

5 A new model of strategic public relations

Introduction

In essence the book's Introduction proposed that three factors are crucial to the effective performance of a public relations leader: a thorough understanding of the strategic role that public relations can play within an organisation; an ability to plan strategically; and an awareness of the key competencies and behaviours they need to exhibit in the role. This chapter discusses the first piece of this jigsaw; that is, how can public relations professionals articulate the value and contribution of their role to organisational leaders and other senior colleagues?

The complexity and challenges described in the previous chapters might suggest a role that is incoherent, messy and almost impossible to define. The purpose of this chapter therefore is to provide a practical framework to tackle this. It will also serve as a guide to help professionals work in a strategic and systematic way by providing a structural and diagnostic framework through which they can organise, audit and analyse their current and future activities. Without a clear understanding of what is strategic and what is tactical and an appreciation that strategy operates at different levels, it is impossible to articulate the various roles that public relations can fulfil within an organisation. Furthermore, in the absence of a clear understanding of how different strategic levels relate to and inform each other, there is likely to be confusion about how and when public relations roles change. We have found in our work with senior professionals that they do not always understand these levels, or that a clear understanding of them helps them to adopt a different and appropriate approach. This, in turn, will impact on how tasks are defined and undertaken, and is a major source of support for practitioners as they are then equipped to resist the tendency of some senior managers to define their work tactically rather than strategically.

The framework described in this chapter is a model that we have tested and used extensively in practice. It was originally developed for and is now used throughout the world's fourth largest organisation, the UK National Health Service,¹ and can be applied to the private, public and not-for-profit sectors, which we contend have more in common than they have differences. Indeed, disparities can effectively be reduced to the purpose of the organisation; that is,

whether it is shareholders, the public interest or a cause that hold the major stake and which ultimately drive the organisation's orientation. Bearing that in mind, the principles supporting the model are deliberately designed to be generic and applicable to any kind of organisation, the model also accommodates the fact that the neat dividing lines that once characterised organisational life are no longer relevant in practice. Indeed, some organisations serve multiple purposes and occupy a hazy middle ground. For example, a state-funded hospital that seeks to serve the public interest may also be required to compete for specialist services and patients, or a listed company may enact values in actions which genuinely serve wider societal interests.

This chapter looks at the strategic role of public relations leaders under four headings:

- Roles in general
- The four-by-four model
- The contribution of public relations at four strategic levels
- The four attributes: DNA strands

Roles in general

Before going into detail about the strategic model that forms the heart of this chapter (as well as the book itself), it is important to clarify the word 'role'. Practitioners often talk about the role they play within their organisation and the succeeding paragraphs of this chapter talk about the 'roles' that public relations can play at different levels of organisational strategy.

The notion of roles emanates from role theory which is a concept drawn from sociology. Role theory contends that much of everyday life involves individuals spending time in groups and acting out a variety of positions or roles within them, for example as mother within a family group, as social club secretary in a social group, as accountant within a company, as manager within a department and so on. People take cues from those around them and learn to adapt behaviours depending on the positions they occupy. In other words, the role and consequently the tasks allocated to the role are profoundly influenced by the expectations of others. Over time these expectations become norms that then define the role. A key principle is that organisations, mainly their senior managers, define roles depending on their perceptions of what they should be. Hence, if senior managers have a limited or skewed perception of what public relations can contribute, then it is likely that public relations will find itself limited to that role. A task for public relations may therefore be to expand the role by educating and demonstrating to management that it can contribute to organisational effectiveness by fulfilling a more comprehensive and strategic remit.

There have been several attempts in the public relations literature to define the role of public relations, most notably by Broom and Smith² and then by Dozier and Broom,³ who proposed that there were two basic public relations