Conversations with PR Leaders:
Heading Into a Dynamic and Uncertain Future at Warp Speed

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Abstract

Interviews with 137 PR leaders in 10 countries/regions examined how they manage complex issues, the influences of organizational culture and structure on practice, and needs and expectations for future leaders. Five themes emerged: 1) the competitive global hunt for talent, 2) intensification of the sensemaking role due to the digital revolution, 3) the dilution of communication power due to cultural and structural constraints, 4) lack of strategic leadership development programs, and 5) incredibly high expectation for future leaders in the field.

Introduction

Excellent leadership in public relations practice is rich human capital. The qualities and capabilities of communication leaders and their day-to-day performance help drive the success, reputation, and future of their organizations and the profession (Berger & Meng, 2010; Meng, Berger, Gower & Heyman, 2012). Scholars and practitioners recognize the link between excellent leadership and effective practice, but few have tried to explain the complex and multi-faceted nature of leadership in the field. The leadership construct and the development of leaders in PR are under researched, under developed, and largely unmeasured (Berger & Meng, 2014).

To advance our understanding, The Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations carried out a global study in 2012 to gain a big picture of leaders in practice (Berger, 2012). An international team of 28 researchers conducted survey and interview research. In the first phase, nearly 4,500 practitioners in 23 countries completed an online survey in nine languages. The survey examined key issues in the field, how leaders manage them, how they affect leaders' roles and practices, and what might be done to improve the development of future communication leaders. Individual perceptions about leaders, organizational culture, gender, and the profession also were captured.

This research paper reports on findings from the second phase of that study, which involved depth interviews with 137 communication leaders in 10 countries and regions. The interviews: 1) provided depth insights about managing issues in a turbulent environment and how they affect what leaders do, 2) examined how organizational cultures and structures influence leadership roles and practices, and 3) explored the development of future leaders. The interviews revealed two crucial needs: more leadership talent at all levels and more strategic, systemic development of PR leaders globally to achieve future success. This report reviews five major themes in the interviews and discusses three practical implications/best practices for leadership development in organizations and groups.

The Literature and the Integrated Model of Leadership

Leadership is a "complex, multifaceted phenomenon" (Yukl, 1989, p. 253), and research about it reflects this complexity through a wide range of theoretical perspectives and approaches developed in the past century. Several comprehensive reviews of this literature are available and are not duplicated here (e.g., Hackman & Johnson, 2009; Northouse, 2007; and Yukl, 2012). Drawing from these works and original studies, four major theoretical approaches are first briefly described—the trait, behavioral, situational, and transformational approaches. Leadership studies

in public relations are then reviewed as a basis for setting up the integrated model of PR leadership that framed the global study. This model integrates concepts from the major theoretical approaches and the public relations literature.

Four Major Approaches to Leadership Theories

The Trait Approach. One of the earliest research areas in leadership, the trait approach refers to leaders' attributes such as personality characteristics, intelligence, motives, values, and skills (Stogdill, 1948, 1974). This research focused on identifying personal attributes or superior qualities deemed essential to effective leadership. Studies often compared such traits exhibited by leaders with those exhibited by non-leaders (Bratton, Grint & Nelson, 2005; Yukl, 1989). However, researchers found it difficult to identify consistent patterns of traits that differentiated leaders from non-leaders; they failed agree on specific traits that would guarantee effective leadership (Stogdill, 1948, 1974); and the approach largely ignored the importance of followers (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975).

Despite its limitations, trait research continues, and many believe that certain traits remain essential to leadership. Manfredi (2008), for example, argued that successful leaders today must be intelligent, possess high energy, think conceptually, and communicate effectively.

The Behavioral Approach. This approach emphasizes what leaders do and the consequences of their behaviors on managerial effectiveness (Fleishman, 1953). Two types of behaviors are often studied: task-oriented and relationship-oriented behaviors (Bratton, Grint, & Nelson, 2005). The *task-oriented* approach seeks to discover what activities are typical of managerial work and the processes of decision-making and problem solving (McCall & Kaplan, 1985; Yukl, 1989). The *relationship-oriented* approach has focused more on leader-follower relationships during work, such as showing respect and support for followers (Kotter, 1982; Mintzberg, 1973, 1979).

This approach also emphasizes *style* of leadership, and Blake and Mouton (1964) characterized five leadership styles in their influential Leadership Grid: authority-compliance, team management, country club management, middle-of-the-road management, and impoverished management. Despite its practical application, the behavioral approach has been unable to describe a universal style of leader behavior that is effective in the vast majority of situations. Nevertheless, leader styles and behaviors remain a central area of study because "walking the talk" and "show it, don't tell it" remain important to organizational members.

The Situational Approach. The situational approach emphasizes the importance of the leader's traits and behaviors within a mix of contextual factors such as the myriad issues in external environments and the attributes of subordinates and other internal affairs. This approach recognizes both the need for flexible leaders and the importance of context. Various theories in this approach have sought to establish the relevance of, and interrelationships among behavior patterns and situations (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975; Fiedler, 1978; House, 1971; Kerr & Jermier, 1978).

For example, *path-goal* theory (House, 1971; House & Mitchell, 1974), argues that the leader's main task is to use the appropriate behavior style to help followers clarify their paths to achieve work and personal goals. The nature of the task, the work environment, and subordinate attributes determine which style best improves subordinate satisfaction and performance. Fiedler's (1978) *LPC contingency theory* proposes that the fit between the leader's orientation and the favorableness of the situation determines the team's effectiveness. *Leader-member exchange theory* (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) describes how

leaders develop different exchange relationships with subordinates. The basic idea is that leaders form two groups of followers. *In-group* members share characteristics similar to those of the leader and are often given greater responsibilities, rewards, and attention. In contrast, *out-group* members work outside the leader's inner circle and receive less attention and fewer rewards.

