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# Negotiation and Conflict Management: Two Valuable Tools in the Public Relations Toolbox

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## Abstract

This introductory essay summarizes my research and theorizing over more than 50 years about the nature of public relations, how and why it is practiced in different ways, and how it can be practiced most effectively and ethically. I have concluded that public relations will be most ethical and have the most value for publics, organizations, and society when the function is involved in the strategic management processes of organizations and is practiced with a symmetrical approach rather than a purely asymmetrical approach. Some scholars have criticized this approach, and I discuss and respond to their critiques. The essay also addresses the role of negotiation and conflict management in public relations and explains how public relations can help manage organization-public conflict by steering organizations toward a symmetrical resolution of conflicts and away from the conflicts that eventually occur when organizations engage in one-way, asymmetrical, and unethical communication strategies.

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Public relations (or strategic communication, if you prefer) is probably the largest communication profession in the world at this time. I use the term *professional* here to mean a communicator who is employed by someone or paid a salary or other compensation to provide services to an organization or client—as opposed to the everyday formal or informal communication activities of nearly every human being. Fifteen years ago, for example, Toni Muzi Falconi (2006), an Italian public relations expert, estimated that there were between 2.3 and 4.5 million public relations practitioners in the world. This number has continued to grow. For example, the U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021) predicts an 11 percent annual increase in the number of PR specialists in the United States from 2020 to 2030. With the decline of traditional media and in the number of journalists in the world, public relations practitioners produce a huge amount of the information that most people have access to about the organizations and institutions that govern their lives, employ them, provide essential products and services, and produce economic externalities such as pollution, discrimination, or inequality. At the same time, few people have a clear understanding of public relations, and most of them distrust its practitioners and believe its practice is a negative force in society.

Public relations has its own body of knowledge, but its scholars and practitioners also use the theories and techniques of many of the other communication subdisciplines—such as journalism, rhetoric, persuasion and attitude change, advertising, organizational communication, interpersonal communication, health communication, risk communication, and intercultural communication. Likewise, scholars and practitioners often use theories from management, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and political science. Because public relations provides a major employment opportunity, it attracts many students of the social sciences, humanities, and communication as well as those who have formally studied public relations. It is human nature for people to apply what they know to the work they do, which means that they do many things and are guided by many theories when they work in public relations.

As a result, there is much confusion, debate, and disagreement about what public relations is, how it should be practiced, what it contributes both to employers and to society, or what harms it causes. When I began to study and practice public relations 50 years ago, it was widely assumed to be a form of applied journalism (if it was viewed as a good thing) or a form of manipulative advocacy (if it was viewed as a bad thing). In either case, public relations was understood to be an asymmetrical diffusion of either informative or persuasive messages from organizations to poorly defined *audiences*.

In the late 1960s, I spent two years in Colombia studying the economic decision-making processes of both large landowners (latifundistas) and peasant farmers (minifundistas). I also researched how both groups used information from media and public relations sources. I spent many hours interviewing large farmers on their farms or in their offices in Bogotá and Cali and then more hours walking down mule trails to interview peasant farmers. This listening experience taught me two things. First, most of the expert information from agricultural organizations, which was supposed to persuade the farmers to be more modern or productive, had little relevance for them and was mostly ignored. Communication had to be two-way for it to be effective (i.e., listening before telling). Second, I came to understand both sides of the debate over whether land should be expropriated from large farms and redistributed to peasants. The conflict over landownership could not be resolved by one side winning the argument. The conflict had to be managed with the help of what I later came to call symmetrical communication.

In 1969, I began teaching public relations at the University of Maryland, and I expanded my research from understanding the communication behavior of publics to understanding how and why organizations communicate as they do through public relations. I conceptualized the *how* part of this research question by identifying concepts that contrasted one-way and two-way communication and asymmetrical and symmetrical communication—i.e., both the direction and purpose of public relations. Eventually, I synthesized these concepts into what I called four models of public relations—four typical ways in which organizations practiced public relations (engaged in public relations behavior). Two of these models were one-way: press agentry and public information. The other two were both two-way, but they differed in whether they were asymmetrical or symmetrical—designed to benefit only the organization or to benefit both the organization and its stakeholder publics.

After many years of research, reflection, and debate, I moved beyond this admittedly oversimplified typology and conceptualized public relations behaviors into combinations of four dimensions: one-way to two-way, asymmetrical to symmetrical, mediated to interpersonal, and unethical to ethical. This was my way of understanding what public relations is. The answer was that it is many things. Some types of public relations are worth emulating and teaching; others are not. Also, some types of public relations are effective and others are not. Effective, in my mind, meant that public relations activities benefit publics and society as well as the organizations doing or paying for the public relations work. Public relations has value for all parties involved, therefore, when public relations professionals successfully cultivate relationships among organizations and publics.

