

Triangular Communications: The Who, Why and How

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This study describes a model of triangular communication wherein the communicator treats management as a public. This model posits that the communicator serves as one corner of a communication triangle, conducts formative research on management as well as publics, and treats management and publics as targets of program planning/communication. Evaluating 22 case study organizations, the use of this model positively impacted overall success of communication/public relations audits. The theoretical basis of the article is derived from the noted Excellence Study on public relations both authors were intimately involved with. It also provides practical advice including detailing ten specific lessons learned through this examination of case studies, five suggestions regarding how to sell management on the idea of conducting a communication audit and eight detailed recommendations for conducting successful communication audits.

Introduction

It would be less than startling to hear that management involvement in a communication audit can be helpful to the ultimate success of a research project. More interesting is the discovery that -- rather than a facilitating, moderating, approving/disapproving force in the communication process -- management's integral involvement may actually determine the success of a communication/public relations audit. Success here is defined as an audit that causes strategic and tactical changes to be made to an existing communication program. Essentially, an effective communication audit emerges from the use of this simple three-way communication process.

Review of the Literature

Perhaps the most influential theoretical influence for the present study was the Excellence Study, the three-nation study of CEOs, top communicators, and employees in 321 organizations in the U.S., Canada, and the United Kingdom (Dozier, L. A. Grunig, & J. E. Grunig, 1995; J. E. Grunig, L. A. Grunig, & Dozier, 2006; L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). In summarizing the 1,700 variables collected in each organization, the Excellence team described communication excellence in terms of three concentric spheres of organizational attributes. To be excellent, the central

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sphere of attributes is the *knowledge core*: the expertise within the communication or public relations department to enact the strategic manager role and the knowledge to engage in two-way communication. At an organizational level, establishing the communication loop requires knowledge of research methods to conduct focus groups, run surveys, do content analysis, and the like (Dozier, L. A. Grunig, & J. E. Grunig, 1995). The knowledge core consists of the specialized expertise to engage in advanced practices.

Shared Expectations

Most relevant to the present study is the second sphere, which the Excellence team labeled shared expectations (Dozier et al., 1995). *Shared expectations* was defined as a mutual understanding between public relations practitioners and top management regarding advanced practices. As Dozier, L. A. Grunig, and J. E. Grunig (1995) argued,

Knowledge of advanced practices is not enough, however. To put such expertise to use, communication departments need CEOs and dominant coalitions to understand such practices and expect them from their communication departments. Under such conditions, communication becomes essential to strategic management and the smooth operation of organizations. (p. 89).

The Excellence study focused primarily on public relations departments and communication units internal to organizations. However, the findings have broad implications for the public relations consultant.

Communication/Public Relations Audits

In their classic work, *Managing Public Relations*, Grunig and Hunt (1984) note that the term communication audit or public relations audit is used in an imprecise way to describe various aspects of the research process in public relations practices. J. E. Grunig and Hunt distinguished formative and summative research, as well as environmental monitoring, social auditing, public relations auditing, and communication auditing.

For the present study, *audit* is defined as the systematic process managed by the practitioner consultant to (1) identify the issues, problems, and/or opportunities that motivate the client to communicate with its publics, (2) collect relevant background information (media coverage, internal organizational documents, etc.) to inform the process, (3) conduct qualitative and quantitative research, and (4) suggest action and communication strategies to address the identified issues, problems, and/or opportunities. Note that the term practitioner consultant does not necessarily imply that the practitioner must work for a public relations firm or consultancy. Rather, this term reflects an orientation to the role of the practitioner as a consultant to senior management, whether employed internally or externally.

There are several processes and goals associated with conducting an audit. These include (1) assess effectiveness of overall communication process, (2) determine how to leverage communication in multiple divisions, (3) evaluate effectiveness of communication channels, (4), assess whether audiences have received/understood messages, (5) develop an ongoing measurement process, and (6) build a strategic communication plan. Although the practitioner consultant may hope to accomplish all six of these steps, the practitioner is constrained by conditions within the organization. Thus, all audits may not accomplish all six steps successfully. This variance in the auditing process across organizational settings generates the variance in triangular communications that permits the conduct of this study.

The Coorientation Model

Interest in the relationship between the public relations practitioner and senior management predates the Excellence study cited above. Broom (1977) was an early public relations scholar to apply the *coorientation model* to the public relations context. The coorientation model has direct application to public relations research in general (Broom & Dozier, 1990) and to audits in particular.

The coorientation model deals with the ambiguity between what management thinks it knows about publics and the actual facts of the situation. Managers make strategic decisions based, in part, on the perceived knowledge levels, attitudes, and behaviors of publics affected by those decisions. Sometimes management makes decisions based on accurate assessments of what public know, how they feel, and how they may act. Management can make decisions that management knows conflicts with the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of key publics (dissensus). Management also can make decisions that management knows are in harmony with the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of key publics (monolithic consensus).

