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Dealing with paradox in public relations: A change of perspective offers hope for  
progress in the profession

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### Abstract

This paper applies research on defining and understanding paradoxes to public relations theories and practices. Public relations has often been juxtaposed between dichotomies: symmetrical or asymmetrical, one-way communication or two-way communication, proactive or reactive, socially responsible or self-interested. But these dichotomies fail to consider the complexities of communication. These contradictory elements exist simultaneously and focusing on one aspect at the expense of the other postpones rather than solves communication problems. The paper identifies paradoxes inherent in the practice, explores the tensions created by the paradoxes, and proposes adapting some the field's basic assumptions to better deal with paradoxes.

Dealing with paradox in public relations: A change of perspective offers hope for progress in the profession

The practice of public relations is inherently paradoxical. Paradox, according to Lewis (2000), “denotes contradictory yet inter-related elements—elements that seem logical in isolation but absurd and irrational when appearing simultaneously” (p. 760). The two elements in the name of the practice, “public” and “relations,” are logical elements in the practice, but when put together create a paradoxical tension that can paralyze the practice. One could argue that it is difficult for any individual to maintain satisfactory relationships within one’s own reference groups—family, work, church, community—let alone for an organization to maintain satisfactory relationships with thousands, perhaps millions, of individuals who bring their own values, interests, and needs to the relationship, and who interact with each other to define this relationship. As Steve Blewett (1993) noted, the implications of trying to manage relationships between all employees and their interactions with external publics alone is mind boggling. Attempting such an effort creates enormous anxiety and tension. In all likelihood, it is impossible. And yet, it is what many in the public relations practice promise to management.

This paper explores public relations through the lens of paradox theory. Cameron and Quinn (1988) claimed that exploring paradoxes would help individuals move beyond oversimplified and polarized notions and, instead, recognize the complexity, diversity, and ambiguity of organizational practices. The practice of public relations has often been juxtaposed between dichotomies: symmetrical or asymmetrical, one-way communication or two-way communication, pro-active or reactive, socially responsible or self-interested. But these dichotomies fail to consider the complexities of communication. These contradictory elements exist simultaneously and focusing on one aspect at the expense of the other postpones rather than solves communication problems. Using the framework of paradox, the paper attempts to identify paradoxes inherent in the practice, explore the tensions created by the paradoxes, and rethink the practice in light of the paradoxes.

*Defining Paradox*

But one must not think ill of the paradox, for the paradox is the passion of thought, and the thinker without the paradox is like the lover without passion: a mediocre fellow. (Kierkegaard, 1985, p. 37)

In the last thirty years, organizational science has begun to rediscover Soren Kierkegaard's passion for paradox. For the Nineteenth Century Danish philosopher, paradox meant unresolved contradictions (Ricoeur, 1998, p. 15). More recently, organizational researchers have defined paradoxes as "contradictory, mutually exclusive elements that are present and operate equally at the same time" (Cameron & Quinn, 1988, p. 2). Paradox is distinguished from similar concepts, such as dilemma and irony by the following explanation:

For example, a dilemma is an either-or situation where one alternative must be selected over other attractive alternatives. An irony exists when an unexpected or contradictory outcome arises from a single alternative.... In precise terms, paradox differs from each of these concepts in that no choice need be made between two or more contradictions. Both of the contradictory elements in a paradox are accepted and present. Both operate simultaneously. The key characteristic in paradox is the simultaneous present of contradictory, even mutually exclusive elements. (Cameron & Quinn, 1988, p. 2)

Ford and Backoff (1988) recognized the human actor's role in perceiving the paradox when developing their working definition of a paradox as "*some 'thing' that is constructed by individuals when oppositional tendencies are brought into recognizable proximity through reflection or interaction*" (p. 89). Lewis (2000) used this definition to explain that people first deal with paradoxes by simplifying them as polarized either/or distinctions, and the absurdities of the paradox are revealed only through reflection or interaction with others.

