

## **Strategic communication management by NPOs in the adult-literacy sector in south africa**

### *ABSTRACT*

The Steyn and Puth (2000) model for strategic communication management has been applied by students and other project participants to non-profit organisations (NPOs), government institutions and small and medium enterprises in South Africa, but organisations' communication practices have not been measured against the model. This paper reports on the strategic communication management practices of NPOs in the adult-literacy sector in South Africa, as compared with the strategic steps in the Steyn and Puth model. The aim of this study was to analyse current communication practices in the adult-literacy sector of South African NPOs in terms of the normative, theoretical Steyn and Puth model for strategic communication management. The purpose was to understand the participating NPOs' operational and strategic communication management context, since little research in this regard has to date been conducted. Recommendations for strategic communication management and relationship building by NPOs are also made.

## **INTRODUCTION**

As a developing society, South Africa faces a variety of social problems, including adult illiteracy. The 2001 Census in South Africa indicates that approximately 8.5 million South African adults, or over one-third of the South African adult population (33.9%), are functionally illiterate (Statistics South Africa, 2003: 41; Aitchison & Harley, 2006: 95; Ntshingila, 2006: 1). This figure dropped to 26% in 2007, but this still means that more than a quarter of the South African population is functionally illiterate (Statistics South Africa, 2007a: 2; Statistics South Africa, 2007b: 8).

Adult illiterates have either no or reduced political say, limited marketable skills to improve their lifestyles, limited participation in debates and decisions that influence lives directly, and limited organised means of expression (Anon., 1998: 18; Anon, 2004: 13; Baatjes & Mathe, 2004: 398; Kassam, 1989: 531–532; Naidoo, 1998: 6; Naidu, 1999: 7; Roman, 2004: 85–88; Tukakhomo, 2002: 2).

*Basic literacy* refers to only the initial skills upon which basic education is grounded. *Functional literacy* refers to all the reading, writing and counting skills needed to function autonomously in a given society, and as such, to engage effectively in all activities in which literacy is normally assumed. Functional literacy thus encompasses a wide continuum of skills, ranging from basic alphabetisation and varying degrees of proficiency in workplace languages and basic life skills to function in society, to a complex set of skills and behaviours embedded within the political, economic and social relations of a society (Aitchison, 2001: 134; French, 1988: 26; Kagitcibasi, Goksen, & Gulgoz, 2005: 472–474; Muller & Murtagh, 2002: 3; Roman, 2004: 81).

In South Africa, it is generally accepted that the minimum education-level indicator of sustainable functional literacy is seven years of schooling – that is, up to Grade 7, with nine years of schooling indicating a full general education – that is, up to Grade 9 (Harley, Aitchison, Lyster, & Land, 1996: 21, 23–25; Aitchison, 2001: 134; Aitchison & Harley, 2006: 90). However, it is acknowledged that government itself cannot effectively address societal issues, such as HIV and Aids awareness and prevention, environmental protection, poverty alleviation, job creation, victim aid and adult illiteracy (Zhang, 2005: 14–15). The role of NPOs in addressing service delivery and social and development issues in South Africa is therefore increasingly emphasised (Zhang, 2005: 15), as NPOs are well equipped to address the above-mentioned issues.

In this regard, Liebenberg (1997: 75–76) highlights some of the strengths of NPOs:

- NPOs can effectively identify community needs because they are closer to the community than the government structures.
- Owing to their functioning at community level, NPOs tend to have more legitimacy in the community they serve. Communities are then also more likely to support NPO initiatives.
- The high degree of community participation encourages the use and adaptation of local knowledge and technology to local development needs.

- NPOs' non-bureaucratic structures are flexible and adaptive to both local conditions and changes in the environment, enabling them to respond more quickly to difficult situations that may crop up.