The Transformational Approach. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, research shifted from what is now frequently termed "traditional leadership" to the "new leadership" with the advent of charismatic and transformational approaches (Northouse, 2007). Traditional leadership theories emphasized rational processes, but the new approaches are more concerned with emotions, values, ethics, and long-term relationships, as well as followers' motives, needs, and satisfaction (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978; House, 1977; Conger & Kanungo, 1987; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993).

Transformational leadership theories are broader in scope because they involve leader style, traits, power, behaviors, and situational variables in a dynamic model. Moreover, transformational leaders articulate a vision of the future that can be shared by subordinates. The benefits of such leadership include broadening and elevating the interests of followers, generating awareness and acceptance among the followers of the organization's mission, and motivating followers to go beyond their self-interests for the good of the organization (Bass, 1985, 1997; Beyer, 1999; Conger, 1999; House, 1976, 1999).

Public Relations Research and Leadership

Until recently, few research projects have directly explored leadership in public relations (Aldoory & Toth, 2004). However, the concept has been addressed in several essays and is implicit in at least four theoretical perspectives in the field. For example, Thayer (1986) argued that professionals should take on a strategic communication leadership role. Neff (2002) advocated for integrating leadership processes and service into the basic PR principles course in education. Other scholars have recognized the importance of applying leadership skills to enhance practice and to help professionals participate successfully in decision-making arenas (Berger & Reber, 2006; Berger, Reber, & Heyman, 2007; L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). Four leadership perspectives in public relations and the work of The Plank Center are reviewed in this section.

Excellence and Role Theories. The IABC Excellence Study identified key characteristics of excellence in public relations as general principles (J. E. Grunig, 1992; L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). The well-known principles reflect characteristics and values that a public relations unit could (and should) have, and we can view these principles as a conceptual framework for leadership. Applying some of them to leadership, for example, we might conclude that PR leaders should: 1) be involved in strategic management of the organization, 2) be empowered as members of the dominant coalition, 3) possess a managerial worldview and requisite professional knowledge and experience, and 4) model two-way symmetrical communication (Broom & Dozier, 1986; Dozier & Broom, 1995; J. E. Grunig, 1992; L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002).

Excellence theorists also concluded that an organization's structure and culture influence both the role and effectiveness of public relations, and they advocated for a "culture for communication." In addition, excellence theory and role theory underscore certain crucial leadership traits (visionary, managerial view), skills (communication knowledge and expertise), and behaviors (model two-way communication) for professionals in the field.

Contingency Theory. Cameron and colleagues (e.g., Cameron, Cropp, & Reber, 2001; Reber & Cameron, 2003) developed contingency theory, which focuses on strategic and conflictual relationships between an organization and its publics. PR leaders help manage their organizations strategically by scanning the external environment, identifying crucial issues and interpreting what they mean, and then making appropriate strategic choices based on those issues and actors. These choices fall within an organization-public relationship continuum that ranges from an organization's pure advocacy of its own position on an issue (adversarial), to pure acceptance of the public's position on an issue (accommodative).

Contingency theory in public relations reflects the situational approach in leadership theory (Waller, Smith & Warnock, 1989): context affects what leaders pay attention to and what they do. This suggests that "leadership is best not conceived as a universal trait, but as situationally-sensitive management and strategic (even tactical) options" (Shin, Heath, & Lee, 2011, p. 172).

Power Relations Theory. L. A. Grunig (1992) linked the power-control perspective with public relations, arguing that PR executives need to be part of the dominant coalition, that insider group of key influencers and strategic decision-makers in organizations. To gain admission to this group and influence its decisions, communication leaders must possess professional expertise and experience and the ability to understand and articulate a variety of stakeholder information that bears on the organization. In addition, communication leaders must have the persuasive ability to be effective advocates and counselors.

Berger and Reber (2006) explored how power can make PR units more effective and ethical in organizational decision making. They claimed the practice is inherently political, and the practice exists and occurs within strategic relationships marked by power. To be an effective leader, then, one must increase her or his power and influence, "become more politically astute, employ more diverse influence resources and tactics, and exert greater political will in organizational arenas where power relations shape decisions" (Berger & Reber, 2006, p. 2). This research highlights organizational structural and cultural dimensions of leadership and valorizes certain traits and skills (e.g., vision of power, political willpower, and political knowledge).

Leadership and Gender. Aldoory (1998) interviewed female public relations leaders to examine their leadership style and found that they exhibited transformational and interactive styles, grounded in a situational context. Aldoory & Toth (2004) examined which leadership styles are most effective and how leadership perceptions vary by gender. Practitioners strongly favored transformational leadership style over transactional style. Overall, the survey revealed few differences between female and male participants and their style preferences.

A study of gender and public relations documented a long-time pay gap between women and men and examined why women find it more difficult to ascend to leadership (L. A. Grunig, Toth, & Hon, 2001). Gender stereotyping is a key driver: issues of gender bias are essentially issues of perceptions of women created by both men and women. Though women now represent about 70 percent of the professional workforce, the pay gap persists. This has been attributed to "years of experience, manager role enactment, participation in management decision-making, income suppressing career interruptions, and career specialization" (Dozier, Sha, & Shen, 2012).

