
Editorial 29.4: Relationship (and behavioural) leadership in public relations and corporate communications

Leadership is a complex issue, with scholars identifying more than 100 definitions in the literature during the early 1990s (Rost, 1991) and 700 in recent times (Curtin, 2022). Northouse (2024) argues that leadership is a trait, an ability, a skill, a behaviour, a relationship and an influence process. Everyone has a leadership trait they can bring to the table and different leaders bring different leadership traits, e.g. decisiveness, confidence, outgoingness, sociability, etc. The ability and skill to lead are not necessarily something people are born with, and these skills can be acquired, such as the ability to speak publicly as a leader where some can do it naturally, whilst others need preparation, and developing leadership skills means developing competencies (Northouse, 2024). An important aspect of leadership is also behaviour, because this approach focusses on what leaders do when they become leaders such as what they say and the way they act. Northouse (2024) argues that leadership behaviour is observable unlike leadership skills, traits and abilities. In my research, I have looked into women's behavioural and communication styles and how women lead, as well as the perception and preferences of the leadership of women who do not hold leadership roles, relative to early socialisation and peer networks. In all the studies I have done so far in journalism, advertising and public relations, it appeared that early experiences affect perceptions of leadership and leadership styles and women who spent time with boys when growing up show what is commonly understood as masculine leadership style and behaviour, whereas women who grew up in peer groups consisting of girls show the so-called feminine behaviour and leadership styles. The latter is more focused on relationship leadership and is often positively assessed by their employees, who tend to express more work satisfaction and feel generally more positive about their work than those who are led by women demonstrating masculine behavioural styles (Topić, 2023). Whilst my research was qualitative and cannot be generalised, albeit it was conducted on relatively large interview samples, it also showed a clear tendency towards the successfulness of relationship leadership to increase employee work satisfaction. In other studies, on mass communication industries, scholars also looked at leadership styles and had similar arguments. For example, Aldoory (1998) argued that women tend to use "participative management, attempts to energize staff, and empathy" (p. 97). Meng (2014) argued that there is a reciprocal relationship between organisational culture and excellent leadership in public relations because organisational culture directly generates a positive effect on the achievement of excellent leadership in public relations.

The concept of relationship-oriented behaviour has been present in scholarship since the earliest studies on leadership (Stogdill and Coons, 1957). Traditional leadership research focussed on examining behavioural styles that are focussed on relationships or behavioural leadership styles, which are marked with considerate and supportive behaviour and focussed on developing trusting work relationships (Likert, 1961; Stogdill *et al.*, 1962; Brower *et al.*, 2000; Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2000; Uhl-Bien, 2005, 2006; Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1991). However, most leaders engage in tasks and relationship behaviour, meaning to get the job done (task) and help people feel integrated into a group (relationship). Relationship leadership is often



associated with or expected of women, although both men and women use this leadership style (Likert, 1961; Stogdill *et al.*, 1962; Brower *et al.*, 2000; Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2000; Uhl-Bien, 2005, 2006; Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1991), and this leadership is based on characteristics such as building camaraderie, respect, trust and regard between leaders and followers or having consideration behaviour (Stogdill, 1974). In addition to that, some researchers described relationship leadership as being employee-oriented, thus taking an interest in employees and valuing their personal needs and uniqueness (Bowers and Seashore, 1966) or also having a concern for people (Blake and Mouton, 1964). Northouse (2024) argues that “within an organization, concern for people includes building trust, providing good working conditions, maintaining a fair salary structure, and promoting good social relations” (p. 85). However, the challenge lies in having enough time to build relationships with followers, getting to know them personally and getting tasks done. A contribution of behavioural research is that it advanced “the trait paradigm to the behavioral paradigm” (Lussier and Achua, 2023, p. 93), and this form of leadership research can help in understanding leaders and being able to work effectively with them, thus also empowering employees in navigating the workplace culture.