Despite the above-mentioned strengths, NPOs experience a vast array of constraints that impede their optimal performance (Jeppe, 1992a: 172; Jeppe, 1992b: 32–33; Merrington, 1992: 16 as quoted by Liebenberg, 1997: 75; Clark, 1990: 57–60 as quoted by Liebenberg, 1997: 75; Zhang, 2005: 18). Such constraints include:

- difficulty in acquiring funding;
- a lack of funding, resulting in NPOs having to interrupt or terminate projects, with detrimental consequences for beneficiaries;
- inadequate funding, preventing NPOs from conducting research concerning their activities and the effective implementation thereof;
- significant delays in approval and funding of government projects;
- excessive bureaucracy concerning management of government projects;
- a sensitive political environment;
- a lack of strong and continuous leadership;
- inadequate leadership, planning, administration, organisational and management skills;
- inadequate training of staff, due mainly to a lack of funds;
- a lack of technical expertise and skill;
- an inability to replicate projects to ensure sustainability;
- an inability to collaborate effectively with government services;
- a lack of co-ordination amongst individual NPOs to maximise efforts;
- an inability to learn from other NPOs' mistakes because of isolation and rivalry (mainly for funding) between NPOs;
- from a communication perspective, NPOs do not always have the requisite knowledge of the value of strategic communication management, which includes stakeholder relationship management. Also, NPOs often cannot afford to appoint qualified personnel for communication and stakeholder management (Dyer, Buell, Harrison, & Weber, 2002: 15; 2002: 15; Naudé, 2001: 265), or may appoint one person to perform multiple tasks, of which communication management might be one. Therefore, most NPOs either do not have a traditional communication department, or the communication and marketing functions are combined into one department.

It is clear from the above that NPOs experience mainly two types of general constraints, namely funding and lack of management skills, which includes strategic communication management. Regarding funding, NPOs in the adult-literacy sector experience government funding as unreliable in that continuous funding is not always ensured because of budgetary problems (Baatjes & Mathe, 2004: 405–406). There is also uncertainty regarding private donors because the funding criteria can, for example, change from supporting adult basic education programmes to supporting programmes involving work with HIV-infected babies. Often, too, the donors do not inform the NPO about the change in time for the NPO to search for new donors (Wiggill, 2009).

Apart from these general problems, NPOs in the adult-literacy sector also experience some problems unique to the sector. The lack of reliable statistics in the reports from the Department of Education stating that they are on track in their aim to reduce adult illiteracy affects funding (Pretorius, 2004: 344; Willenberg, 2005: 163; Aitchison & Harley, 2006: 89–112). Such unreliable reports could result in perceptions that the sector is well funded and thus not in need, which could lead to donors allocating less money to the field of adult illiteracy.

Furthermore, the formalisation of adult education contributes to *poor learner retention* because adults are taught school subjects that do not answer to their everyday needs (Baatjes & Mathe, 2004: 406–407). When learners fail to perform, or drop out of school, the communal relationship (see Section 3.1) between learners and the NPOs, as well as between learners and donors, is damaged. Poor learner retention also negatively affects the exchange relationship (See section 3.1) between donors and NPOs, as donors do not want to fund what they perceive as a lost cause, where results are evident only after several years or where few outcomes are achieved.

Given the constraints of NPOs in the adult-literacy sector in South Africa, it can be concluded that strategic communication management is essential for building the strong, lasting stakeholder relationships necessary for the effective functioning of NPOs. Lack of strategic communication management affects stakeholder relationship building, which, in turn, affects funding negatively. The normative Steyn and Puth (2000) model might assist NPOs in managing communication and stakeholder relationships. Based on the work of Grunig, Dozier, Ehling, Grunig, Repper, and White (1992), Steyn and Puth (2000) developed a model for the strategic management of communication in organisations as part of a longitudinal study research project conducted at the University of Pretoria. Although students and other project participants have applied Steyn and Puth's model to NPOs, government institutions and small and medium enterprises in South Africa, the operational reality of organisations' communication practices has not been measured against the model (Steyn, 2008; Steyn, 2007: 163; Steyn, 2002: 19; Steyn, 2000: 13; Steyn & Green, 2001; Steyn & Nunes, 2001).

In the cases where NPOs recognise that communication and relationship management are essential to the existence of the organisation, communication is mostly unplanned and without a clear view of the relationship objectives for a particular stakeholder (Bowers, 2000: 13; Dyer et al., 2002: 15). It should be noted that even though some NPOs realise the importance of strategic communication management, they face many constraints impeding the application of strategic communication management, which includes relationship management.