The Plank Center Studies and the Integrated Model of Leadership in PR. In 2006 The Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations at the University of Alabama launched a research program to enrich the body of knowledge about leadership in the field. To date this effort has yielded 22 studies that explore diverse aspects of leadership—behaviors, styles, skills, ethics and values, emotional intelligence, and education, among others.

For example, Choi and Choi (2007) identified six leadership behaviors that influence the value of public relations in organizations, including providing employees with a clear vision about public relations policies and strategies, exerting upward influence, acting as a change agent, and creating alliances inside and outside of the organization. Werder and Holtzhausen (2009) found that transformational and inclusive leadership styles were most prevalent among practice leaders. Both styles were seen to increase the effectiveness of public relations strategies.

Jin (2010) examined core emotional traits and skills for PR leaders. She found that PR leaders preferred a transformational leadership style, and empathy played an essential role in this type of leadership. Both leadership style and empathy were significant predictors of PR leaders' competency in gaining employee trust, managing employee hopes and frustrations, and taking successful stances toward employees and top management in decision-making conflicts.

Lee and Cheng (2011) interviewed 20 high-level PR executives to examine the ethical dimension of leadership. They found that ethical leadership was grounded more strongly in personal rather than professional ethics. Also, advocating ethical standards and modeling appropriate behaviors facilitated the transfer of ethics knowledge and behaviors in the organization more effectively than did communicating ethics codes and conducting training.

Erzikova and Berger (2011, 2012) surveyed university PR educators to learn how and to what extent leadership is incorporated in education. The teachers said they are advocates for leadership and help develop future leaders, but few universities offered actual leadership courses or content. Educators indicated the most important leadership skills and values for students were communication knowledge and skills, a strong ethical orientation, and problem-solving ability.

Meng and colleagues at The Plank Center (Meng, 2009; Meng & Berger, 2013; Meng, Berger, Gower & Heyman, 2012; Meng, Berger & Heyman, 2011) have been carrying out a research program to build theory about leadership in the field. As described above, research in managerial leadership and public relations leadership is marked by a broad range of theories and approaches. Meng's model (2009) grew out of a review of these theories and the belief that successful leadership is complex and multi-dimensional. Thus, the model draws from and integrates elements of several of the theoretical perspectives—traits, skills, behaviors, and situational and transformational leadership styles.

This integrated model of leadership in public relations includes six individual dimensions and a major environmental moderator of leadership effectiveness. A *dimension* is a fundamental unit or element of the leadership construct (Berger & Meng, 2014). The six dimensions are: self-dynamics (self-insights and vision), team leadership and collaboration capabilities, ethical orientation and professional values, relationship-building skills, strategic decision-making capabilities, and communication knowledge management and skills. The seventh dimension—the environmental moderator—represents the organizational structure and culture in which the PR teams and leaders practice. Issues in the external world also affect practice and influence what leaders pay attention to and what they do.

Essentially, the integrated model contends that communication leaders may be more effective and excellent when 1) their six personal dimensions are rich and strongly developed, and 2) organizational culture and structures support open and transparent communication processes. The seven dimensions are fully described in other publications (Meng, 2009; Berger & Meng, 2014). The model was tested in the U.S. and Singapore, and subsequently in countries in the global study. In each test, factor analysis yielded a single factor, which was labeled the *integrated model of excellent leadership in public relations*.

The interviews with leaders in the global study, the subject of this paper, were concerned with three areas of questions related to the model. First, some questions focused on culture-specific interpretations of critical issues and how those issues affected the personal dimensions of leadership and leaders' roles, decisions, and day-to-day practices—from hiring and training to strategic decision making and vision. Second, several questions focused on specific ways in which organizational culture and structure—the seventh dimension of leadership—facilitate or impede practice. Third, leaders' perceptions were gathered about the crucial qualities, capabilities, and values required for future leaders—personal dimensions of leadership. Corresponding development needs and the state of PR leadership development in each country/region also were discussed.

Method

An international team of 28 researchers developed a 17-question Interview Guide for use in 10 designated countries/regions: Brazil, the Chinese-speaking countries (China, Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan), the German-speaking countries (Austria, Germany and Switzerland), India, Latvia, Mexico, Russia, South Korea, Spain, and the U.S. The three primary areas of questions were those described in the preceding paragraph. Back translation procedures were used to prepare the Guide in nine languages. Participants were given the option to complete the interview in English or in their home language.

Snowball sampling was used to ensure that participants were diverse, senior professionals and recognized leaders. As a result, most professionals in the sample were high-level communication executives with 20 years or more of experience. Overall, 137 in-depth interviews were completed in the 10 countries/regions, and 10-15 interviews were completed in most countries and regions. Men and women were equally represented in the interviews (68 women and 69 men), and they worked in three types of organizations: public or private companies (64), communication agencies (38), and nonprofit organizations (35), which included government agencies, universities, and political groups and organizations.

The vast majority of interviews were conducted by telephone, though a few were completed via Skype or in person. The shortest interview lasted 30 minutes, the longest more than two hours. On average, each interview lasted about 52 minutes. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and then analyzed by the country researchers, most of whom used the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This method requires a careful and thoughtful approach to code and conceptualize field data into themes or categories of interest, constantly comparing new data text entries to each category. The researcher then integrates the various categories and properties to attempt to develop "a focused, selective accounting of the phenomenon" (Lindlof, p. 224).

Researchers in each country then produced a written report of their findings and analysis. Three researchers subsequently reviewed and analyzed the country reports for commonalities and differences among the themes and concepts in the 10 texts. This final analysis of the reports is the basis for this paper.

