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11 The catalyst

Introduction

When Kevin Murray and Jon White interviewed chief executives about working with high-calibre public relations advisers they found:

This breed of person showed an acute understanding of stakeholder needs and desires, and awareness of the organisation's business model and key performance indicators, and awareness of the operating environment and the confidence to challenge the leaders of the organisation ('to look them in the eye').¹

The model outlined in Chapter 5 concludes by suggesting four roles for public relations leaders: orienter, navigator, catalyst and implementer. In this chapter we will focus on the catalyst role. This requires special attention because it is so critically important and because it has rarely been focused on. The other roles are embedded across the whole of the book, but with a significant part of the implementer role also being covered in Chapter 12 – the expert technician.

As implied, the organisational catalyst is someone who makes things happen, but in a very particular way. Leaders make things happen in their areas of responsibility. As the organisational catalyst, public relations leaders also make things happen to support and defend the values and relationships which are all so critical to organisational success as a whole. They examine the touch points between an organisation and its stakeholders, not only for those stakeholding groups for whom they hold professional responsibility. This may mean operating in other leaders' territory, and pointing out where systems and processes do not deliver against values and expectations. The catalyst acts as the organisation's general guardian and fixer. This role as 'fixer' is a potential source of power for practitioners and can be leveraged to reinforce personal leadership authority, beyond technical competence (more on this later).

As indicated in Chapter 5, the catalyst role comes into play largely at the value-chain level, with those close stakeholders who interact with the organisation on a regular basis. However, as will be pointed out later, the catalyst

operates at all levels in the organisation. In this chapter, we will explore the organisational catalyst under four headings:

- The need for a catalyst
- Implications
- Grit in the oyster
- Areas of influence

The need for a catalyst

In recent times there has been an increasing recognition that organisations are operating under a new business paradigm. As South African Benita Steyn says, business organisations have been focused on the bottom line.² Return on investment and profit have been the mantra. Now, 'social, political, environmental, and ethical issues have gained strategic importance, all strategic stakeholders as well as societal values and norms have to be considered'. Trust and legitimacy are not 'nice to have'; they are essential. Ultimately, society decides whether it will give an organisation a licence to operate.³ The opprobrium that banks are currently experiencing reflects the view that people in general believe they have acted illegitimately. The anger felt is partly the result of the fact that they have proved too large and important to have their licence withdrawn. Many, but not all chief executives realise the far-reaching nature and implications of these new accountabilities and are trying to deal with a world full of new risks that are not amenable to traditional solutions such as more efficient working practices, increased resources or tighter compliance. They need an organisational catalyst who can identify the risks and issues in organisational performance from relationship and communicative perspectives and who – most crucially – offers solutions. So, for example, if cumbersome compliance systems are preventing productive relationships with suppliers, this needs to be identified and fixed by someone who looks across the whole organisation and whose responsibility it is to identify potential issues and threats to the organisation's reputation. As Steyn says, 'Contemporary concepts such as reputation, trust, legitimacy, transparency, governance, socially responsible behaviour, and sustainable development are monopolising strategic conversations in this century.'⁴

The public relations practitioner is well placed to lead on these issues. Their knowledge and leadership in these areas can also become an important source of power.⁵ Power within organisations has been seen to elude public relations professionals because they have been traditionally reliant on their skills of persuasion, their ability to build strong interpersonal relationships, network and undertake technical tasks effectively.⁶ Like it or not, coercive power is vital to gain leverage in the organisational structure. Being responsible for initiating discussions about how to fix the issues linked with organisation-critical assets such as reputation and trust puts organisational catalysts in a different and better place. They are able to determine and direct courses of action to enhance and

block threats to the organisation's reputation. It has been a harsh lesson to learn in numerous organisations such as BP in Texas and Barclays Bank who have discovered that where governance and reputational risks are not handled well the threat of organisational failure is as acute as the immediate financial fallout. In light of this, the organisational catalyst calls for leaders to reflect regularly and seriously on the purpose, values, actions and words of the enterprise and whether or not they will retain support.

It is interesting that in these times of increasing uncertainty and accountability, the number of public relations professionals on boards is increasing and one of their roles is to be the guardian of strategic issues and risks.⁷

Implications

So what, then, are the implications of these requirements?