There are also different types of leadership that scholars research, particularly in the organisational context. Yeonsoo Kim, Shana Meganck and Icha Basnyat write for this issue about the effects of internal crisis communication during the COVID-19 pandemic, focussing on employee perceptions of communication quality, leadership and relationship outcomes. The authors argue that not all types of information “were equally associated with positive employee responses in terms of perceived quality of internal communication related to the COVID-19 pandemic and transformational leadership”. What is more, the specific information that employees need to know to perform daily tasks safely (e.g. organisational protocols and thorough preparation) is the most needed and desired information; adjusting information was positively associated with employee perceptions of internal communication and, consequentially, of CEO leadership. The quality of internal communication affected perceptions of transformational leadership and relational outcomes such as trust in the organisation, perceptions of organisational commitment to a relationship with employees, support for organisational decision-making regarding COVID-19, etc. The authors argue that transformational leadership is crucial for managing a crisis response. This form of leadership is effective, and it focusses on providing direction, inspiration and showing empathy with employees (Men, 2014; Tao *et al.*, 2022). Transformational leadership is defined as a leadership style focussed on relationships, providing direction effectively, and seeking mutual benefits with employees (Men, 2014). The transformational leadership style is focused on building connections between leaders and followers and is oriented towards empowerment through symmetrical communication (Men, 2014; Khan *et al.*, 2018). This form of leadership is commonly linked to public relations due to the focus on relationship building and empowerment, and there is evidence that this form of leadership influences follower attitudes, behaviours and personal development (Groves, 2020; Men, 2014; Yin *et al.*, 2019). The findings of the study in this issue show that “for an instructing information strategy, not all types of information were equally associated with positive employee responses in terms of perceived quality of internal communication related to the COVID-19 pandemic and transformational leadership”. Equally, “the study findings confirmed that adjusting information was positively associated with employee perception of internal communication quality and perception of transformational leadership”. Finally, “employees’ perceived quality of internal communication affected by the base crisis response strategies was positively correlated with perceptions of transformational leadership and relational outcomes”. These findings lead towards the conclusion that relationship leadership can have a positive impact on employees; in this study, they have shown appreciation for internal communication during the recent pandemic, thus signalling that taking care of employees and communicating pandemic measures, increases employee satisfaction. Transformational

leadership is clearly linked with relationship leadership, and the study in this issue provides evidence of the usefulness of this approach to leading people. Juan Meng, Po-Lin Pan, Michael A. Cacciatore and Karen Robayo Sanchez for this issue write about the integrated role of adaptive leadership, a sense of empathy and communication transparency by looking at trust building in corporate communication during the pandemic. The authors particularly look at adaptive leadership to explore how an organisation's top leadership can support related adaptive action in strategic communication and whether the application of adaptive leadership could facilitate a higher level of communication transparency as well as deliver a sense of caring and empathy in COVID-19 communication. Results showed that the "perceived impact of the COVID-19 pandemic increased communication professionals' challenges in building trust. It also drives adaptive changes in their coping actions in strategic communication. More importantly, the top leadership within the organisation played a key role in this adaptive leadership environment by demonstrating a commitment to transparency in COVID-19 communication and delivering a sense of empathy during the pandemic". Adaptive leadership has been previously used to explain how leaders encourage productive change, which includes themselves, organisations, community and society. This leadership theory argues that the leader is not someone who should be solving problems for people but one who plays the role of assistant to followers who need to confront tough problems (Heifetz *et al.*, 2009). The authors argue that the COVID-19 pandemic has made adaptive leadership particularly important in the context of strategic communication and have also expanded this theory by integrating a dimension of authentic leadership, relational transparency, which was previously advocated by complexity leadership (Uhl-Bien and Arena, 2017; Walumbwa *et al.*, 2008), as well as empathy, a characteristic of servant leadership (Mittal and Dorfman, 2012). These findings also lead to a question of whether relationship leadership is a way to go given that trust increases with adaptive leadership, which increased transparency in this study, but equally, one could ask whether a focus on building relationships and two-way communication would yield even more positive outcomes for organisations?