It is against this background that the present study investigated the *strategic* communication practices of NPOs in the adult-literacy sector in South Africa, by comparing these practices with the strategic steps in the Steyn and Puth model. More specifically, this paper endeavours to answer the following research questions:

- How do NPOs in the adult-literacy sector practise strategic communication management within their unique context?
- How, if at all, do the communication practices of NPOs in the adult-literacy sector

correspond to the strategic steps in Steyn and Puth's model for strategic communication management?

## 1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 1.1 Stakeholder relationships in the non-profit organisation sector

Relationship building is an essential part of strategic communication management for NPOs. Knox and Guar (2007: 116) note that NPO stakeholders are generally more important than those in commercial businesses because they often have complex relationships with the NPOs and are closely involved in the achievement of organisational goals. Building strong relationships is particularly important in the case of donors because good relationships could result in repeated and increased donations (Brennan & Brady, 1999: 332; Brennan & Brady, 1999: 327–337; Sargeant, 2001: 177; Bennett & Barkensjo, 2005: 136; MacMillan et al., 2005: 806; Polonsky & Sargeant, 2007: 461–462). NPOs furthermore operate in a highly competitive environment where an ever-increasing number of NPOs rely on a small number of donors (MacMillan, Money, Money, & Downing, 2005: 806). When donors are given the opportunity to interact with the NPO, it seems unlikely that their support will lapse, as they have a relationship with the NPO and feel appreciated by the NPO (Sargeant, 2001: 188–190). Grunig, Grunig and Dozier (2002: 548–550) highlight the value of strategic two-way symmetrical communication in developing and maintaining strong, long-lasting relationships with an organisation's stakeholders. Owing to the importance of strategic communication for this purpose, the focus of this study is strategic communication management by NPOs, in the adult-literacy sector.

Two types of relationships exist between an organisation and its stakeholders, namely exchange and communal relationships (Hon & Grunig, 1999: 20). An *exchange relationship* is one in which members benefit from one another in response to specific benefits received in the past or expected in the future (Hung, 2005: 396; Hung, 2007: 456), and as such is based on the economic principle of exchange (Clark & Mills, 1979: 12–24). A *communal relationship* is one in which benefits are given in order to please the other party, without the benefactor expecting the beneficiary to return the favour (Hon & Grunig, 1999: 21; Hung, 2007: 456). Communal relationships are closely associated with commitment amongst all involved in the relationship, as partners in the relationship are concerned with each other's welfare (Clark & Mills, 1979: 12–24; Grunig, 2000: 2; Paine, 2003: 8).

Hung (2005: 415–417; 2007: 457–458) refines the concept of communal relationships by depicting stakeholder relationships on a continuum ranging from exploitive relationships (only concerned about oneself) to one-sided communal relationships (only concerned about others). Manipulative relationships, contractual relationships, symbiotic relationships, exchange relationships, covenantal relationships, and mutual communal relationships are placed between exploitive relationships and one-sided communal relationships. Hung (2005: 415–417; 2007: 457–458) emphasises that the extremes on the continuum are

not recommended for organisations, because exploiting stakeholders will result in a bad reputation for the organisation and loss of public support. Exchange, covenantal and mutual communal relationships strive towards a win-win zone and are viewed as best practices. Strategic communication practices should thus aim to build these three relationships.

An organisation's motivation for survival in the institutional environment affects the types of relationships it aims to form with its stakeholders. Thus, organisations do not engage in only one type of relationship with all their stakeholders, but interchange these depending on their situation and their goals (Hung, 2001: 50–51; Hung, 2007: 454).

In the NPO sector, strong communal relationships with specifically the donors are necessary because NPOs receive funds from them without having to return such funds. However, NPOs also have exchange relationships with donors because donors expect NPOs to deliver certain services to their beneficiaries (which are also the donor organisation's beneficiaries). In the case of NPOs in the adult-literacy sector, donors provide funds to the NPOs in exchange for their providing literacy education to illiterate adults. Relationships should therefore be managed according to the demands unique to each type of relationship.