Five Themes—The Old, the New, and the Future

Five primary themes and a number of sub-themes emerged in analysis of the conversations with communication leaders. The 137 executives were thoughtful and forthright. Overall, they provided a rich mosaic of perceptions, insights and beliefs about the profession—

where it is and where it needs to go. They shared many similar concerns and hopes; none of them were satisfied with where things stand; and they anticipate a brighter though far more challenging and complex future for a rapidly expanding global profession that requires more outstanding leaders and role models. The five themes are discussed in this section.

1. The hunt for talent at all levels keeps PR leaders awake at night.

When asked to discuss the key issues they confront, the executives collectively named 14 issues in the interviews, including frequent mentions of the 10 issues identified in the global survey (Table 1)—dealing with the speed and volume of information, managing the digital revolution and rise of social media, crisis communication, and so forth. However, the senior leaders said that finding, developing, and retaining top talent at all levels keeps them awake at night more than other issues. This was the case in most of the countries/regions, but especially in the Chinese-speaking countries, India, Russia, and the U.S.

Table 1

The Most Important Issue for PR Leaders Today (n=4,483)

Issue	Frequency	Percent
Dealing with the speed and volume of information flow	1029	23.0
Managing the digital revolution and rise of social media	684	15.3
Improving the measurement of communication effectiveness	547	12.2
Being prepared to effectively deal with crises that may arise	532	11.9
Dealing with growing demands for transparency	375	8.4
Improving employee engagement and commitment	354	7.9
Finding, developing and retaining top talent	337	7.5
Meeting demands for corporate social responsibility	274	6.1
Meeting communication needs in diverse cultures	239	5.3
Improving the image of the profession	112	2.5

The talent hunt isn't new, but the PR leaders said globalization, the growing demand for communication professionals, increasing transparency requirements, and the digital revolution exacerbate the quest. Some said this issue consumed a majority of their time and was their most crucial responsibility because it affects not only hiring and training, but also strategizing, structuring the function, assigning projects, and other practice elements. An energy company PR leader summarized this position: "Having the right team is more crucial than ever in our hyper work world today. The majority of my time is spent finding, developing, retaining and managing people."

Regarding hiring entry-level talent, an agency leader in the U.S. echoed the sentiments of many in highlighting the great need for digital and research specialists:

We're looking for specialists now. We used to be all generalists and everybody knew a little bit about everything, but that's no longer working. So we're looking for people with deep specialties in research, design, software development, social networking. We have an increased focus on people strategists who understand research and measurement.

Finding enough well-educated young professionals is a related challenge in burgeoning markets like India. According to the head of an agency in that country, "We don't have great schools. We have very few schools that teach PR. These are cottage courses. There are very few structured communication courses or degrees that make true blue professionals."

However, hiring talented entry-level specialists is only part of the issue. The PR leader at an insurance company in the U.S. emphasized the need for developing professionals already in the function, as well as hiring new skill sets at higher levels: "I purposefully look outside to bring in change agents, people who have a different set of skills and who see the vision and understand the changing landscape we're facing."

Another leader in the chemical industry said it was very difficult to find talented middle managers or directors. "I need people with great experience, with critical-thinking capabilities, with the capacity to get dropped into any problem or opportunity in any country and deal with it successfully," she said. "Yes, I need digital media specialists, but even more I need people at more advanced levels with full capabilities who can solve problems."

Retaining high performers is as difficult as finding them, according to a communication executive in China. "Those companies that provide solid training courses are now so concerned they will lose people as soon as they train them—they will take higher paying jobs elsewhere—that they are increasingly reluctant to offer training." Similar turnover problems in agencies were mentioned by leaders in India.

A leader in an industrial manufacturing company described why finding the right people at all levels is so crucial:

> If you don't get the right people in the right jobs, it takes more people to get the work done. The budgets and the downsizings over the last five years are just not forgiving. When you have people who aren't carrying their full load, it puts stress on the people who are high performing. The organization I came from had so many weak links that I put really hard stress on two or three people while the others just came in, did their thing, and left. I just didn't have time to develop people. I inherited people, and now I have zero patience for those who don't perform at a high level.

Other communication leaders addressed another dimension of the talent issue—the ongoing challenge of preparing front-line managers and supervisors to be more effective internal communicators and listeners, which is linked to employee engagement, trust, and other internal issues. Locating professionals with business savvy is a related issue. One Chinese company leader expressed it this way: "PR leaders lack commercial sensibility. We do not have a large number of executives who are PR people who have run large-scale enterprises." Greater business knowledge also was cited by some as a requirement for future leaders.

An information technology communication leader said the best teams in the global world today blend people with old and new skills, and both require training:

> I need both traditionalists and Millennials. The more traditional PR folks--they're great writers, great storytellers, and those skills are always going to be in high demand. However, the challenge is to get them to change how they look at news cycles, and faster ways to tell the story. So, there's a huge training need for them. The Millennials are incredibly advanced with the channels, very open, very keen to tell that story. But the challenge with them is their writing skills aren't as strong, and their understanding of the business is still wanting.

A leader at a manufacturing company in South America summarized the power and scope of this crucial global theme:

> The talent issue touches virtually all aspects of my work: hiring and development, forming teams, budgeting, strategic planning, resource allocations and so forth. Getting the right people in the right places to do the right things in the best way is the ongoing challenge in leadership. Isn't that what leadership's all about?