Margaret Anne Murray and April Marvin write in this issue about the Astroworld Tragedy and call for proactive crisis management using the 4R approach (reduction, readiness, response and recovery) due to social media heightening the importance of a quick and effective organisational response to risk and crisis situations because poor responses go viral quickly. However, authors argue that social media also provides intelligence and crowd-sources information that can inform PR practitioners of emerging crisis scenarios and remains an underutilised tool for two-way communication during crises. The authors argue that as the world changes and becomes less predictable, practitioners need to have a clear plan to protect organisations and the public surrounding them. Listening on social media and using social media for crowdsourcing have been a common practice in journalism for a long time now. The British Guardian, for example, has a crowdsourcing section where they write about this form of user-assisted help to various causes (<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/crowdsourcing>). In addition to that, many stories were crowdsourced and provided a public benefit, such as the famous story of Ian Tomlinson, a member of the British public who was pushed to the ground by a police officer and died whilst the police issued an untrue statement that the man died of natural cause. The video was handed over to the Guardian by a person who recorded Tomlinson being pushed, and the Guardian launched a successful story that led to the public finding out the truth of what really happened. In an article about how crowdsourcing was used, the Guardian wrote that "using social media to report news events is no longer ago considered innovative" and that this is what their journalists do because it supports the profession and empowers citizens.

For Guardian journalists, it is now interwoven in the process of what we do, from gathering information and checking it, through to letting our users know it is there. As an evolving form of journalism, it means we can retrieve valuable information from an increasingly empowered citizenry (The Guardian, 2011, n.p.).

This brings back the listening element in public relations and corporate communications because organisations and practitioners in charge of communication with the public need to listen to their publics and communicate and act appropriately. This is not to say they should be greenwashing or “mirroring the zeitgeist” and changing their communication and policies as public opinion shifts (Topić *et al.*, 2021). Listening to the public and considering their information is also important because, as the Guardian emphasises, it makes their audiences feel more empowered and engaged, and in corporate communications and public relations, this can also mean a greater focus on excellence in communication focussed on a two-way model (Grunig, 1992). What is more, journalists’ building relationships with their audiences through crowdsourcing that empowers readers can easily be translated into relationship leadership that listens to publics and builds a relationship with them, and ultimately, this could reduce the severity of organisational crises.

David Clementson and Tyler Page write for this issue about spokespersons and how they can help or hurt businesses through crisis messaging. Literature shows that spokespeople botch crisis responses with media interviews that inflame scandals, and spokespersons’ media statements have been known to cause the public to lose trust in an organisation (Callison, 2001; Coombs and Holladay, 2014; Benoit, 2015). Literature also shows that narratives are powerful persuasion tools, and spokespersons are frequently encouraged to use them because of their persuasive potential and storytelling (Kent, 2015; Coombs and Holladay, 2018; Sellnow and Seeger, 2021). The authors argue that the message will backfire when an audience mentally counterargues a spokesperson because audience members are persuading themselves to take the opposite position to the one advocated by the spokesperson, but despite that, spokespersons tend to instil counterarguments despite being professional persuaders. Thus, the authors examine the role of counterargument and the extent to which different message types from the spokesperson affect a company during a crisis, exploring the paradox of spokespersons’ (in)effectiveness by using three theoretical frameworks, namely normative crisis communication theory, narrative persuasion theory and the theory of reporting bias. Using an experimental research method of having participants watch video clips of media interviews of company spokespersons about a scandal, authors argue that reducing counterargument matters in the context of non-narrative persuasion, and non-narratives can perform at least as well as narratives in crisis communication. This paper also brings about relationship leadership as a question that could be asked whether spokespersons could build relationships with audiences during a time when there is no crisis and communicate more effectively and regularly to create a relationship with the organisational publics. Many organisations try to do that, but they are not always successful as the previous paper also shows.

Courtney D. Boman, Erika J. Schneider and Heather Akin add to the previous paper on crisis and write about the mediating effects of sincerity and credibility in crisis communication strategies. The authors explore how “source type can influence organisational assets proposed by source credibility theory (SCT) when paired with matched situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) strategies for accidental, preventable, and victim crises”. The authors argue that public relations professionals need to control not just the message content but also message delivery because “while news headlines can disseminate crisis information to the masses, organisations may utilize communication channels to release company statements.” The credibility of the source can influence beliefs, attitudes and behaviours and often, receivers of online crisis communication