More relevant and problematic from a practitioner perspective are two other coorientational states: false consensus and pluralistic ignorance. These conditions result from management's inaccurate assessments of what publics know, how they feel, and how they might behave. Falsely assuming that a decision is harmonious with the views of key publics (false consensus), management is unprepared for the backlash that the decision provokes among publics. Falsely assuming that a decision conflicts with the views of key publics, management implements action and communication strategies premised on a conflict that doesn't actually exist (pluralistic ignorance).

As noted above, a key function of audits is to reduce management uncertainty and ignorance about key publics. This is accomplished through the systematic gathering of information about publics and about communication with those publics. In coorientational terms, the goal of audits is to reduce conditions of false consensus and pluralistic ignorance by providing management with accurate information about publics.

Accurate information, however, is in the eye of the beholder. Broom and Dozier (1990) note that public relations research, including audits, occur in a politicized organizational environment. Research utilization can range from instrumental use to conceptual use to symbolic use. *Instrumental* use means that research findings are used directly to make strategic decisions about action and communication strategies. *Conceptual* use means that the research findings have changed the way management thinks about or conceptualizes public relations problems, issues, or opportunities. However, this change in “head space” may not have any direct, immediate impact on action or communication strategies. *Symbolic* use means that decisions have already been made prior to conducting the research; research activities are symbolic efforts to justify pre-existing decisions, uninformed by research.

The goal of the triangular communications model is to ensure that audits have an instrumental or conceptual impact on the organizations that sponsor them. As Broom and Dozier (1990) note that managers of organizations

simply cannot be left out of the [research audit] process until the findings are reported with the expectation that the research will reflect their interests and perspective. They have to participate in the evolutionary thinking that produces the conclusions. Secondly, communication must be maintained in order to increase the level and interest and commitment to the project. It’s a variation on that old truism that the greater the level of participation throughout the process, then the greater the likelihood that [management] will be committed to see that the findings are accepted and used. (p. 303)

The present study provides strong empirical support for this argument.

Practitioner as Mediator

Research by Plowman (1995, 2004, 2005, 2006) emphasized the role of practitioners as mediators between organizations and their publics. In order to be effective as a mediator, the public relations consultant must interact with all relevant parties involved. The triangulation theory of communications is an articulation of this view of the consulting practitioner as a mediator that explicitly includes senior management as a key audience or public.

The Triangular Communications Theory Summarized

Based on the review of the literature and empirical generalizations drawn from the conduct of audits over several decades by the first author, the theory of triangular communications can be summarized as follows: Communication audits are more likely to be successful at changing the client organization’s philosophy and strategy if senior management is included as a distinct audience or public in the auditing process. As noted below, a successful audit is considered a necessary but not sufficient condition for the successful change or maintenance of relationships between organizations and publics.

Methods

The present study utilizes a rigorous qualitative research methodology that Yin (1989) described as a Type 4 multiple case study design. This methodological approach is often considered “more compelling” than a single case study (Yin, 1989, p. 52), because a single case may be idiosyncratic and dismissed by others as an exception to general patterns regarding the phenomena of interest. The Type 4 multiple case study design conceptualizes each case study the way a quantitative researcher might think about multiple experiments. Each experiment, according to the hypotheticodeductive logic of quantitative research, is a separate test of the theory under consideration, as operationalized in the research hypothesis.

Unit of Analysis

The logic of the Type 4 multiple case study design is similar to the logic of multiple quantitative experiments described above. In this study, an audit (conducted by the consulting firm of the first author) was the triggering event that qualified the organization as a unit of analysis for purposes of this study. The first author is the past owner of a medium-sized public relations firm in the American Midwest. Since each audit was conducted for a different organization, the unit of analysis is conceptualized as *an organization* for which an audit was conducted.

Data Collection

In the present study, the authors examined the results of 22 communication audits conducted for a variety of for profit and not-for-profit organizations. All were past or former clients of the first author. All of the organizations analyzed are large. Therefore, each organization is classified as complex, difficult to understand, and institutionally resistant to changes in communication course direction (i.e., heavy organizational “mass” subject to behavioral inertia).

Evaluating the Data

As a qualitative multiple case study, the key attributes of organizations were not quantified for statistical analysis. Rather, each audit was inspected to determine whether or not triangulation communication was achieved. Then, using specific qualitative criteria, the success or failure of the audit was determined for the 22 cases analyzed.

This method of data collection and evaluation depended on documentation (e.g., the audits themselves) to determine whether triangular communications was implemented effectively. That is, was senior management treated as a separate public and included in the information gathering process? Did the practitioner consultant sit down and interview members of senior management as a separate public or audience? Did management seek to participate in a meaningful way in the audit process? In a quantitative experiment, this determination would be regarded as the *independent variable*, the causal influence that affects some outcome.