In addition to the types of relationships, different *relationship outcomes* indicating the quality of the relationship can also be identified (Hon & Grunig, 1999: 18–20; Huang, 2001: 65–68; Hung, 2001: 25–30). Trust refers to one party's level of confidence in and willingness to expose itself to the other party. *Control mutuality* refers to the extent to which parties agree on who has rightful power to influence the other (in the case of NPOs this would, for example, mean that the NPO could co-decide with a donor organisation on how funds should be spent). *Commitment* entails that all parties involved feel that the relationship is worth the time and energy spent on it. The level of *relationship satisfaction* refers to the extent to which one party is favourably disposed towards the other because positive expectations regarding the relationship are reinforced. It is therefore necessary for NPOs continually to build and maintain relationships with their stakeholders by applying two-way symmetrical communication in such a way as to encourage trust and commitment between NPOs and their stakeholders, which, in turn, will lead to mutual relationship satisfaction.

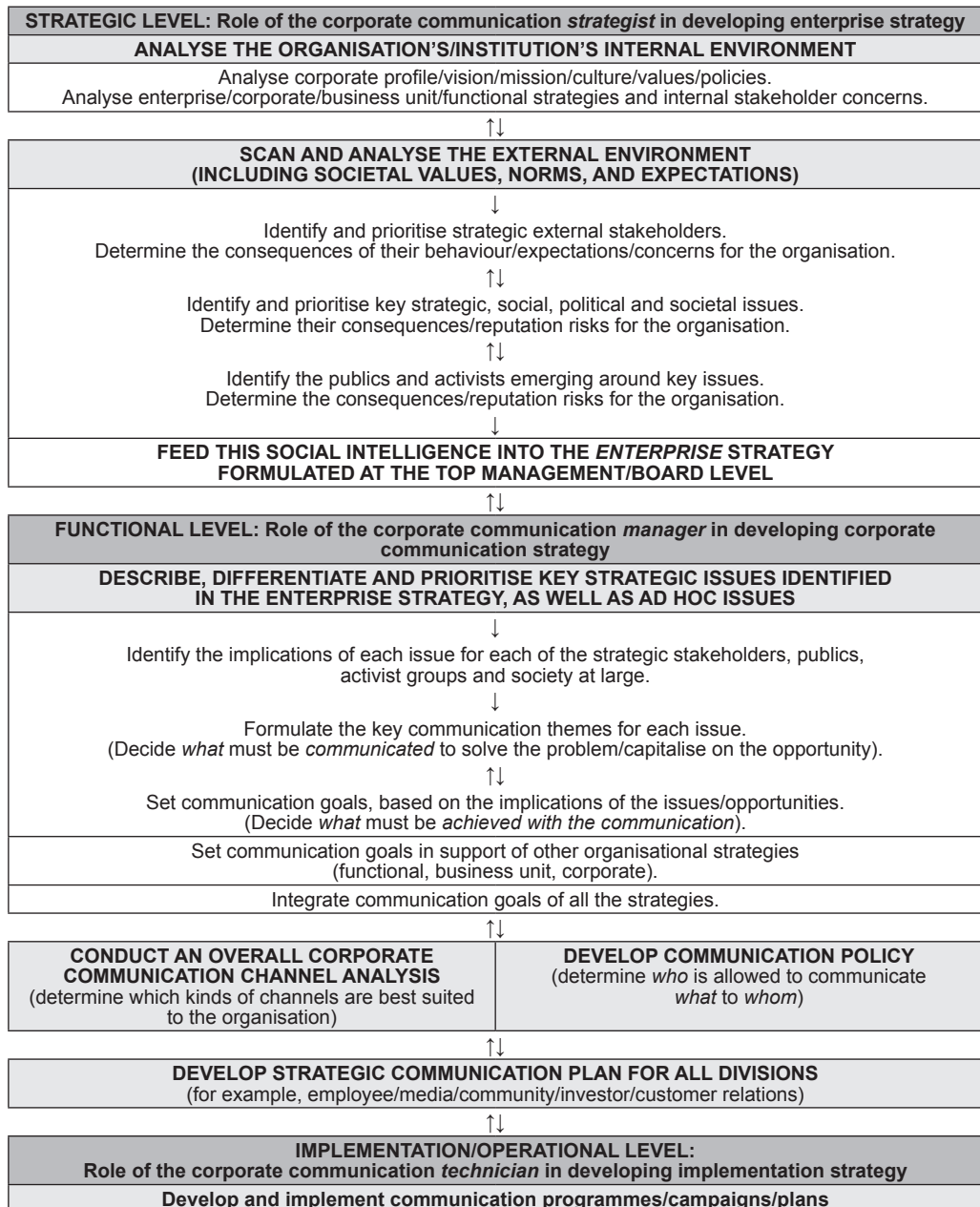
In order to build and maintain quality relationships between an NPO and its stakeholders, it is essential to manage these relationships strategically. Steyn and Puth's model for strategic communication is based on the *Excellence Study* by Grunig et al. (1992), in which it was empirically verified that two-way symmetrical communication is both a normative and an ethical way to practise communication management for the more effective achievement of organisational goals. Research, the norm of reciprocity, and the importance of managing relationships with stakeholders are inherent in two-way symmetrical communication, and they form the basis of the Steyn and Puth model.

