the business did not neglect other important stakeholders. According to the participants, they sometimes had to give way to capitalist means as their input would not always be implemented, but by feeding the information on stakeholders to top management, the executives were empowered to make an informed decision about their chosen course of action. The findings therefore indicated that these roles were important in the daily work of the ten participants, which indicated they fulfilled a strategic role, as set out by roles theory.

The findings confirmed that the ten participants did contribute to the development of their organisation's strategy, and the type of input they provided covered social, environmental, political, and activist groups to achieve mutual benefit for all the parties involved.

An interesting observation from the data is the recurrence of the importance of internal stakeholders and staff in strategic planning. The participants thereby indicated that they did not simply rely on the human resources department to address employee issues. These public relations practitioners would provide insight into how employees might react to certain strategies and consider the impact on the internal stakeholders.

Participants reported instances where the public relations team was notified of a new strategy only

after it had been developed, and instructed to simply implement and communicate the strategy to the internal and external stakeholders. Two participants, however, reported that their departments were only one step removed from newly drafted strategies. These participants were given an opportunity to critically analyse the strategy in draft form to highlight concerns and provide insight into how the strategy might be perceived by others.

The five individuals who serve on their organisation's EXCO participate from the initial stages of the decision-making process at a senior level when public relations and non-public relations issues are involved. A further three participants said it depended on the type of decision, while the remaining two participants noted that decision-making unrelated to public relations was done without them. But all three reported that they would not simply implement decisions made by others before they fully understood the purpose and goals of such decisions.

When discussing whether the interviewees coached top management about stakeholder issues and raised stakeholder views with them, the majority voiced a need for educating top management. Three participants did not like using the word "coaching", but preferred the terms "influence", "advise" or "counsel". All participants agreed that, while members of top management did have some form of understanding of the value of public relations, constant education and reminders were required.

Summary of barriers to playing a strategic role

The findings showed that the sampled public relations specialists faced a number of barriers that prevented them from contributing towards enterprise strategy formulation and strategic decision-making processes in their organisations. The major barriers identified in the findings were the notion that business decisions were usually made by the financial contributors to the business, and that it was extremely difficult to prove or measure communication and public relations' contribution in monetary terms. One of the participant articulated this as follows: "The biggest barrier is the issue that it is extremely difficult to measure what I do. There are certain things that need to happen. The company must perform ... and sustain itself to pay good dividends to all its stakeholders."

There are several additional barriers these practitioners face: misperceptions about the strategic role of public relations; senior managers' lack of understanding of what the function could offer the business at a strategic level; profit-focused decision-making at an executive level that culminates in the neglect of stakeholder issues; a lack of professional networking for public relations executives; and flawed methods of filling communication and public relations roles.

The participants reported that misperceptions still existed among some senior managers about the strategic role of public relations; it was still seen as a support function, and not considered a core strategic function as it should be, in terms of the theory. This leads to a lack of insight into what the function can offer the business at a strategic level. One participant noted that traditional business structures had not organised themselves to align with the evolving business paradigm and the need to engage with stakeholders, taking the stakeholder view into account. Only once this happened, would communication specialists be considered important contributors at the executive table. One participant remarked that public relations specialists brought a perspective to the table that was not necessarily viewed as a direct contribution to the triple bottom line, but yet it was.

The derogatory term, "PR poppie" [PR dolly], was mentioned by two participants in reference to the stereotypical viewpoint that there were women in the profession who were appointed based on their glamorous appearance rather than their skill. There are also misperceptions that public relations is purely a media relations, event management or crisis communication function.

One participant noted that the way in which senior public relations and communication roles are filled in South Africa, was flawed. She noted that companies appointed individuals with experience in media studies or journalism, which she did not regard as sufficient to fulfil a strategic communication role.

The findings indicated that traditional organisational structures were not conducive to the institutionalisation of public relations at executive level. This restricted senior communication strategists' access to the dominant coalition and participation in strategic decision-making. One of the participants

reported that her department usually was consulted only when there was a problem or an issue. She noted that with the advent of the internet and social media, it was critical to engage with stakeholders and take the stakeholder view into account, but this had not translated into organisational structures yet. "There are very few companies that have an executive for communication who sits at EXCO ... and that's ideally how you should have it ... I think the biggest barrier is how traditional business structures have organised themselves."

Exclusive relationships in the organisation were also identified as a barrier. One participant, for example, noted that she faced inner circle issues, as certain people developed strong relationships that often excluded others from contributing. It was also mentioned by two participants that female executives in the profession were not taken as seriously as their male counterparts. In this regard, Benecke and Phumo (2021) confirm that gender inequality exists in the communication profession in South Africa. They believe that the aspect of gender in leadership in the communication profession needs to be considered. They argue that the exclusion of women in positions of influence and their under-representation perpetuates patriarchal approaches to communication. This undermines the potential of open communication, and the connectedness of stakeholders, which is a critical ingredient for impactful communication in a dynamic operating environment.