### *Paradoxical tension*

These conflicting and coexisting elements create what might be best referred to as "paradoxical tension" (Vince and Broussine, 1996, p. 4). People often sense tension and anxiety but don't recognize it as being produced by the paradox because they haven't

reflected on the contradictory elements. The natural reaction to the tension is to engage in behaviors that reinforce the paradox and intensify the tension. At both the organizational and individual levels, people deal with paradoxes by acting to “defend against embarrassment or threat” (Argyris, 1988, p. 257). At the organizational level, these defensive routines “are taught through socialization ... [and] as strategies to deal effectively with threat or embarrassment ...” (p. 257). They also receive support from the organization’s culture and over time through the behavior of individuals moving in and out of the organization (Argyris, 1988). For example, a common public relations practice is to centralize communication at one place, allowing only an assigned spokesperson to speak to the press. The company wants to control for a consistent message to the media, but it also sends a message to employees that management does not trust them. The press views the message as canned and not candid, therefore less credible. What seemed like a good idea at the macro level—controlling the message—leads to coercion and domination at the micro level (see Cameron & Quinn, 1988).

Lewis (2000) identified six defensive reactions that reinforce the cycles contributing to the paradox: splitting (creating we/they distinctions), projection (blaming the conflicting feelings on a scapegoat), repression (blocking the awareness of the tension), regression (resorting to actions that provide security in the past), reaction formation (excessively supporting the practice opposite the threatening one), and ambivalence (compromising the conflicting emotions with a lukewarm reaction). None of these reactions reduce the tension manifest in the paradox. These reactions also move the organization away from recognizing and accepting the paradox; key steps in coping with or resolving the paradox.

According to Lewis (2000), paradoxical tensions are products of the contradictions produced by “technological change, global competition, and workforce diversity” (p. 760). Societal and organizational changes that once occurred over the course of several years, even decades, now take place in a matter of weeks, days, and even hours. Further complicating the problem is the twenty-four-hour news cycle and Internet, both providing immediate scrutiny of paradoxical tensions brought on by these changes and the actions taken to respond to tensions. The increased complexity and immediate communication mean organizations must respond more quickly to problems

despite the fact that complex problems require a more thoughtful and reflective response (Martin & Ernst, 2005). Thus, the philosophical and psychological challenges of Kierkegaard's day have become the social and organizational reality of contemporary life.

Contemporary pressures leave little time for managers to devote to reflection. They would prefer a clear and concise theory or model for dealing with paradoxes. But a social landscape marked by "contradictory assumptions, explanations, or conclusions" (Pool & Van De Ven, 1989) frustrates researchers trying to develop internally consistent theories. The reason: They want to apply convergent thinking—problems can be solved by logic—to human and organizational action that is better understood through divergent thinking—problems that often defy logic and explanation (Schumacher, 1997; and Quinn & Cameron, 1988). Theory and model building may help to solve convergent problems, but they are woefully inadequate in solving divergent problems.

Paradoxes are divergent problems. Divergent problems are not easily quantifiable or verifiable, and the more they are understood the more divergent, or contradictory, the solutions appear to be. For example, in organizations, managers face divergent problems when they are asked, "to increase efficiency and foster creativity, build individualistic teams, and think globally while acting locally" (Lewis, 2000, p. 760). To deal with today's complexity, organizations simultaneously seek flexibility and control, promote accountability and independence, and encourage new ideas while desperately hanging on to tradition. Managers confront divergent problems and find themselves in control and not in control at the same time (Streatfield, 2001). Managers also cultivate a reputation as open-minded consensus builders while at the same time trying to be perceived as decisive decision-makers and take-charge leaders (Griffin & Stacey, 2005).

Organizational literature does include two examples of divergent thinking that have proved helpful in understanding paradox. The first deals with the S curve while the other introduces the concept of first-order and second-order change. The S curve, proposed by Handy (1994), postulates that for every up cycle, there will be a down period. First-order change, according to Watzlawik, Weakland, and Fisch (1974), is change that occurs within a system that remains unchanged and only offers temporary solutions. Second-order change occurs when change transforms the system. Lewis (2000)

noted that that second-order change embraces negatives and contradictions, finding solutions in contraries and opposites. “Second-order change is thus change of change....” (Watzlawik et al., 1974, p. 11).