## 1.2 Strategic communication management

In their research towards developing a model of strategic communication management, Steyn and Puth (2000: 20–21) empirically verified a differentiation in respect of the traditional communication manager's role, namely between that of the strategist and the manager (Steyn & Puth, 2000: 19, 21). An additional role is that of the communication technician. Steyn (1999: 27) expands her view of roles by explaining that the strategist is responsible for the identification of the organisation's strategic stakeholders, for proactive environmental monitoring to detect or predict changes, and for the identification of issues that could potentially influence the attitudes of internal and external stakeholders. This information is presented to strategic decision makers to compile the organisation's enterprise strategy, from which the communication strategy is directly derived. Several researchers share Steyn's view that communication management should have a strategic function, and, that a dedicated, highly skilled practitioner, functioning as a strategist, should fulfil the role (Dozier, 1992: 341; Wright, 1995: 186; Toth, Serini, Wright, & Emig, 1998: 158; Moss, Warnaby, & Newman, 2000: 301; Van Ruler, 2000: 412).

In addition to a highly skilled communication practitioner, the organisational worldview and culture determines what communication model will be practised and whether the head of the communication department will be part of the dominant coalition (Grunig & Grunig, 1992: 297–303; Grunig et al., 2002: 9, 331-339, 361). Therefore, the use of two-way communication within a symmetrical organisational worldview, practised by a well-trained communication practitioner who fulfils a strategic role in the dominant coalition, contributes to effective stakeholder-relationship management, and ultimately to organisational effectiveness and excellence.

Steyn and Puth's model is divided into levels that indicate the various roles and tasks of the communication practitioner. All the tasks form a unit to assist the communication practitioner in practising *strategic* communication management. However, this model only serves as a guideline for communication practitioners. Even though the steps in the process of developing a communication strategy are indicated in a linear fashion, they do not necessarily always transpire in this sequence in practice (Steyn & Puth, 2000: 76). The practitioner decides, according to the specific circumstances, what is to be done at a specific point in time (Steyn & Puth, 2000: 76). Furthermore, it should be borne in mind that the development of the communication strategy is a continuous, or rolling, process in which strategy is evaluated and adjusted. Figure 1 provides a graphic representation of the Steyn and Puth model.



Source: Adapted from Steyn and Puth (2000: 63); Steyn (2007: 164)

Figure 1: Steyn and Puth's model



The use of Steyn and Puth's model for strategic communication specifically assists an organisation in aligning its communication strategy and its plans with organisational strategies, and in building strong, mutually beneficial relationships with its stakeholders for more effective achievement of the organisation's strategic goals.

However, the Steyn and Puth model has been criticised, by both communication practitioners and theorists for being theoretically idealistic, while also not considering practical constraints (Ströh, 2007: 199–220). Proper implementation of the model might thus not always be possible, owing to practical constraints in the adult-literacy non-profit organisation sector, as explained earlier.