First, the organisational catalyst is both an ideological and contextual leader.⁸ Ideological leadership may have negative connotations, but what we mean here is carving out a role for the organisation in its immediate value-chain network, which is unique to itself and which adds real value. This is not about *imposing* the organisation on the value chain, which is ultimately futile, but sustainable enterprises find a place where they add value and are valued, not only economically, but as partners and as peers with common aspirations. This begins to determine the nature of relationships with immediate stakeholders and in turn demonstrates to the wider 'general public' in very concrete terms how its values and character operate in action.

Contextual leadership is about managing multiple, multi-layered and interwoven relationships between the members of the value chain, and beyond that, the relationships on which they depend. For example, an organisation may supply goods and services to another organisation. That second organisation may also be supplied by others who have connections which may be problematic or beneficial. The first organisation will need to take a view on these relationships and the organisational catalyst will be the one to both obtain information through intelligence gathering and make an assessment of required actions. These will be for the benefit not only of the first organisation, but for the whole value chain, since potentially the whole chain will be affected. So, if it is discovered that one member of the value chain has particularly strong and credible connections with local communities, that is an asset that the whole value chain may benefit from.

Ideological and contextual leadership is a strategic process, it is not about *doing* public relations, but at the heart of determining what an organisation's purposes, place and role is in the value chain.

The second implication is that the catalyst views the organisation from the standpoint of those others in the value chain. Their principal test will be to ask whether the organisation delivers on the promises it makes, and this goes beyond compliance. As the most recent Edelman Trust Barometer⁹ concludes, to move

from licence to operate to a licence to lead requires 'principles-based leadership not rules-based performance'. A further test will be how selfish the organisation is perceived to be. Does it operate in a spirit of partnership and mutuality seeking to ensure the well-being of the whole value chain, or is it constantly seeking its own advantage?

The task of the organisational catalyst is to walk in the shoes of its value-chain partners to see the organisation as it is in reality: its actual behaviours and actions. Undertaking an audit of the organisation from a value-chain perspective is a revealing exercise. Figure 11.1 uses added value and trust as axes in this exercise.

The third implication of being an organisational catalyst requires the public relations professional to be a reflective leader. Reflection is not a passive kind of leadership and not to be confused with reflexivity. Reflexive leaders, according to Susanne Holmstrom,¹⁰ take an internal perspective; they tend therefore to repeat established behaviours and actions, and are blind to the shifting and broader context. This exposes them to risk because actions and decisions can be seen to be out of kilter with what is happening 'out there'. They will therefore find their world-view in conflict with other world-views. We find this quite often with companies who are led by strong entrepreneurs with single-minded purpose or by scientists and engineers who take a very rational approach to their work. In the case of entrepreneurs this can be a good thing, leading to innovations of mind-blowing scale, but it can also lead to catastrophic failure when they are seen to be out of touch with what the public wants. Famously, Shell, in its

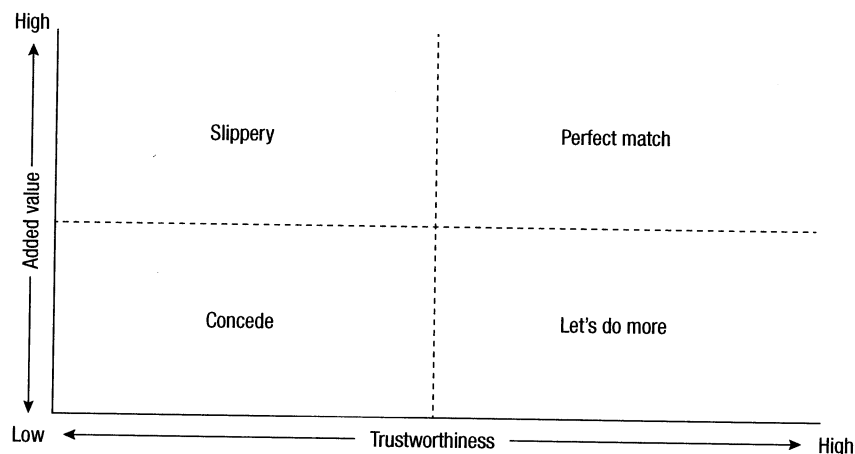


Figure 11.1 Value-chain auditing

Note:

Map each value-chain member onto the grid by asking two questions:

- If I were organisation X in my value chain, how would I rate my organisation in terms of adding value?
- How would I rate our organisation as being trustworthy?

