

As well as presenting the case for public relations being a strategic asset, the public relations area can make another critical contribution at corporate level. It can support management in making enlightened decisions by ensuring that multiple-stakeholder perspectives are taken into account when resource decisions are made. So, for example, shareholders are a very important stakeholder group, but if their interests are put before all other stakeholders' legitimate claims, the organisation will create issues for itself. The interest of all stakeholders must be properly balanced within the declared value base. So, for example, if an organisational value is to protect the interests of the most disadvantaged, then the needs of that group must be properly accommodated in resource allocation even in difficult times and they should not be left with whatever is left when all other and perhaps more powerful stakeholder needs have been considered. It is the job of the public relations function to ensure these less powerful interests are represented and that all stakeholder interests are balanced. It is at this level where the organisational values which are espoused internally and externally are tested and the public relations function is a guardian of those values and their continued enactment.

It is also the task of the public relations professional to provide intelligence on how the organisation's corporate decisions are likely to be perceived by stakeholders and, of course, to involve stakeholders in, and inform them of, corporate-level decisions as appropriate. Stakeholder involvement can have a profound impact on the nature and scope of the business and its facilitation is a strategic contribution by public relations. Harley Davidson, for example, involve their Harley Davidson Owners' Group (HOG) in discussions about the nature of the business and this guides management decision-making.

Finally, as indicated earlier, it is neither desirable nor possible for the public relations function to be totally responsible for all the organisation's relationship-building and communication activity. An essential role of the senior public relations professional at corporate level is to coach and mentor other senior managers in communicating the organisation's objectives and decisions to their peers and stakeholder groups, and ensuring that they too are alert to the reputational and relational opportunities and threats inherent in doing so.

Value-chain level

At the value-chain level, the focus will be on those stakeholders directly involved in, and with the organisation. Their closeness to the organisation distinguishes them from the broad societal level stakeholders, often called the 'general public', who may have no specific or strong link with it but who form the substance of those norms that form public opinion and who will hold the organisation to account accordingly. Typical value-chain stakeholders will include customers, service users, delivery partners, suppliers, distributors, regulators, employees, and so on. It is at this value-chain stakeholder level that societal and corporate

intentions and decisions are made real by being operationalised. The public relations function has a part to play in engaging with these 'close' stakeholders, including those who may be regarded as troublesome, such as activist groups and online communities. This engagement could be for a range of reasons: to involve them in decision-making, to keep them informed, to persuade them to buy or to sell, to identify and work through their current and future concerns, to identify potential issues and crises, to capitalise on opportunities they raise, to solve common problems, and so on. Specific expertise in stakeholder identification, segmentation, insight, engagement and collaboration and/or management can be offered by the public relations department alongside coaching and mentoring those colleagues who interact with these stakeholders regularly. In addition, the public relations function can offer help in detecting, balancing and managing what could well be the conflicting demands of different stakeholder groups and navigating complex negotiations and relationships between them and management.

A very specific and important skill is the insight that public relations professionals can provide on specific groups of stakeholders and individuals. This will be covered in greater detail in Chapter 10, but knowing stakeholders intimately, being able to judge how they are likely to behave and how that behaviour can be influenced is a critical skill of practitioners.

As indicated earlier, being alert to the differences between internal culture and behaviours and external expectations of that culture and behaviour is especially important at this level. Individuals are representatives of the organisation and the brand, and how they behave and communicate will affect the reputation of the whole organisation. This is precisely why so much attention is now being paid to the internal stakeholder, with communication being central to successful cultural and organisational change.

The role of the public relations function in being attuned to and representing all these 'close' stakeholder perspectives, internal and external, to senior managers in the organisation is critical to organisational success.

Functional level

At the functional level, it is the role of public relations to liaise with the other specialist functional areas of the organisation to determine how the functional department called public relations as a whole can contribute its specific communication skills to the organisation's mission and objectives at an operational level. For public relations this will involve planning specific programmes and campaigns which support these objectives, offering specialist public relations advice and services to other functional areas of the organisation in support of their objectives, and coaching and mentoring colleagues throughout the organisation to be 'communicatively competent', or at least communicatively aware, so that they can either undertake certain public relations tasks themselves to an adequate standard, or be clear about when they need to enlist the help of the specialists. The types of specific