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

The communication practices and operational context of five selected NPOs in the adult-literacy sector in South Africa were subjected to in-depth, qualitative investigation. The aim of the study was to achieve a deeper understanding of the strategic communication practices and needs of the selected group of NPOs, and not simply a superficial analysis of surface comparability between large numbers of respondents (Mason, 2002: 65).

A qualitative approach was followed in that it would offer both an understanding of the specific operational constraints in the environment of each NPO and an opportunity to investigate the reasons and motives behind the NPOs' communication practices. The findings were compared with the Steyn and Puth model (2000) for strategic communication management, which is a theoretical, normative model, in order to determine the extent to which NPOs in the adult-literacy sector practice communication management according to the model.

The 2007 *SANGONeT Prodder Directory*, the Adult Literacy Network and the Cape Gateway Internet website were used for selection purposes, with the main selection criterion; applied being that the NPO should be working mainly towards the mitigation of *adult illiteracy*. The NPOs included differed in terms of size and type:

- *SHARE Adult Education Centre* has been operating in the Helderberg region of the Western Cape since 1990;
- *Project Literacy* was launched in 1973 and is currently one of the largest adult basic education and training (ABET) providers in South Africa;
- *Family Literacy Project* has been operating in KwaZulu-Natal since 2000;
- *Optimus Foundation* was established in Johannesburg in 1976; and
- *ASB (Army Support Base) Potchefstroom ABET Centre* was launched in 1995 at the Potchefstroom Artillery School in order to provide ABET to Army staff members. The ABET Centre was thus an NPO within a larger organisation.

Qualitative, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the CEO and/or specific person responsible for the communication functions in each organisation. Emphasis was placed on insight and understanding of the context in which strategic communication management took

place in the selected NPOs. Therefore, questions covered the communication function in the organisation, as well as the organisational structure, culture and worldview. These questions sought to determine the organisations' approach to communication, in order to link them to specific communication models. Furthermore, questions covered the organisations' specific communication and stakeholder management practices, to determine whether such practices were aligned with the steps in the Steyn and Puth model. More specifically, the interviews aimed to:

- determine the selected NPOs' organisational world view and culture, as well as the communication model practised;
- determine the role of strategic communication management and stakeholder-relationship management in the selected NPOs; and
- compare the *strategic* communication practices of the selected NPOs with the *strategic* steps in the Steyn and Puth model.

### **3. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

#### **3.1 Organisational worldview**

All but one of the interviewed NPOs was largely managed according to the premises characterising a symmetrical worldview (Grunig, 1989: 38–39; Grunig & White, 1992: 43–44; Naudé, 2001: 71–72). All the NPOs were supporters of participative management and encouraged staff members to provide input into management. All but one of the interviewed NPOs' organisational cultures were characterised by emphasis on equity, autonomy, responsibility, participation and innovation. Although the participating NPOs did not practise strategic communication management, this finding implies that most of the interviewed NPOs' organisational worldview would support the implementation of strategic communication management.

#### **3.2 Communication model practised**

The premise that excellent communication management should have a *managerial role*, and not merely a technical role as premised by the asymmetrical worldview, was absent in all the interviewed NPOs (Grunig, 2000: 30; Grunig & White, 1992: 53–55; Naudé, 2001: 72). In the main, this could be attributable to the lack of qualified communication practitioners and/or knowledge on strategic communication practices in the NPOs investigated. None of the NPOs employed a communication practitioner, except for Project Literacy, whose Fundraising and Communications Manager had a half-day position. None of the persons responsible for organisational communication, not even Project Literacy's Fundraising and Communications Manager, had any formal communication training, although some remarked that they had "picked it [communication management] up through years of experience".

All the NPOs predominantly practised a one-way dissemination of information, inherent in the application of the asymmetrical public information communication model, as described by Grunig and Hunt (1984: 21–27). All the NPOs viewed communication as a means by which

to “to tell and remind” stakeholders what they do. Two of the NPOs, who in addition provide ABET training to the business sector at cost, also applied the asymmetrical communication model (Grunig & Hunt 1984: 21–27). These NPOs used scientific research on the benefits and quality of their ABET provision to *encourage* potential clients (that is, the marketplace and employers) to employ their ABET programmes, this despite the high costs involved. The interviewed NPOs thus viewed communication management as a *technical, marketing function* without a strategic management role. The communication models applied by the NPOs are therefore incompatible with the practice of strategic communication management, which presuppose employing the two-way models.