rely on assessing the credibility and validity of both the source and the information that was provided to them (Coombs and Holladay, 2008). The authors also argue that honesty plays a key role in measuring sincerity by audiences (Clementson and Page, 2021), and in this study, matching the source to the type of crisis response enhanced perceived sincerity. This paper also opens a question of relationship leadership because if organisations focussed on building relationships with their stakeholders, trust and a perception of sincerity would come as a natural outcome. On a similar topic, Andreas Schwarz and Audra Diers Lawson write about crises in the third sector and the way they are portrayed by the media. The authors argue that “within the context of mediated third sector crises and comparable IGO crises, our findings show that journalists’ choices regarding storytelling follow clear patterns. When crises are defined by the journalists as internally caused (i.e. the organization is to blame), for example, then the narrative focuses increasingly on damage and calls for institutional reform (critique frame) as opposed to narratives where NPOs are the victims of externally caused crises (victim frame)”. The authors also argue that practitioners should follow up on these results because “First, in cases of misconduct (internal crises), the use of standard apologies is not enough to facilitate more positive evaluations by the news media. More expressions of empathy for victims of a crisis (e.g. victims of sexual abuse) and more efforts of organizational renewal as part of the post-crisis discourse of NPOs may yield better results (Seeger *et al.*, 2005). Second, when NPOs are victims of a crisis (e.g. attacks by terrorists or authoritarian governments), defensive crisis response strategies (e.g. attacking accusers, blaming perpetrators) may actually yield positive effects in the news media discourse. This contradicts the common wisdom of crisis communication research on business organizations and may represent a crucial difference compared to the specific context of NPO crises”. The findings again bring up the issue of relationship leadership and open a question of to what extent non-governmental and not-for-profit organisations engage in relationship building and public relations practice with the media. Whilst communication has substantially moved towards the digital sphere, traditional media still has relevance in setting the agenda and forming opinions.

The last two papers in this issue focus on corporate social responsibility (CSR) and views of public relations practitioners about moral entrepreneurship, with which we continue to publish works tackling CSR as the *Corporate Communications Journal (CCIJ)* has always done (Topić, 2022) and open a possibility for new and original research, something we also regularly do (Topić, 2024). Zahoor Ahmad Parray, Junaid Iqbal and Rashid Mushtaq write about customer perceptions of CSR and its impact on customer engagement (CE). The authors looked at how CSR affects CE and how corporate reputation (CR) serves as a mediator of this relationship. The authors argue that both “CSR and CR are positively related to CE and that CSR is positively associated with CE via a positive and affirmative mediating influence exerted by CR”. In addition to that, results suggest that customers’ views of the company’s CSR can boost their involvement with the organisation in terms of cognitive biases, meaning that there is also a strong correlation between CSR and CE. This paper illustrates the importance of listening to publics and aligning organisational values with the values of the public they serve, but it also brings about the notion of leadership that decides on CR and CSR, which ultimately boosts CE. Finally, Elina Erzikova and Diana Martinelli write about USA public relations professionals’ views of moral entrepreneurship, which is defined as “the purposeful process of changing or creating new institutionalized ethical norms”. The authors argue that “the concept of moral entrepreneurship provides organisations with a potentially valuable framework to actively recognize societal pressures and problems and act accordingly to better the environment in which the organisation resides and operates”.

In conclusion, this journal issue was not about relationship leadership, for no paper used this theoretical framework, but this theoretical framework is what I read out of papers published in the issue. Relationship theory is largely ignored in public relations and

corporate communications scholarship albeit it seems it could support organisations in building better relationships with their publics. In addition to that, the behavioural approach – which links with relationship leadership – has almost all but vanished from research, which is surprising because this approach – as my research has also shown – can explain the organisational dynamic and employee relationship, support employee retention and well-being, as well as work satisfaction, and help creating a more equitable workplace. Whilst the behavioural area of research is mainly focussed on organisational affairs, it is not illogical to think that happier and more satisfied employees would serve the organisational public better. The *CCIJ* remains open to sociological and psychological behavioural perspectives to studying public relations and corporate communications; however, given the lack of behavioural approach in scholarship in public relations and corporate communications, one needs to wonder: do we no longer consider public relations and corporate communications behavioural professions?

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