Organizational deterioration is inevitable (Hirschman, 1970). The rise and fall of organizations is a natural outgrowth of the competitive market system. Handy’s (1994) S curve reflects this phenomenon and presents the following paradox: As an organization harvests success, it sows the seeds for failure. Handy cited an example of an organizational leader who recognized that the organization needed to make changes while still successful but failed to inspire organizational members to adopt the same vision. Three years later, with the organization in trouble, the CEO was replaced. A recent example would be how Ford Corporation focused its production on trucks and sports utility vehicles when the demand was high and remained profitable despite increasing foreign competition. However, after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, gas prices shot up, and consumers reduced purchases of trucks and SUVs. As Mark Shields, Ford’s president of the Americas, said a year after Katrina, “I think the segment [consumer demand for trucks and SUVs] shifts have been much swifter and more permanent than we expected” (quoted in Krisher, 2006, paragraph 12). Thus Ford’s priorities became the primary reason for financial losses estimated in the billions of dollars.

An organization can minimize the downturn by reengineering in the middle of success. As a result of embracing new ideas, an organization can produce a second curve after the first up curve runs out of steam. But this is difficult to achieve because people often see paradoxes as either/or choices, and the choice of perpetuating what one knows has been successful is more comfortable than exploring new alternatives that address the tensions of the paradox. Actors tend to choose the positive aspect of the paradox, hoping it is true by itself. This may eliminate cognitive dissonance, but it leads to temporary positive effects that ultimately increase tensions and magnify the problem (Hofstadter, 1979; and Lewis, 2000).

Frankental (2001) identified the problems of first-order change in the paradox of social responsibility. For many companies in the United Kingdom, the emphasis of social responsibility falls under external affairs, corporate affairs, or community affairs. These are adjuncts of public relations, a staff function that handles support activities, rather than

a line function critical to the bottom-line. Public relations uses first order change to promote social responsibility, without helping the organization engage in second-order change that would change the organization's support structure to reinforce socially responsible behavior. To see the limited value of first-order change, one doesn't have to look further than Enron. In 1999, the company's CEO Ken Lay wrote California Power Exchange officials that Enron believed in "conducting business affairs in accordance with the highest ethical standards" (quoted in McLean & Elkin, 2003, p. 267). That same year, Enron's deceptive trading strategies exploited California's electricity crisis and made millions of dollars in profits. Enron's CEO advocated social responsibility and touted the company's ethics manual, but the company's cutthroat culture encouraged arrogance, deceit, and greed (McLean & Elkin, 2003; also see Smith & Emshwiller, 2003). Second-order change requires that organizations adjust their cultural values, mission, structure, and support system to resolve deeply embedded paradoxes.

### *Dealing with paradox*

Applying divergent thinking to the study of paradox may not increase the possibility of finding single solutions, but it does increase the possibility of new discoveries (Schumacher (1977). In the case of paradox studies, researchers have proposed a multiple solution, divergent approach for dealing with paradoxes (Quinn & Cameron, 1988, Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). First, accept paradoxes and learn to live with them. Citing Van de Ven and Astley, 1981, Quinn and Cameron (1988) argued that much can be learned about organizational change from tensions between personal action and the structures aimed at constricting personal actions and from the conflicts between "forces of conflict, coercion, and disruption at one level" and "forces of consensus, unity, and integration at another" (p. 31). But Poole and Van de Ven (1989) warned that this approach may cause researchers to adopt contrary perspectives, leading to more ambiguity and tension. Despite this concern, they say that accepting paradoxes will help researchers tolerate inconsistency and recognize the limitations of models and theories.

Second, clarify levels of reference—i.e. individual or organizational--and identify connections between them. For example, public relations' emphasis on mutually beneficial relationships at the organizational level may translate into self-serving quid pro

quo (Stoker & Tusinski, 2006) relationships at the individual level. Dilenschneider's (1990) advising practitioners to develop a favor bank relationship—helping those who can return the favor—at the individual level can lead to an organizational philosophy in which all philanthropy and public service are conditional on whether the other party can return the kindness. Looking at different levels helps to identify the interrelationships between the contradictory elements.

Third, take into consideration the role of time. The sequence of events may help in dealing with paradox. Although the contradictory elements exist simultaneously, one may have emerged after the other or as a result of the conflicting element. Temporal relationships allow researchers to separate out potential causal factors as well as provide greater insight into the relationship between opposing forces. For example, a common response to paradoxical tension is to revert to defensive strategies that lead to more tension. Identifying the temporal relationship between structural decisions, individual reactions, and subsequent actions may help in going on the offensive to relieve the paradoxical tension.