### 3.3 Strategic communication management practices

Although some of the NPOs realised that a communication strategy could benefit them, none considered this crucial:

- “it [a communication strategy] is not absolutely necessary at the moment because of good communication in classes”;
- “a formal communication strategy would probably add to what we can do”;
- “does need a communication strategy, but we need a dedicated person for that”;
- “does not really need a communication strategy, although it is important to let people know what you’re doing”;
- “we’re still small, [therefore it is] not really necessary for a communication strategy until the organisation gets bigger”; and
- “every organisation needs a communication strategy, but I’m not sold on a formal communication strategy. I have seen some corporate communication strategies and they’re just over the top and too focused on profits”.

Although all the interviewees were of the opinion that a dedicated person would have to be appointed to conduct formal strategic communication and relationship building – considered to be a time-consuming task - none of them thought they could afford it. This must be viewed within the context of their perception that strategic communication and relationship management do not have that much value. It was thus not surprising that none of the interviewed NPOs had a communication management strategy either to manage their organisational risks and stakeholders’ issues or to build and maintain stakeholder relationships.

In comparing the NPOs communication practices with the *strategic* steps in Steyn and Puth’s model, it became evident that none of the interviewed NPOs conducted *formal* environmental scanning/research to identify their most strategically important stakeholders, organisational risks and stakeholders’ issues. Several of the NPOs conducted some form of formal research when starting large projects or planning significant changes in the organisation or its curriculum. This research, however, did not specifically focus on the views of stakeholders concerning the organisation, stakeholders’ issues or the communication needs of stakeholders. However, all the NPOs’ senior management staff did engage with stakeholders and thereby brought stakeholder opinions *informally* into decision-making processes. Other forms of *informal* environmental

scanning/research were reading and using the Internet extensively, as well as networking with others in the adult-literacy sector. However, none of the formal or informal research and environmental scanning focused on the strategic application of *communication* to minimise organisational risks, build and maintain relationships or address stakeholders' issues.

During the interviews, all the NPOs identified their learners and donors as their most important stakeholders. Concerning organisational risks, the government-funded ASB Potchefstroom ABET Centre was the only NPO not to identify funding as its most strategic risk. Most interviewees said that finding and creating relevant, meaningful programmes for adult learners and the lack of well-trained teachers were also risks facing their organisations. Specifically these two risks influence learner retention - a major constraint facing NPOs in this sector.

It was surprising that none of the interviewed NPOs conducted any formal research to determine the *consequences* or *reputation risks* to the organisation of their stakeholders' behaviour/expectations/concerns, or stakeholders' issues. The most important consequence of stakeholders' behaviour to concern the NPOs was the withdrawal of funding.

None of the interviewed NPOs identified or engaged in any *strategic* relationship-building goals whatever in respect of any of their stakeholders. The NPOs furthermore did not plan specific, personalised messages for specific stakeholders according to strategic goals for a stakeholder or stakeholder group. An important negative result is that NPOs did not form close relationships with their stakeholders that would enable them really to *listen* to stakeholders' needs and expectations and to adjust their actions and communication accordingly, so as both to build strong relationships and address stakeholders' issues more successfully.

All the NPOs' communication practices were at an operational level and comprised annual reports, meetings, formal reports, annual functions to introduce the organisation to stakeholders, and roadshows. One of the interviewees also attended conferences, read papers and published scientific articles on family literacy as a means of "communicating what we do, so that people can learn from us". This is typical of one-way communication, without a focus on relationship building.