It would be even better if you asked independent researchers to do this.

disposal of the Brent Spar oil platform, took all the right engineering decisions, but was blind to the consequences of not taking into account the fact that environmental activism was rising on the agenda and that Greenpeace was able to provoke an emotional response.

Reflective leaders, on the other hand, see their organisations as part of a multi-dimensional and multi-contextual world, and there are a number of aspects to this that play to the strengths of public relations leaders:

- the organisation sees itself from outside, as one actor among many and set within a larger context;
- the organisation has choices and the potential to act and behave differently;
- others realise this too and hold it accountable for those choices;
- this frames the relationships that the organisation forms with stakeholders;
- this is a critical factor when assessing risks and opportunities.

The person (or department) who takes responsibility for generating intelligence on these factors is of major significance to the organisation. It is an obvious role for public relations.

This perspective leads to a new approach to the positioning of the organisation, which can be seen to be complementary or even an alternative to traditional strategic and marketing thinking. Rather than just looking for competitive advantage (Porter) or to lever resources (the resource-based view), the organisation seeks to find a place in the value chain where it can add value. So instead of stakeholders having to be 'managed', they are respected: instead of depending on 'getting our message across' the organisation becomes part of an ongoing and multiple polylogue where listening takes on a critical importance: where the primary role of public relations is not information dissemination, but intelligence acquisition. In this way the public relations leader becomes, in Benita Steyn's words, 'the reflective strategist',¹¹ the outcome of which, for that individual, is to become the source of constant challenge, change and renewal; the catalyst in the organisation, the grit in the oyster whose constant but constructive irritation produces something of immense value.

Grit in the oyster

From the above it can be seen that the catalyst role, although focused on the way things are done in the value chain, operates at all the levels mentioned in Chapter 5. At the societal level, the knowledge of context and social change needs to be factored into the developing strategy of the organisation. At the corporate level decisions need to be illuminated with stakeholder and contextual intelligence and constantly measured against purpose and values. At the functional level too, public relations and broader communication-led programmes, whether internal or external, need framing within this context. It has always been a puzzle to us that a constant challenge cited by public relations professionals is aligning public

relations and business strategy.¹² How can this be if the catalyst public relations leader is doing their job properly?

This last point might be partly explained by the observation that being the organisational catalyst is not a comfortable role. It takes personal courage, credibility, a great deal of persistence, resilience and integrity – along with evidence. However, research by one of us¹³ has demonstrated that such public relations leaders are not afraid to elevate uncomfortable truths to the board and indeed that is why they are valued.¹⁴ Unfortunately, the skills, knowledge and behaviours required to fulfil this role are rarely taught either on advanced public relations courses or management programmes. Perhaps the nearest equivalent to this role is that of the management consultant and we cover the internal consultant role in Chapter 14.

It also has to be recognised that dealing in organisational relationships (internal and external) cannot be dissociated from organisational politics and power. As mentioned earlier, because of the risk involved in working in this territory and their ability to deal with it, public relations leaders can attain coercive power with the ability to direct action. The received wisdom on this is that the practitioner therefore should be on the board. However, there is counter-thinking on this which is worth exploring. Derina Holtzhausen and colleagues take the view that public relations leaders should ‘resist authoritative organisational power structures’ even when they hold senior positions because they should assume the role of organisational activist.¹⁵ Indeed, she argues that being in the senior decision-making cadre may severely restrict the public relations leader from this activist role. Championing those who do not have power, whether they be within or outside the organisation, and constantly challenging the status quo, bringing in alternative perspectives and voices, actually makes the organisation stronger. In fact, this activist role can be taken one step further to become the character of the whole organisation. She cites the case of the Benetton group who have taken on the corporate activist role on issues such as AIDS, the death penalty and racial prejudice – often to the outrage of the ‘establishment’.