Fourth, explore new ways to look at the relationship between contradictory elements. In other words, think outside the box in dealing with paradox. Quinn and Cameron (1988) introduced Giddens' (1984) theory of structuration and suggested that individuals' interaction with structures lead to the reproduction of those structures. This approach considers a duality of structure in which the subjective act of interacting with the objective world (structures) is both the medium, the act of interaction, and the outcome, the recreation of the structure that influences the next interaction. In other words, people's ongoing routines and habits reproduce the continuation of those routines and habits over time. Individuals are influenced by their structures because they repeat past practices, but they still have the conscious power to re-evaluate their action and change it if they recognize legitimate reasons for doing so. Thus, structure constrains and enables human action. Tucker (1998) called Giddens' theory a reconstruction of social theory, an attempt "to overcome the theoretical dualities, such as those of agency/structure, micro/macro, and qualitative/quantitative methodological approaches...., [that] prevent the social sciences from attaining a better understanding of the social world" (p. 11). By entertaining new approaches, such as structuration theory,

Poole and Van de Ven (1989) argued that new concepts and new perspectives can be introduced that may resolve paradoxes. They warn, however, that the new perspectives may oversimplify some issues or fail to completely grasp the original problems.

The four methods can overlap and may work together in helping to spark new questions and perspectives “that stretch the bounds of current thinking” (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989, p. 567). For the purposes of this paper, all four will be considered in an analysis of public relations, but the primary goal of this research is to apply the fourth method and propose new ways of looking at paradoxes in public relations.

### *The paradox of public relationships*

The most puzzling paradox of public relations is the very heart of the practice: public relationships. The term public has several meanings. According to the American Heritage College Dictionary (2002), it can be a noun meaning “the community or the people as a whole,” or “a group of people sharing a common interest.” It can also be an adjective, “concerning or affecting the community or the people,” “maintained for or used by the people or community,” “open to the knowledge or judgment of all” (Pickett et al., p. 1126). Does the term *public* in public relations mean having relationships with the community as a whole or certain interest groups, or does it mean being open to all and made known to the communities the organization serves?

In the practice of public relations, it has come to mean both. However, traditionally the practice has focused on “making things known” to the public, primarily through standard efforts such as press releases, public service announcements, video news releases, and publicity events. While these tasks are done in an effort to achieve the purpose of public relations, which has been defined as “a management function designed to create and sustain mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on which its success depends” (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2000, p. 6), there is little evidence that the efforts to make something public actually sustain mutually beneficial relationships. Making something public does not necessarily tap into a public’s capacity to contribute to an organization’s success. Making something public implies an equitable distribution of information with no consideration of merit or potential for reciprocity.

More recently, publics as a group of people with common characteristics has received more attention, especially in association with relationships. Relationships are built on experiences where the needs and interests of both parties are met with enough satisfaction to continue the relationship. Hon and Grunig (1999) identified six characteristics of relationships as a way to measure the long-term effectiveness of public relations efforts, but they failed to define relationships. Defining relationships poses problems because public relations theorists have generally accepted their existence without clearly defining them (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 2000). The authors then surveyed the relationship literature in interpersonal communication, psychotherapy, interorganizational relationships, and systems theory. Their research revealed the dichotomy that has long existed in the social sciences: The interpersonal theorists, with some exceptions (see Surra & Ridley, 1991), emphasized the subjective over the objective nature of relationships while the other disciplines focused primarily on the objective nature of relationships. Broom, Casey, and Ritchey (2000) proceeded to advocate a systems approach of interdependent parts in which structure played the dominant role. This leads to a definition of public relations as making known the interdependence among organizations and other structures in society or the interdependence among objects and groups of people. With this kind of structural functionalist approach to public relations, it is no wonder that individuals perceive public relations as impersonal, formulaic, sterile, and insincere.

Disregard for the subjective nature of relationships helps explain why putting public together with relations creates a potential contradiction. It promises relations with an objective collective group when relations are only possible with subjective individuals. The term is used as a verb rather than a noun, which implies that organizations can manage the relationships it has with various diverse publics. Therefore, an organization wants to handle or “manage” relationships with several publics, without reconciling the paradox that these publics are actually autonomous and have very different, and sometime conflicting, interests.