All the interviewees emphasised that their organisation did indeed have communication plans, but these 'communication plans' consisted of schedules explaining *when* to communicate *what* to *whom*, and as such were thus more technical than strategic in nature. Although all the interviewed NPOs engaged with their stakeholders, their communication practices did not answer to specific, overall strategic goals regarding relationship building with specific stakeholder groups.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to determine the *strategic* communication practices of NPOs in the adult-literacy sector in South Africa and to compare these practices with the strategic steps in the Steyn and Puth (2000) model, in order to ascertain whether the NPOs' communication practices correspond to the *strategic* steps in this model. It is evident from the discussion of the findings that the interviewed NPOs' communication practices did not correspond to the strategic steps in the Steyn and Puth model. It can therefore be concluded that these NPOs did not practise strategic communication management according to this model. However, all the NPOs *intuitively* performed some of the steps in the Steyn and Puth model, even if *informally*. They practised informal research by reading extensively, using the Internet and utilising informal relationships with other NPOs in the sector.

All the NPOs realised the importance of relationship building, but they focused mainly on relationships with donors and government, while concentrating less on learners, potential learners, teachers and the communities in which programmes were run. Nevertheless, the NPOs can be commended for the creative and unique techniques they employed in building relationships with their stakeholders, for instance:

- Various senior staff members at Project Literacy were responsible for building relationships with the different stakeholders. However, communication and relationship management occurred on an ad hoc basis and no strategy or plans were followed.
- Staff members at the Optimus Foundation who managed certain projects were also responsible for communication and relationship building. They placed a high premium on feedback and insisted on "feedback on feedback", thus creating dialogue that should enhance relationship building.
- All the NPOs' teachers were responsible for strong, trusting relationships with learners, but no strategy or plans were followed to manage these relationships strategically.
- All the NPOs placed a high premium on trust, dependability and commitment, which are all characteristic of communal relationships.

Yet, it is necessary to redirect these intuitive practices towards systematically achieving strategic goals. Although this is the ideal, it is not necessary for the CEO of an NPO or the person responsible for communication *directly* to practise communication management. Other staff members, such as board members, teachers or even partners, can do so indirectly. For example, specific stakeholders can be assigned to specific board members, who are then responsible for building a relationship with that specific stakeholder. In the case of teachers and/or partners, strong relationships can be built with learners or beneficiaries and the constraint of learner retention can thus be addressed more effectively. It is very important to inform board members, teachers and partners concerning the NPO's overarching communication strategy, to empower them to communicate and build relationships according to a strategy. In this way, a more participative management approach would be encouraged, which theoretically links to Ströh's criticism (2007: 199–220) that the Steyn and Puth model is insufficiently participatory.

Furthermore, it is necessary for NPOs to recognise the value and benefits of strategic communication management for building relationships in order to minimise and manage organisational risks and stakeholders' issues. Non-profit organisations in the adult-literacy sector in South Africa need to realise that their very survival depends on strategic communication management in order specifically to strengthen stakeholder relationships and to manage organisational risks effectively. Unless NPOs acknowledge this long-term value of strategic communication and relationship building, no communication model will be of use to them. It is therefore important to emphasise that it is possible to manage communication and relationships strategically if NPOs *utilise and build on what they are already doing*, and that it will not cost them more in terms of funds or time.

Taking into consideration the constraints confronting NPOs, this study recommends that the Steyn and Puth model be condensed for *implementation* purposes. It was evident that the decidedly "academic" division of the Steyn and Puth model into *strategic, functional* and *implementation* levels could daunt or overwhelm some NPOs. Furthermore, the linear nature of the model might mislead NPOs, who may not realise that the Steyn and Puth model is a continuous, or rolling model, and they might thus only focus on certain levels. The purpose of such a condensed model is to *combine the academic, normative model with the practical reality as experienced by the NPOs*. This model should have the communication practices already employed by the NPOs as baseline. The adaptation of the Steyn and Puth model for implementation in NPOs is currently under investigation.

Against the background of the adapted model, training on various aspects of strategic communication management and the contribution thereof to organisational excellence should be provided to NPOs. Although the initial costs involved in training staff (only the staff member responsible for communication management and relationship building) in strategic communication management principles may admittedly be high, NPOs must compare these costs with the possible gains to be had from practising strategic communication management: more funding, improved relationships with all stakeholders, strategic management of issues and reputation risk management. Training staff in strategic communication management can also be viewed as strategic capacity building.

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