The digital revolution, globalization, and the growth of public relations practice in large and growing markets is fueling competition for well-trained and highly capable professionals at all levels. All indications are that the talent wars will continue to intensify worldwide, but perhaps more so in the large and rapidly growing economies of Brazil, China, India and Russia.

2. Digital magnifies the sensemaking role of leaders.

The top issues in the global survey (Table 1)—dealing with the speed and volume of information flow and managing the digital revolution and rise of social media—were the second area of greatest concern for those interviewed. Communication leaders bear many roles and responsibilities, but above all they have been and are *sensemakers*—they gather, process, interpret and distill vast amounts of information. They then translate and make sense of this information for others inside and outside their organization (Parry, 2008). All leaders spend a great deal of time in gathering, processing, and distributing information about issues, problems, and opportunities confronting their organizations (Walsh, 1995), but this is arguably the central role for public relations leaders today.

This sensemaker metaphor is rooted in the work of Smircich and Morgan (1982), who claimed that leaders are concerned with managing (influencing) meaning among followers. Leaders attempt to manage the meaning of issues, events, and experiences so that followers understand those issues and events within the preferred interpretation of the leader. In doing so, followers may better understand their role in dealing with these issues and experiences, identify more closely with their organization, and increase contributions to goal achievement.

Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) described three cognitive processes for considering the sensemaking work of leaders. The first process is *sensemaking*, which gives meaning to experiences and events. This involves 1) information seeking where leaders search their environment for issues that may impact the organization, and 2) then constructing meaning to provide a framework or structure for decision-making and action.

Sensegiving is the second process. Here, leaders interpret and explain to others what the issue means for the organization, in their view. They attempt to influence meaning to gain followers' support, and they may use many approaches to do so, including rites, rituals, metaphors, storytelling, rewards, and so forth (Schein, 1992).

The third process is *sensenegotiating,* which refers to the interplay of the leader's preferred meanings, and the views of other organizational members who have their own interpretations of the issue, as they attempt to negotiate collective understanding. These three processes play out continuously because the global political-economic-social environment is dynamic and fast moving, and organizations must successfully adapt to external changes and integrate them internally.

Today, these managerial communication responsibilities involve multi-dimensional sensemaking, sensegiving, and sensenegotiating. Like all leaders, communication managers try to make sense of experiences, events and issues inside and outside of their organizations. They then adopt preferred meanings for those issues and convey them to their team members and followers, who make their own sense of the issues and how they affect them. This leads to negotiation of preferred meanings among communication leaders and their followers.

For public relations leaders, however, sensemaking goes beyond this traditional leader-follower interaction, and the role has become far more complex due to the digital revolution and the breathtaking velocity, volume, and variety of information ("big data"). Public relations leaders today must process at warp speed this high-speed flow of information to 1) determine

what is most relevant to the organization, 2) evaluate the relevant information strategically and tactically, and 3) identify what corresponding worthwhile opportunities for engagement and interaction are presented in the flow. Communication leaders then try to make sense of these issues and opportunities in their interactions with organizational leaders and employees. They add more to these processes when they prepare or facilitate communications between other organizational leaders and their followers, or with other stakeholders.

Further, public relations leaders try to make sense of their organization's world of stakeholders and their issues and concerns. They gather information from groups and stakeholders and translate it tactically and strategically to organizational leaders and decision makers. They engage in sensenegotiations and decision making about what to do, and especially how and what to communicate about what they decide to do, in an increasingly transparent world. In the data and digital age, then, sensemaking, sensegiving, and sensenegotiating are increasingly complex and ever more crucial.

One example from many in the interviews nicely illustrates this metaphor in action. The communication leader in a large energy company described how her work has been radically altered by social media—how the sensemaking, sensegiving, and sensenegotiating processes have changed:

> Social media has redefined everything we do, and here's how we are managing now. We outsourced some information gathering and preparation of briefing documents. They troll information all the time. Then we [the communication team] have a really solid briefing first thing every morning. I have a team that has a pretty good sense of what to bubble up, and I have a sense of what to bubble out, down, up, which means we are tethered 24/7. I've had to learn to manage when to focus on information and when to be thoughtful about what to do with it. How we changed from three years ago is there are a lot more face-to-face meetings—a lot more communication among executives to make sure that everybody is fully informed and participating in problem solving.

Processing and reflecting on information that has been strategically selected out of the vast data flow; bubbling it up, down and out; negotiating meanings with and among senior leaders; engaging in decision-making—these are some of crucial requirements for public relations leaders, the multidimensional sensemakers.

According to communication leaders in South Korea, the social media revolution impacts practice at four levels: practitioner, work unit, organization, and field. It requires people with new skills and knowledge who nevertheless require ongoing training, and who will drive information sharing among team members. The ability of professionals to use social media effectively, to make sense of these extensive tools, and to understand the new electronic publics and communities who use them, have elevated the status of the function. One South Korean PR leader described what happened in his organization:

> The possibilities of new communication technology led to a reorganization of our unit, which resulted in a new team in charge of PR. We moved from traditional media relations and established a new team, new equipment, and so forth. Social media are currently taking a greater place in practice.

In addition, agency leaders in several countries described how they have created new electronic monitoring and listening centers to track traditional media, social media, and social communities and conversations to better serve their clients. These new approaches allow them to become of aware of issues faster, make sense of them faster, and respond or engage in real time. Hiring people with new skill sets, continuously training people, and creating new units

or structures are some of the ways in which communication leaders try to become more efficient and responsive sensemakers in the high-speed digital world.