By thinking through the paradox of trying to “manage” publics, Blewett (1993) raised some very original thoughts. He defined public relations as a noun, as “the dynamic relationship created by planned and unplanned interactions between an

organization and its publics” (p. 15). By the very nature of interaction between an organization and its publics, organizations have public relations whether they plan for them or not. However, Blewett noted that it is a mistake to think that the organization owns these publics and that public relations practitioners can manage these publics the same way they manage their budget or their personal bank accounts. Members of these publics choose their interactions. To think that they can be manipulated to meet the organization’s goals is unethical and impossible. Blewett argued that the appropriate relationship between an organization and its publics is that of co-responsibility, “which means that a successful outcome is created through an honest, open and cooperative process” (p. 15).

Attempting to “manage” publics suggests that the organization has some control over public values, opinions, and behaviors. This attitude actually leads to the erosion of quality relationships, especially if the members of the publics don’t think the organization has the right to exert influence. As Hon and Grunig (1999) noted, some degree of power imbalance is natural in relationships, but “unilateral attempts to achieve control by one party are associated with decreases in perceptions of communicator competence and satisfaction with the relationship” (p. 19).

If practitioners first recognize that publics have “a right to manage their own relationships with organizations, with help, not paternalistic hindrance or ideological advocacy, from public relations practitioners” (Blewett, 1993, p. 15), then they move toward a different perspective about the function of public relations. Managing public relationships means managing one’s side of the relationship. It means helping an organization be worthy of having relationships with employees, shareholders, consumers, and the like. This perspective absolves public relations from the stress of trying to control the public’s side of the relationship, because it is not possible. Therefore, rather than attempting to manage and ultimately manipulate how publics feel or perceive the organization, the public relations function should help an organization achieve and maintain its worthiness for relationships. When looked at through this paradox, public relations takes the role of the corporate conscience and not just the mouthpiece.

This approach, long advocated by some of the field’s most influential practitioners, demands that public relations should accurately portray the organization for

what it is. As Blewett (1993) noted, “the most positive and constructive organizational relationship is one that is organic; one that grows out of who we are, not what we do.” It should provide information required and wanted by the publics. In essence it should help the organization be more transparent to the publics. This enhances the autonomy of the publics to make decisions about their relationships with the organization, and if provided the information they need, they can freely choose to associate with the organization and evaluate their satisfaction with the relationship. This would lead to longer lasting loyalty and involvement by the publics—two highly desired outcomes of public relations.

#### *Paradox of positive publicity*

Another highly desired outcome of public relations is to have its clients and or corporation receive positive publicity. But the one-sided nature of positive publicity has created another paradox for public relations. The purpose for positive information is to instill trust in the organization. But the literature on trust clearly indicates that trust requires candid and open communication rather than guarded and strategic communication. In their summary of trust research, McKnight, Choudhury and Kacmar (2002) found three attributes of trust: competence, benevolence or goodwill, and integrity. People trust others who do what they say they can do (competence). They trust others who care about them as much as about themselves (goodwill). And they trust people who have the integrity to be honest, reliable, ethical, and take responsibility for their actions. In sum, they trust people who deal with them honestly, caringly, and responsibly.

By applying the paradox framework, certain aspects of these trust attributes emerge as co-existing and conflicting. If an organization makes a mistake and it is made public, its competence is called in to question. If the organization tries to cover or minimize the mistake to protect its competence, then its integrity is questioned. And, if the mistake could affect or hurt others, or knowledge of the mistake could affect public perceptions of the organization, then hiding the mistake obstructs the autonomy of those publics and jeopardizes the goodwill of the organization.