Next, a determination was made as to the success or failure of the auditing process, which constitutes the outcome measure. This is similar to the *dependent variable* in an experimental design. Although qualitative in nature, this determination was nevertheless rigorous. Obviously, if an audit successfully accomplishes the six steps discussed in the *Audits* section above, one could consider the audit successful. However, on a more realistic level, the practitioner consultant's goals are much more simple. The first author utilized the four following criteria to determine this outcome indicator:

Did management accept/understand the results of the study?

Did management get involved in "solutions" to issues?

Did the audit have legs, i.e., did it create a lasting attention to making the changes that were recommended?

Were the changes that were made as a result of the audit strategic rather than only tactical?

Affirmative responses to these questions essentially mean that the organization approached the audit with an eye to philosophical, strategic changes, not just tactical or cosmetic changes. If an audit caused a publication to be published, but didn't truly attempt to understand and deal with issues raised, then the audit was only partially successful. Note that in order to be successful, an audit must succeed in changing organizational behavior; a successful audit moves the needle within the organization. Changing the organization and moving the needle with senior management does not mean the organization was ultimately successful in changing or maintaining relationships with publics, which is the ultimate outcome measure of a successful communication program. The present study is concerned with the *process* that needs to take place for a communication program to ultimately succeed, a necessary but not sufficient condition.

Findings

Using the research design described above, the first author conducted the initial analysis. The second author, who was not a party to the audits, conducted a second review of the cases to confirm or disconfirm the patterns identified by the first author.

Findings are summarized in Table 1. The 22 organizations are ranked from most successful (score of 10 on the 10-point success scale) to least successful in terms of overall outcome of the audit process. Related to this outcome measure is the degree to which the results of the audit were tactical or strategic. These outcome measures are closely related to whether or not management interviews were conducted, the degree of general management involvement in the audit process, and the level of deep management involvement in the audit process. The basis of management involvement

revolved around two factors: basic approvals vs active input. That is, if management was involved only as an approval source, we considered that to be low (albeit, important) involvement. However, if management offered ongoing insights, information, ideas, and suggestions, we considered that to be high involvement.

Based on the analysis of these 22 cases, the following determinations were made:

13 of the audits were, on a qualitative basis, considered successful efforts

7 of the audits were, also on a qualitative basis, lacking in success

2 were not able to be judged for lack of follow-up information

Of the 13 successful organizations, 11 projects included senior management interviews and 10 of those 11 had what we considered intimate senior management involvement in the process and determination of the results

Of the 7 less than successful efforts, five had little or no senior management involvement

Looking closer at the successful ventures, ALL of the most successful ventures had both senior management interviews AND deep senior management involvement. On the other hand, each of the least successful audits had few or no interviews and involvement from management.

Discussion

What does this all mean? It means that communicators must look at management as a separate and distinct audience. Management is, in fact, a separate audience that needs to be addressed with the same care and attention as the ultimate end audience.

Ten Lessons Learned

Looking even closer at the audits, there are 10 lessons to be gleaned from this multiple case study analysis:

Strategic change efforts came from efforts where management was most closely involved. Conversely, where management was little involved, tactical changes were most notable on recommendations that came from the study.

As a general rule, there seemed to be a higher rate of organizational acceptance of the results of a study when management was involved all the way along in a study.

Where management was involved as a distinct audience, there seemed to be a better chance of their "listening" and paying attention to the results of the audit.

Very often, biases that existed within the ranks of management could be seen emerging and, very often, dealt with in a straightforward manner. That is, deep held beliefs on the part of senior management, when surfaced, would be discussed with consensus on reality often a part of the end result.

Studies that included management as a separate audience seemed to help "cement" that group to the communication staff. On the other hand, when management was less involved, communication staff seemed to be ignored more frequently.

Senior managers, when included, were able to offer insights and knowledge that greatly informed the efforts of the study. This is especially true for those aspects of an organization that are cultural, rather than mechanical or technical.

The more deeply involved the managers were, the more they tended to be better informed about the "audience."

It was much more likely that if a study targeted senior management equally as an audience to be studied then the results of the study were likely to be meshed with the organization's objectives and strategies.

One small but important outcome of senior management involvement was that involvement allowed the communication staff to hear and "feel" language and emotions that informed the communicator's ultimate efforts.

Finally, senior management involvement seemed to help build consensus for the fact that solutions to certain issues were needed and helped bring about those solutions.

For all of these reasons, we believe it is a mistake to treat management as anything but a separate audience. Their views, beliefs, understanding, expectations and experiences rule their decision making. And they will make decisions about communication—either through neglect or actively. If the audit pays attention to them, they are more likely to want to be part of the process and more likely to be a positive part of that process.