3. Organizational cultures and structures diminish the power of strategic communications.

Professionals have long lamented that they aren't part of key strategic decision-making groups and processes in organizations, and that their company leaders don't understand the value of PR. Organizational structures and perceptions of public relations strongly influence what leaders do on the job, and they can reduce public relations practice to a technical production role when its greatest value is strategic.

Based on the interviews, this issue appears less problematic in the German-speaking countries and the U.S., where PR leaders described a number of structural and cultural factors that supported their work. Structural factors included close links with the CEO/leader, participation in strategic decision making, sufficient staffing and resources, growing strategic alignment with organizational goals, and so forth. Positive cultural factors included an open communication climate, two-way communication, and regard for and recognition of employees, among others.

What has led to this more favorable environment for practice? U.S. leaders cited three reasons: 1) the exemplary leadership of a single individual who imbued the function with credibility, 2) a strong and measurable performance record by the function over time; and 3) CEOs, presidents or other functional executives who embrace communication and serve as excellent role models for it.

In most other countries/regions in the study, however, a variety of cultural and structural barriers inhibit practice. Public relations leaders in Brazil, for example, said internal culture was their top issue; their communication functions operate in "an environment where the function is not fully supported, nor the strategic value fully understood." One executive summarized this view: "There is still a cloud over all of the potential in the area and the changes that could be implemented that might positively impact change."

Executives in Mexico reported that while internal communication is highly valued in their organizations, organizational leaders still don't understand the value of external public relations, which impacts budgets and sharply limits involvement in strategic decision making.

Latvian public relations interviewees said they were constantly under pressure to convince management of the value of public relations and provide a rationale for everything they did. One leader said, "We must make management understand that public relations is part of the bottom line, part of our company's final success."

Societal culture and a long legacy of authoritarian control still dominate Russian organizations, and the influence of the state constrains communication leadership and success. Russian PR executives said misperceptions of PR (as spin or manipulation) and lack of understanding of strategic public relations, was the top issue in their country, along with a low level of professionalism. An agency leader said, "PR professionals are seldom involved in decision making. They are simply given a task, like organizing a media event." According to some of the interviewees, part of the problem is due to a weak educational system that doesn't arm students with basic writing or digital media skills.

Public relations practice in South Korea was described as being in the formative stage with a continuing strong focus on media relations and the execution of technical roles. Some organizational leaders there also view PR as a luxury, while others fail to see the link between PR and success in the marketplace. On the other hand, interviewees indicated that effective

understanding and use of social media appeared to be improving the reputation of practitioners in their companies.

In some countries, e.g., Latvia, Russia, India, and Spain, weak educational systems and professional associations contributed to the problem and reinforced the general belief that public relations practice is neither strategic nor essential. Communication leaders in Latin American countries believe the solution to the problem lies in new measurement tools and approaches that will help them build a fact-based case for the value of public relations in their organizations.

4. Leadership development in public relations is under developed.

The most successful public relations programs and campaigns are grounded in research, guided by clear and measureable goals, shaped by appropriate strategies, carried out with the best tactics, and measured or assessed for results. Shouldn't national or international efforts to enhance leadership or strengthen the development of leaders in the field follow the same formula?

Certainly there's an opportunity for improving leadership and the conditions for leadership in public relations as evident in results in the global survey (Table 2). The Summated Leadership Index, a simple measure, depicts the mean scores for answers to three survey questions: the performance of the senior communication leader, the extent to which the CEO values public relations, and the presence of two-way communications in the organization. These are three measures of a culture for communication (L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, & D.M. Dozier, 2002). The mean score for each country/region (summed means for each of the three questions, 7-point scale) indicates the extent to which the environment for excellent leadership is present. A perfect score would be 21.0, and the average mean score for countries in the survey was 14.49. The opportunity to improve leadership and the conditions for it is evident.

Table **2**
Summated Leadership Index

Country/Region	Number	Mean	S.D.
India	140	16.44	4.26
Mexico	213	15.31	4.55
Chinese-speaking countries	143	14.87	4.29
United States	828	14.76	4.47
German-speaking countries	1773	14.62	4.07
Latvia/Estonia	142	14.60	3.96
United Kingdom	139	14.42	4.89
Spain	210	14.39	4.89
Chile	156	14.00	4.51
Russia	215	13.56	4.59
South Korea	205	13.37	2.14
Brazil	302	13.09	4.61
Total	4,464	14.49	4.26

The executives we interviewed agreed that leadership in public relations should be strategically developed and strengthened. However, there appear to be few formal leadership development efforts and little will power or collective interest in doing so in many countries/regions. The German-speaking countries, for example, boast strong educational

programs, and many leaders there hold graduate degrees. However, little attention is devoted specifically to leader or leadership development in educational curricula or within professional associations. The same is true in Latvia, Russia and Spain, where the PR leaders said that education programs were relatively weak and more oriented to theory than to practical or applied knowledge. In Spain, a cottage industry of general leadership training programs has mushroomed, though the quality and contents of such programs are unknown.

The situation is similar in most Asian and Latin American countries in the study. Educational curricula vary widely from country to country—some practically oriented but most theory heavy. Leaders in India, for example, said efforts to build a professional community and to meet growing marketplace demands are hampered by lack of 1) strong culturally relevant communication education programs, 2) a supportive industry structure, and 3) strong role models in the field. Formal leadership development is not high on the agenda of most professional associations in the countries, which focus more on developing basic technical and management skills, creating platforms for speakers and presentation of case studies, and providing social networking events to build identity among professionals.