Organizations that choose to rely exclusively on positive publicity in the absence of balanced and more critical information sow the seeds of doubt, skepticism, and cynicism in their publics. The positive publicity attempts to tell the story that the organization is doing well, accomplishing its goals, and moving forward without obstacles. But without honest, open, and self-critiquing messages, the information is likely to be interpreted by the audience as fluff, and the credibility of the source is jeopardized. Fort (1996) cited Koehn's (1996) argument that institutionalized self-critique engenders trustworthiness:

Institutions that are trustworthy open themselves to criticism. Their decisions and the reasons for such decisions are open to examination and evaluation by stakeholders. Stakeholder management thus requires corporations to be accountable to questions similar to those of professions [such as law and medicine]. (Fort, 1996, p. 214)

In urging the newspaper industry to adopt greater transparency, Steve Smith, the editor of the *Spokane Spokesman-Review*, also noted that being open about mistakes “can kill rumors and conspiracy theories that breed distrust... [and] enhance credibility..., if consistently followed” (Smith, 2005, ¶ 5). Though counter-intuitive, Smith continued, “raising the window, fessing up, speaking directly to readers with genuine openness actually enhances credibility” (¶, 6).

By recognizing the conflict of the trust attributes, an organization can consider how efforts to maximize the image of competence may have the unintended consequence of damaging credibility and trust. It could then be argued that maintaining the attributes of integrity and goodwill are more important than the appearance of competence. Since organizations will make mistakes, and mistakes damage relationships with stakeholders, it is more important to maintain the tools required to repair the relationship, namely trust and credibility. The crisis communication literature clearly shows that an organization regains competence by making changes that resolve the crisis and instituting safeguards to prevent problems from happening again. If an organization sacrifices honesty, candidness, and goodwill toward its publics in an attempt to protect the image of competence, it jeopardizes the trust it needs to repair that relationship.

*Paradox of strategic public relations*

A similar paradox arises when the strategic use of public relations is perceived as insincere positive spin. A recent example of this paradox was expressed in the media response to Wal-Mart hiring a Chicago public relations firm to create “Action Alley,” a rapid response center to immediately defend itself against criticism and tout the company’s good works (Burner, 2005). Wal-Mart’s efforts have resulted in positive coverage, especially for its response to Hurricane Katrina, but its effectiveness has also caused critics to question whether “Wal-Mart’s efforts to change its spots focus more on public relations than a reform of its business operations” (Batstone, 1995). Thus, Batson introduces one of the unique paradoxes facing public relations. An effective public relations campaign might fail simply because the public perceives it as an effective public relations campaign. In other words, strategic public relations campaigns by their very nature represent first-order change, and the public will remain skeptical of these public relations efforts unless they perceive that the organization has embarked on second-order change.

Public relations has institutionalized first-order change with its adoption of strategic communication techniques embodied in the RACE formula—Research, Action Planning, Communication, and Evaluation (see Cutlip et al., 2000). The RACE formula produces several paradoxes, especially at the outset. The campaign goal is usually tied to the organization’s mission and culture, and is an attempt to mobilize publics and resources to meet that goal. But what if the public relations problem arose as a result of the mission, culture and values of the organization? Instead of addressing these problems, the formula presents a temporary solution, a communication campaign ultimately destined to fail if core practices that created the problems remain in place. Externally focused campaigns will not likely solve problems stemming from what the organization is or what it is doing. These strategic campaigns generally attempt to persuade and to some degree coerce publics to establish and be satisfied with their relationships. This finite solution is disingenuous and, ultimately, not likely to succeed in solving constitutional flaws embedded in the organization itself.

To solve the paradox, a possible solution is to add two new phases to what would then be known as the RERACE formula. As in its earlier form, the formula begins with

Research and is then followed by Evaluation and Re-engineering. If the organization's culture, membership, or management or a combination of these and other elements created the public relations problems, the practitioners identifies the issues hindering progress and then recommends a plan for re-engineering the constitutional problems before implementing Action Planning and Communication. Any strategic plan that does not include changes in the system, second-order change, will lead to temporary improvement followed by greater tension and miscommunication.

#### *Paradox of public relations models*

Public relations scholars, such as James Grunig, have recognized some of these flaws in a strategic approach to communication and sought to solve the paradox by recommending a dialogic approach to public relations based on mutuality, reciprocity, and consensus. Grunig's Excellence Model decries the one-way communicative aspects of strategic dissemination and persuasion while reverencing two-way symmetric communication (see Grunig, 1989; Grunig & Grunig, 1992; and Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Based on extensive research, the model describes four conceptual areas of public relations practice. The first, publicity/press agency, focuses on one-way propaganda-persuasion model with the explicit goal of changing public attitudes and opinions to more closely align with that of the communicator. The second, public information, appears more ethically attractive on its face because its primary purpose is to inform through making available messages that publics are perceived to need. Asymmetrical communication is the third model and consists of two-way communication based on listening to the public for the purpose of better communicating strategic and persuasive messages. The fourth model, two-way symmetrical communication, is considered the most ethical because it emphasizes a dialogue between opposing (or simply divergent) parties with a purpose of reaching mutual agreement and understanding.