While this may seem an extreme and even self-serving position, there are merits in this view. As one director of corporate affairs told us, ‘If I have not had a row with my MD by 9.00 in the morning, I’m not doing my job properly.’ It is the job of catalysts to constantly challenge. The Swedish academic and practitioner Sven Hamrefors captures the role amusingly but well when he compares the catalyst leader to the medieval court jester whose role it was to tell the king how things really were because the king, like many chief executives, was usually told what he wanted to hear by his courtiers.¹⁶ The jester had a formal and protected position to ensure that grounded reality was also given a voice and for the king to see himself as others saw him. As the quote from Kevin Murray and Jon White at the beginning of this chapter affirms, the catalyst needs the confidence to look the chief executive in the eye.

Areas of influence

As mentioned above, the organisational catalyst has a part to play at all levels of the organisation. They are also uniquely placed to look at the *whole* organisation, in context, as others see it and very specifically from the point of view of those in the value chain – including employees. Public relations practitioners are some of the few people to have this helicopter view of the organisation, seeing the whole system within a wider system. This cross-cutting role is important. We all know situations where various parts of an organisation have a role in an activity and issues are caused by those actions in aggregate. The organisational catalyst will appreciate from a relationship point of view that this is corrosive and seek to fix it by encouraging departments to work together to resolve any problems.

Beyond these vertical and horizontal responsibilities there are a number of other areas that the catalyst will need to monitor and be involved in:

Change leadership and management. It is agreed that public relations is usually involved in change-management programmes. Leadership is also associated strongly with change (see Chapter 3). However, it is not the *content* and *outcomes* of these programmes that is the point here, but the impact of their implementation on the system. The reality is that most change-management programmes are not followed through, or the next one arises before the first one is completed. The effect of this is system cynicism,¹⁷ and inertia and resistance to further change because ‘we’ve seen it all before and if we keep our heads down long enough, we’ll get back to where we are now’. The role of the catalyst is therefore to make judgements about the timeliness of such programmes, their nature and audit their progress and impact. In a world where constant adaption and change are required, inertia and those things causing inertia are the enemies of progress.

The catalyst’s knowledge is invaluable when considering organisational structures. Key questions need to be asked about what should be retained centrally and what can be localised. The principle of subsidiarity, that is allowing decision-making, especially about implementation, to be done at the point where those decisions bite, is an important one. Equally important is listening to feedback on how structures can be adjusted to make them better.

Organisational structure tells a story as does the physical structure of buildings and the location of people within them. The hierarchical structure of an organisation can often be replicated in the physical layout of buildings: senior managers on the top floor, reserved parking, dingy restrooms for cleaning staff. They all speak volumes about the organisation.

Apart from managerial hierarchies and physical structures, organisational structures are also mentally constructed. The way that vision and values are discussed and agreed set the frame. Organisational language, forms of address and the way people are around each other creates not only the culture of the organisation, but the uncoded approvals and disapprovals that configure the mind-set of employees. The organisational catalyst remains in tune with

these things, looking for issues and initiating actions which build the whole system positively.

While structures set the architecture, processes are the organisational software. They move things around the system: in, out, through, around and between. It is often process or a combination of structure and process that causes friction. 'Why is it so difficult to get things done?' is a voiced frustration against dysfunctional structure and process. A simple audit of all the steps required to achieve a particular end will reveal the blockages, bottlenecks and redundancies that are inherent in any process that is built up over periods of time. Custom and practice become the norm. The ambition of the catalyst has to be, as Sven Hamrefors says,¹⁸ to have systems that are better than actually needed. He also points out that benchmarking against those in the same industry sector rarely brings significant improvements and gives the example of a budget airline learning from supermarket logistics about how to turn around baggage quickly as cross-sector thinking.

The catalyst examines processes to discover the real issues that produce conflict in relationships and which pose reputational threats. He or she then comes up with solutions, usually working with those with the knowledge, invariably those who are involved at the front-line.

The ultimate objective for the catalyst is for the organisation to function to its optimum capability within a value chain and wider stakeholding community. These are the constituencies that will judge everything that is done, said and demonstrated through decision-making, structure, systems and processes.

Summary

This chapter has sought to demonstrate the role of the organisational catalyst. As one of our vice-chancellors said to us, 'How is it that wherever there is action your PR students are in the middle of it?' That is exactly it. The catalyst is where the action is, present throughout the organisation at all levels; observing structures, systems, processes and indeed every activity where the reality needs fixing.