The profession in the U.S. is marked by a network of professional groups and associations, and university education programs have spread rapidly in the past 30 years. More than 300 colleges and universities now offer degrees or courses in public relations, and 10,000 college students are members of the Public Relations Student Society of America (Public Relations Society of America, 2013). Leadership development is not the primary focus of these education or professional programs, but some development may occur in these systems and does take place in four other approaches.

First, some individuals take on the responsibility for their own development and proactively go about enhancing their leadership knowledge, capabilities, and capacity. Self-responsibility is an important driver. Second, some companies and agencies carry out comprehensive internal leadership development programs (e.g., GE, IBM, Ketchum, P&G, Southwest Air), and presumably this includes employees in worldwide locations. Some of these are robust programs, literally "company universities" with specially designed curricula, structured development assignments, and real work projects to facilitate succession planning and strengthen the overall capabilities and capacities of organizational leadership.

Third, several large professional associations provide a wide range of development opportunities and programs, though most focus on skills and management development rather than leadership development. The Arthur W. Page Society provides perhaps the most intensive and planned two-year leadership development program for 30-40 "future" chief communication officers each year. Fourth, a variety of specialist leadership development suppliers like the Center for Creative Leadership offer diverse training and programming opportunities to organizations.

Overall, then, some leadership development efforts exist in all countries in two senses: 1) some individuals seize the initiative to develop and educate themselves, and 2) some organizations develop their high performers through internal educational and experiential programs. These two approaches represent development for both leaders and leadership. Van Velsor and McCauley (2004) said *leader* development refers to individual growth and skill advancement that expand one's leadership capacity and capabilities. *Leadership* development focuses on an organization's attempts to enhance its team of leaders to strengthen their overall organizational performance.

Leadership development is appropriate for professional associations, too, and it represents a significant opportunity for the field. At present, however, there are few association-

or education-focused leadership development programs are available, and none at a national or international scale. Moreover, there appears to be no compelling urgency to address the need, and no systematic plan or approach for doing so at a time when the profession is experiencing rapid development under the influence of media, cultural, and social changes (Servaes, 2012).

As the profession contemplates its future, then, two questions need to be addressed. First, should leadership development be a priority in the field? Second, how can we systematically and systemically develop more great leaders in the profession when the context for leadership is changing dramatically?

5. Future leaders may come from other planets: they are bigger than life.

The communication executives were asked to look ahead 10-15 years and describe how future leaders might differ from current leaders, given the rapidly evolving world and practice. Many said some traditional qualities and characteristics would remain the same, but future leaders would also be significantly different in other respects. One financial services vice president best captured the notion of enduring traits or qualities:

> The primary leadership traits shouldn't change. I think it's how you interact with people, how you motivate, how you communicate and engage with people. It's about empathy and enabling employees. I don't see those things disappearing. I think some of the great leaders in the past would still be great leaders today, and great leaders tomorrow.

On the other hand, the diverse communication leaders described a number of new or embellished qualities, skills, and requirements for future leaders. Because these comments were fairly consistent across the countries and regions, the most frequent descriptives were used to create the following composite profile of hypothetical future leaders in the field:

More public relations leaders in the future will be women. Future leaders will be better educated and armed with more specialist information and multidisciplinary education. A growing percentage of leaders will possess degrees in public relations or strategic communication, but they also will have a better understanding of business, economics, advertising, marketing, and technology. Continuous education and training will be required to keep up with an ever expanding pool of knowledge in a world where the half-life of any acquired knowledge set is sharply reduced.

Having grown up wired, future leaders will think digital first. Decision-making will grow out of analysis of mountains of data and carefully targeted research, rather than intuition, past experience, or gut-instinct. Measurement will be refined, routine and demanding. Transparency will be a practice, not an objective. Future leaders will possess extraordinary communication competence and knowledge, and they will combine great organizational clarity with a compelling vision for how communication connects the organization with others in the world.

Future public relations leaders will be culturally aware and possess a global world view. They will be risk-takers, fire fighters and formidable change agents who push to create cultures for communication by knocking down internal barriers and driving engagement. Above all, they will be ethically branded and courageous—willing to speak truth to power and to challenge those who abuse or misuse power. In these ways future public relations leaders will be seen as business and organization leaders, as well as communication leaders.

This collective vision is compelling and ambitious, but it begs the question: How does the profession arrive at this bright future without some deep systematic or systemic changes in how it conceptualizes and prepares individuals for leadership roles?

Discussion and Implications

The communication leaders we interviewed confirmed the survey findings regarding the most important issues in the field, that crucial context that shapes practice. The digital revolution accelerates the sensemaking process and touches many aspects of leaders' day-to-day practices and decisions even as it casts sweeping changes over the profession globally. Digital is a local and global issue. Is it also both the problem and the solution?

The public relations executives also confirmed the varying stages of professional practice in the world as reflected in country histories, the development and state of educational programs and curricula, the extent and quality of professional support structures and systems, and the perceptions of practice among organizational leaders. In many countries organizational leaders still question the credibility and value of public relations, and corresponding cultures and structures in those organizations often diminish the potential strategic impact of the function. Improving the reputation and strategic use of the practice, whether through new measures of value, improved performance over time, cutting-edge uses of new technologies, or other approaches will help organizations achieve their goals and solve other problems, e.g., transparency, CSR, and employee engagement.

The most compelling findings, however, are the interconnected issues of 1) finding talent at all levels and 2) the development of future leaders. The growing competition to find, develop, and retain top talent—human capital—at all levels underscores the competitive advantage of excellent professionals in our high-speed digital world. The keen competition to find talent is global, but so are the payoffs for landing such individuals and this is why leaders lose sleep over the issue.