On one hand, the excellence model appears to be a defensive routine devised to protect the field against the embarrassment and threat (see Argyris, 1989) of being associated with propaganda, persuasion and strategic communication. It polarizes the contradictory elements into either/or practices. It associates publicity/press agency approach with manipulation, deception, and exaggeration despite the potential honesty of an open expression from the communicator's viewpoint, which allows the receiver to

judge the veracity of the communication based on an evaluation of the source. The public information model appears more altruistic and tries to educate receivers without listening for feedback. But providing relevant information the public needs for making good decisions can have value regardless as to whether the public has a desire or an opportunity to respond. Indeed, seeking out information with the goal to more effectively persuade the audience has little or no bearing on the validity of the message. If the message is valid, seeking out a better way to communicate it is honorable. If the message is invalid, seeking out a better way to communicate it is dishonorable.

Two-way symmetric communication values receivers and invites them in a dialogue that could lead to a more valid message and a more responsible mode of transmitting the message. But it is no less susceptible to manipulation and invalidity than the previous models. On the one hand, the communicator assumes a greater responsibility for finding the truth by denying his or her infallibility and seeking input from the other party. On the other hand, if the goal of the communication is compromise or agreement, the communicator may relinquish responsibility for the validity of the message by negotiating a mutually acceptable outcome.

Thus, the Excellence Model can produce just as much paradoxical tension as it alleviates because it proposes a convergent solution to a divergent problem. The subsequent mixed motive model, which allows for organizations to use one approach over another, appears to be more divergent because it accepts the paradoxes and provides a way for practitioners to cope with the paradoxes (Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig, 1995).

### *Conclusion*

The examples above are just a few paradoxes that become apparent when viewing the practice through the lens of paradox. As public relations continues to deal with the dramatic changes in individuals, technology, and society, it will confront more and more paradoxes. For public relations practice to meet the demands of an increasingly paradoxical environment, practitioners and scholars must be willing to adopt second-order thinking. They must confront paradoxes, accept the existence of contrary elements occurring simultaneously, and look for solutions in the contraries. The outcome of this self-reflection may require more than cosmetic changes; it may require a wholesale

transformation of how public relations is practiced.

To survive in this climate, organizations and their leaders must have a clear sense of their identity while at the same time adapting to the changing environment (McCarthy, O'Connell, & Hall, 2005). For organizations to compete in the changing environment, they must become adept at interpreting and responding to change and then communicating their responses to an increasingly fickle and skeptical public.

Although this perspective may seem fresh, it is actually more consistent with the origins of public relations, when publicity meant "providing necessary information to the public" and was closer to the today's concept of transparency (Stoker & Rawlins, 2005). This perspective recognizes the autonomous nature of publics, and that publics choose relationships and are not owned by institutions. As Blewett (1993) noted, strong relationships are fluid and dynamic, developing as a result of what organizations are, not necessarily what they do.

Therefore, public relations should help an organization become something that autonomous individuals choose to interact with, either as an employee, a customer, or a shareholder. The organization should empower its publics with more autonomy and greater information for choice. The ability to act and the capability to decide whether to be acted upon are inherent moral rights associated with the implicit and explicit moral rule to "not deprive of freedom" (Gert, 1998, p. 163). For public relations, this means that an organization's communication should enhance a person's ability to act and provide opportunities to carry out those actions. It also means, the individual should choose whether to be acted upon by an organization or in other words, have a relationship with that organization. By enabling publics to choose the relationship, an organization could establish longer-lasting loyalty and involvement by the publics—two more highly desired outcomes of public relations (see Friedrich, 1963).

This paper represents a philosophical argument, but further research, both qualitative and quantitative, could be done to determine the effectiveness of viewing organizations through the lens of paradox. Further research could explore whether practitioners recognize paradoxes, whether they reflect on them, and whether that reflection enhances their ability to deal with ever-increasing complexity of communicative problems.

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