Management nearly always believes it has a well-developed "sense" of each of an organization's audiences. Thus, communicators need to have a finely tuned understanding of what that sense is, why and how that sense developed, how deep the beliefs go, and the level support for any potential project or program. Knowing the type and levels of support that may be (or not be) forthcoming, designing a communication program becomes much more real world.

Finally, each and every audience knowingly or unknowingly sends often separate signals to communicators and management. In the case of customers, management sees and studies sales figures (maybe even talks to a customer on occasion) while communicators may be dependent on editors of trade publications or interpretations by sales or marketing management. In the case of shares of stock movement over time, senior management may have occasional meetings with the Street.

Communicators, on the other hand, are far more likely to be seeing letters from shareholders, or having telephone conversations with them. In employee initiatives, such as getting buy-in for a benefits program, management obtains most of its information from human resources or the legal staff or other managers. On the other hand, communicators are having hard, one-on-one conversations with employees—who will often tell them things they would never say to the big bosses.

Five Ways to Sell an Audit

Now, while all of this may make sense, the "doing" of involvement is much more complex. How does a communicator who wants to conduct a communication audit get management involved? Based on the case studies discussed earlier, here are some observations as to how the concept of an audit was "sold" to the client organization:

Build consensus for the need to know more about how communication dollars are being spent...and whether they are being spent well. That was by far the biggest motivator for management to say yes to the project, and to being involved.

Be sure to talk benchmarks; where that was done, audits were more likely to be approved.

Forgetting money for the moment, in many of the audits we studied, there was a simple desire to be sure that all of management was singing from the same song book when it came to communicating important messages. That is, consistency. Appropriate message development was an obvious driver in many of the efforts. Most managers wanted to ensure that the right messages were devised and communicated. Many of the approved audit requests came by appealing directly to the concept of alignment, making sure that communication goals were directly linked with business goals.

Eight Recommendations for Doing Successful Audits

The final point to be made from the audits studied was to look at the specific techniques used to involve management. Without fail it was the use of one-on-one, sit-down interviews: the researcher/communicator sitting in the office of the senior manager and asking questions. This finding leads to an examination of guidelines discerned by setting up and conducting of these interviews. Here's what we learned:

The interviewer had to be the right person for the process to be approved. If the interviewer was perceived as not up to the task, turn downs were more likely. In many cases, multiple interviewers were used, thus ensuring that no biases interfered with the "hearing" of information.

At least one hour, and often 1 ½ hours were dedicated to the discussions. In almost every case, the interviewer used a prepared and approved questionnaire to get the approval, then was adept enough to explore concepts that arose along the way, or de-emphasize areas that appeared to lose importance, for whatever reason.

The selection of the right management group was critical. In almost all cases the decisions were made based on whether the managers were seen as being members of senior management and, mostly, they were the dominant coalition.

Accuracy of quotes was promised, and anonymity was guaranteed. Only notepads were to be used. Audio or video recording were viewed as being inappropriate.

In most cases, a qualitative report was promised by the researchers...and presented to management as a separate presentation.

The interviews were promised to be a critical starting point in order to develop an inkling of what should be pursued as issues facing the organization. The premise was sold that while it was helpful to know how a particular manager felt about an organization's abilities to communicate with important audiences, it was even more important to understand managers' views on the important issues to be addressed in communications programming.

In the final analysis, the attention paid to senior managers as a separate audience can, and often will, determine the ability to conduct a communication audit. Doing so won't guarantee success, but our research would seem to indicate that it increases the chances.

Limitations and Implications for Further Research

As with all good science, the present study has several limitations. Several of these are inherent to case study methods. First, the 22 organizations studied were all clients of a single public relations firm that has a research specialty, mostly in the American Midwest or East Coast. Second, determining the degree to which triangular communications were used in the auditing process (independent variable) and whether the audit was successful or not involved the use of qualitative criteria that involved elements of subjectivity. Although the first and second authors reached consensus on these determinations, others looking that the same cases may have reached different conclusion.

Despite these limitations, this study embraces the Wheel of Science (Babbie, 2004, p. 26) and sees this research as contributing to a stream of research with considerable benefits to the body of knowledge. That is, the present study is primarily an inductive study based on the pattern recognition of the first author: successful audits involve triangular communication where senior management is treated as an identified audience or public during the auditing process. The present study systematically reviewed 22 cases where the pattern was confirmed. Thus, the theory of triangular communication is best regarded as an empirical generalization. Future research could formalize this empirical generalization as a formal theory and test it using quantitative measures of the independent and dependent variables identified as relevant in the present study. The advantage of a quantitative study is that many more organizations could be included. Probability sampling would permit statistical generalizations to a large population of organizations, something not permitted by the multiple case study design used here. Further, determination of the independent and dependent variables could be accomplished through the use of Likert-type items that would permit the determination of reliability of measures.

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