Sometimes high pay and lucrative benefits land top communication talent, but greater autonomy on the job may be increasingly important (Berger & Meng, 2014). Retaining top people appears linked to the culture of the organization—the extent to which it is an open and inclusive culture, a culture for communication. Thus, organizations with strong, rich cultures are likely to get richer with their hires, and this brings us back to leadership development.

Many of the leaders in the study pointed to an absence of meaningful leadership development efforts within the professional structures of the system—education programs and professional associations. Education programs contribute to leadership development by strengthening students' analytical and critical-thinking skills and their communication knowledge management capabilities, though this varies by country. Professional associations contribute by enhancing technical and management knowledge and skills. But overall, formal leadership development is "not high on the radar" of important issues in their countries, the leaders said.

Some individuals actively seek out and take on leadership development opportunities. A number of top companies and agencies have strong internal leadership development programs for high-potential professionals. But as the Summated Leadership Index suggested, there's much room for improving leadership and the conditions for excellent leadership in every country in the study. Greater involvement of association and educational components of the system, along with strategic development inside organizations, seem crucial to closing the gap between what is and what might be.

In closing, three practical implications of research and best practices for leadership development are briefly described. Acting on them may help groups, organizations, and institutions of all types build better leaders and competitive advantage in their fields of operation.

1. Create a strategic, long-term leadership development plan—live it and infuse it in the culture. According to the Human Capital Institute (HCI) (2010), some organizations do little to develop future leaders, while others use a simplified approach—they carry out a leadership-training program and corresponding annual talent review. On the other hand, top companies for leader development—e.g., IBM, GE, Deere & Company, P&G, 3M, and Cargill—practice a deeper, more complex and structured approach.

These and other top companies view leadership development as a key driver of competitive advantage, company strategy, and future success (e.g., Fulmer & Goldsmith, 2001). They document links between financial success and their leadership practices and development. Some of the top companies' best leadership development practices were identified in a longitudinal study of leadership in more than 500 companies, which was carried out by Hewitt Associates, Fortune Magazine, and the RBL Group (Human Capital Institute, 2010). Here are four of the practices:

- ✓ CEOs invest real time and energy into developing leaders—they live it.
- ✓ Leadership development is integrated into business planning and organizational culture. Leaders are responsible for demonstrating core values.
- ✓ A holistic view guides leadership development and actions in four senses—management of people, preparation of leaders and succession planning, effectiveness of leaders in achieving organizational goals, and the constant tracking of high-potential employees at all levels in the organization.
- ✓ A measurement mindset and a rich set of data inform many aspects of leadership development programs, decisions, and actions.

2. Envision leadership learning and development as a continuous process, a journey throughout life—not a discrete set of planned activities or programs. Individuals develop their leadership capabilities and capacity through multiple approaches during this journey: individual experiences, knowledge gained through actual leadership roles at all ages, formal or structured leadership development programs, educational programs or other types of interventions, and the influence of role models, mentors and coaches (Conger & Fulmer, 2003).

An individual's natural life experiences, and what he or she learns from them, generate a significant impact on a leader's development and style (Bennis, 2009). In addition, organizations can help talented employees gain the right experiences at the right time to accelerate their development (e.g., McCall, 2010; McCauley, Ruderman, Ohlott, & Morrow, 1994). McCall (2010) described five leveraging points organizations can use to create a supportive context for leadership learning and development: 1) identify developmental experiences; 2) identify people with potential to be leaders; 3) develop processes for getting the right learning experience; 4) increase the odds that learning will occur; and 5) take a career-long view with a focus on critical career transitions.

Similarly, Conger (2010) argued that it is important for organizations to create formal leadership development initiatives that not only focus on individual skill development, but also integrate corporate vision and values; add strategic interventions to promote major changes; and design active learning approaches to address real organizational challenges and opportunities.

Best-in-class companies employ these and other approaches, and recognize that development is a long, work-life journey. According to the Hay Group's *Best Companies for Leadership* survey in 2014, best-in-class companies adopt a proactive, structured approach to talent development (Hay Group, 2014). They identify crucial roles and skills required for future

leaders; they plan development experiences to strengthen these roles and capabilities; and they make leadership development programs available at all experience levels, by way of building the talent pool. In addition, they deliberately work to create a diverse pool of future leaders.

3. Develop a measurement-mindset for planning, implementing, and evaluating development activities that are critical to the business. HCI (2010) reported that top companies regularly use a 360-degree survey and feedback process—or similar in-depth approaches—to assess leaders at all levels. They measure leadership performance at the team level by evaluating effectiveness of onboarding processes, turnover rates, movement rates of high potentials, and rates of completed development plans.

They gauge the effectiveness of leadership development programs with specific metrics such as employee engagement rates, movement of talent across the organization, and fulfillment rates for key positions. In addition, they identify and evaluate skill and experience gaps for the next generation of leaders. Top leaders in top companies are held accountable for developing other leaders, demonstrating behaviors that exemplify core values in the organization, and embedding leadership metrics into measurement of organizational performance.

Put simply, top organizations "see" leadership development differently than do other organizations, they hold top leaders accountable for development outcomes, and they possess a measurement-mindset. The communication leaders interviewed in this study agreed that the future of public relations profession is bright and promising. Learning more about leadership development through research and best cases/practices, along with strengthening systemic capabilities, may improve the development and performance of public relations leaders globally and render that promising future even more brightly.

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