The communicating organisation is not a choice. Organisations communicate whether they want to or not. The organisational catalyst's job is to look at the organisation in its totality, to see where the potential friction points are and to ensure that action is taken to fix them. Why is this the role of the public relations leader? Because there is no one better placed to do this. Public relations leaders are invited onto boards not because they can create wonderful communication plans, but because their perspectives and insights contribute to the future well-being of the organisation. Being the catalyst, ensuring the organisation is communicatively competent and defending the intangible asset base is the job for a leader, the public relations leader.

Notes

- 1 Murray, K. and White, J. (2005). CEO's views on reputation management, *Journal of Communication Management*, 9(4), 348–58, p. 354.
- 2 Steyn, B. (2009). The strategic role of public relations is strategic reflection: a South African research stream, *American Behavioral Scientist*, 53(4), 516–32, pp. 517–18.
- 3 Broom, G.M. and Dozier, D.M. (1990) *Using Research in Public Relations: Applications to Programme Management*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- 4 Steyn, B. (2009). The strategic role of public relations is strategic reflection, p. 517 (see above).
- 5 One of the classic texts on power and still widely used today is by French, J. and Raven, B. (1959). The Bases of Social Power. In Ott, J. Parkes, S. and Simpson, R. (eds), *Classic Readings in Organizational Behavior* (pp. 400–9). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. They describe five sources of power: coercive, where punishment can be inflicted if expected behaviour is not complied with; reward, where someone has power to incentivise another, for example giving a discretionary bonus; legitimate, where someone is obliged to submit to another, for example a subordinate to their senior manager; referent, where there is close identification between one and another, for example where there is a strong team ethos, and expert, where one has superior knowledge. Raven also argued for another power – informational, where someone has superior persuasive and communication powers to influence others.
- 6 For more evidence on this see Zerfass, A., Verhoeven, P., Tench, R., Moreno, A. and Verčič, D. (2011). *European Communication Monitor 2011: Empirical Insights into Strategic Communication in Europe. Results of an Empirical Survey in 43 Countries (Chart Version)*. Brussels: EACD, EUPRERA; and Hogg, G. and Doolan, D. (1999). Playing the part: practitioner roles in public relations, *European Journal of Marketing*, 33(5/6), 597–611.
- 7 The European Communications Monitor (Zerfass, A., Verčič, D., Verhoeven, P., Moreno, A. and Tench, R. (2012). *European Communication Monitor 2012: Challenges and Competencies for Strategic Communication. Results of an Empirical Survey in 42 Countries*. Brussels: EACD/EUPRERA) and the American Generally Accepted Practices (GAPVII) Study published by the USC Annenberg Strategic Communication and Public Relations Center (available at <http://ascjweb.org/gapstudy>) provide the latest insights on this.
- 8 The ideological and contextual leader concepts come from research done for the Swedish Institute of Public Relations by Professor Sven Hamrefors (2010) which is provided in a report called *The Information Officer's Role in Leadership*, Stockholm: The Swedish Institute of Public Relations.
- 9 Edelman Trust Barometer (2012). London: Edelman. Available at <http://edelmaneditions.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Final-Brochure-1.16.pdf>.
- 10 Holmstrom, S. (2005). Co-evolution of society and organization: reflexivity, contingency and reflection. Paper given at EUPRERA Conference, Lisbon, 10–13 November.
- 11 Steyn, B. (2009). The strategic role of public relations is strategic reflection, pp. 517–18 (see above).
- 12 This is seen as the second largest challenge in the most recent European Communications Monitor, Zerfass, A., Verčič, D., Verhoeven, P., Moreno, A. and Tench, R. (2012). *European Communication Monitor 2012* (see above).
- 13 Gregory, A. (2008). The competencies of senior practitioners in the UK: an initial study, *Public Relations Review*, 34(3), 215–23.
- 14 Murray, K. and White, J. (2005). CEO's views on reputation management, p. 354 (see above).
- 15 Derina Holtzhausen is a leading scholar in what is called the postmodern school of public relations. Papers worth reading are Holtzhausen, D.R. (2000). Postmodern