The findings indicated that as only half of the participants do add strategic input into the decision-making process at top-level management, their input may not be regarded as core business insights, and therefore do not carry as much weight as it should. Therefore, while the practitioners are able to provide input, their suggestions are not always considered and/or implemented, as communication or public relations experts are not regarded as experts on the operational aspects of the business.

Understandably, the senior management and CEO make the final decisions and the participants mentioned that the main priority for senior management was to keep the business afloat and remain profitable. This, however, suggests that top management's decisions are often perceived as only profit driven.

Recommendations to overcome the identified barriers

When asked what could be done to overcome the barriers that prevent the sampled practitioners from providing strategic input at executive level in their respective companies, the participants made several suggestions. A summary of their recommendations, validated by the theoretical constructs of this study, is provided below.

It is noted from the findings that profit-driven business initiatives can make it difficult for public relations specialists to foster relationships with key stakeholders, as senior executives are mainly concerned with profits and financial gains. The participants explained that in the quest for profits, senior executives sometimes make decisions that do not align with stakeholder views or opinions, but will make sense for the business to remain sustainable and profitable. It is important to recognise profitability as an important factor in a business's ability to continue paying salaries to staff, but it is vital that senior managers understand that in today's business environment, organisations cannot focus on profits alone.

The emphasis on people, planet and purpose has increased over the years, and organisations that do not take cognisance of this will not be supported by stakeholders and therefore not generate profits. Senior managers need to grasp new ways of conducting business and why they should consider outside influences if they wish to operate successfully and profitability in this new business paradigm. As reflective strategists, public relations specialists can and should assist senior management to understand these issues, balance the interests of all the stakeholders, and make the organisation more effective.

The participants agreed that the onus to overcome the barriers they experience largely rests on individual practitioners. Practitioners should understand where they resort in the business process to add value at a strategic level and continue proving the function's worth by demonstrating its value. This will help in building mutual trust with top management and thereby validating a seat at the executive table.

It was also suggested that as individuals, public relations practitioners must re-profile their departments and request attendance at strategic meetings.

Public relations managers should repeatedly emphasise their value and ask for representation at senior level. It was stated that individuals should be relentless in pursuing a seat at the executive table by showing their value.

It was also suggested that a greater understanding of the role of communication needs to be generated, especially in organisations that still see public relations as part of the marketing function. When an organisation's values and philosophy are about transparency and honesty, there is a strong argument for having public relations at the most senior level.

Participants also made suggestions that involve the public relations industry at large. They mentioned that there is a need for improved industry networks to aid practitioners to develop alliances with like-minded individuals in the industry to create better opportunities for professionals at executive level, and to assist in creating awareness of the value these professionals can add.

Professional institutes in the field should also assist in creating awareness of the benefits of including senior public relations strategists in the dominant coalition, and promoting the idea that a business cannot claim to stand for transparency without considering stakeholders at the most senior level of decision-making and strategy formulation.

Academic researchers should also play their part in advancing the profession, especially through their research endeavours. It was mentioned by several participants that research is needed to find a solution to the measurement issue – the fact that it is extremely difficult to prove or measure communication and public relations' contribution in monetary terms. Researchers can assist in finding new ways of validating the contribution of reflective boundary-spanning strategists in business. Participants, for example, noted that the industry needs new ways to measure reputation and the impact that preventative steps have on the business and its reputation. Academics can also assist the industry by doing a needs analysis to identify areas of research that may be beneficial to practitioners at the executive table. Practitioners can, for example, provide academics with insight into the questions that executives at senior level are asking and financial measures they are demanding.

CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

The findings of the research indicated that the sampled public relations managers, to an extent, do contribute to strategic decision-making and enterprise strategy formulation in a selection of the top 100 companies listed on the JSE in South Africa. However, the findings also indicated that the ten participants still face a number of challenges when it comes to influencing the dominant coalition and contributing towards executive decision-making processes in their organisations, including proving the function's value in monetary terms, balancing the quest for profit, incorrect perceptions about the role of public relations, and senior executives not taking the public relations manager's advice seriously.

The study concluded that there is still work to be done to create a better understanding of the value of the profession and the potential benefits of including public relations strategists in the dominant coalition. Building mutually beneficial relationships with stakeholders, based on knowledge of and insight into societal issues, has become increasingly important in current times. Companies are increasingly under public scrutiny by stakeholders who demand transparency, sustainable business practices and accountability in the current context of climate change, globalisation and disruptive digital media. Involving senior public relations strategists in executive decision-making makes sense and has become a requirement.

Lastly, it is acknowledged by the authors that the research reported on has limitations. Probably the biggest limitation is the fact that, given the size of the sample and the fact that it was a non-probability sample, the research findings cannot be generalised, neither to the rest of the top 100 JSE-listed companies nor the entire public relations industry in South Africa. Furthermore, the results were based on the perceptions of the participants and may therefore contain some bias. Further research into the institutionalisation of public relations at executive level in the top 100 JSE-listed companies is therefore recommended, including a survey among CEOs.

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