These benefits to publics, organizations, and society, I concluded, can be achieved most often through public relations that uses both one-way and two-way communication at different times but favors two-way communication. It also can be achieved through a judicious combination of symmetrical and asymmetrical communication, but favors symmetrical communication. It also uses both mediated and interpersonal communication, but strives to include listening in both forms. Finally, public relations should be ethical, which I believe can be achieved most easily through symmetrical public relations although it also can be done with asymmetrical public relations.

The *why* part of my research on the public relations behavior of organizations was difficult to answer. We researched the effect of organizational structures, environments, culture, power, and worldviews. We looked at pressure from activist groups. We examined the professionalism, knowledge, schemas and worldviews, gender, and power of public relations practitioners. Most of these research paths came to dead ends. Ultimately, the best explanations of public relations behavior were the knowledge and professionalism of the public relations practitioners and the worldview and expectations of the senior managers or clients who hired them, as well as their respect for gender, racial, and cultural diversity of the practitioners.

In a nutshell, my colleagues, students, and I have concluded that public relations will be most ethical and have the most value for publics, organizations, and society when the function is involved in the strategic management processes of organizations. In that role, public relations can listen to publics to understand the problems they expect an organization to solve, as well as the problems created for publics when management makes irresponsible decisions—thus providing publics (and society of which they are a part) a voice in management decision-making. In a strategic management role, public relations also can help to manage organization-public conflict by steering organizations toward a symmetrical resolution of conflicts and away from the conflicts that eventually occur when organizations engage in one-way, asymmetrical, and unethical communication strategies.

My conclusion that a symmetrical approach to public relations is both more ethical and effective than a purely asymmetrical approach has generated a great deal of discussion, argument, and even condemnation. Some scholars believe symmetrical public relations is idealistic, utopian, and rarely, if ever, practiced. These critics mistakenly believe that I have said that symmetrical public

relations always produces harmony and consensus. Clearly, that rarely happens. Others believe that symmetrical public relations is always accommodative—that it empowers publics too much, especially undesirable or even evil publics. Of course, pure accommodation would be asymmetrical rather than symmetrical—always favoring publics at the expense of organizations. Others believe that symmetrical public relations is entirely organization centered—aimed at neutralizing the power of publics by giving the impression of symmetry without ever changing organizational behavior. If that were the case, public relations would be practicing a pseudo-symmetrical model, not an actual one.

Perhaps the most avid criticism of symmetrical public relations has come from defenders of persuasion, which obviously has been a core concept of communication and rhetoric for centuries. These critics make a valid point that advocacy is an integral part of public relations; and, I would add, to symmetrical as well as asymmetrical public relations. Supporters of persuasion argue that a responsible advocate remains open to the interests of the target of persuasion and does not advocate for ideas or behaviors that injure the other party. To this, I would add that the persuader also must remain open to the ideas of the other and be willing to change, which makes self-persuasion a part of symmetrical public relations. There are several ways to describe the interaction of advocacy and persuasion in a symmetrical model, such as collaborative advocacy (Spicer, 1997), collaborative antagonism (Raiffa, 1982), Noether's theory of conservation and change (Sha, 2004), and agonism (conflicts and confrontations among rivals rather than enemies) (Davidson, 2016). The crucial part of these concepts for symmetrical public relations is that persuaders (public relations professionals) respect their organization's rivals and often act as advocates for publics as well as for the organizations that employ them.

The work of public relations professionals today is dominated by digital media, including social media, online news media, web pages, email, blogs, and podcasts. At one time, I believed that digital media would make symmetrical communication inevitable because powerful organizations would not be able to control the information flowing to their publics. With the internet, people would be able to get information from multiple sources, making it essentially impossible for organizations to lie to them or mispresent their behaviors. To some extent, I still believe this is true. However, digital media also have made it possible for publics and the organizations they support or oppose to segment themselves into virtual tribes and to reinforce one another with messages that support their pre-existing ideas and behaviors and to foment conspiratorial thinking. The internet has evolved from a free marketplace of ideas to a free marketplace of misinformation (which is unintentional) and disinformation (which is intentional). Public relations practitioners are tempted to take advantage of this dark side of the internet if their aim is to asymmetrically represent their organizations or clients. Doing so, however, accelerates the amount of conflict in society. Symmetrical practitioners, on the other hand must find ways to use digital communication to manage conflict while others take actions that accelerate it.

This brings us to the theme of this special issue: the role of negotiation and conflict management in public relations. The toolbox of public relations is well stocked with both asymmetrical and symmetrical strategies and techniques. Many critical scholars have pointed out that there are far more asymmetrical tools in this toolbox than symmetrical. However, both my values and my research on public relations have led me and others to search for and test symmetrical tools. The concept of symmetrical public relations is a broad one that allows a great deal of theoretical and practical space for its implementation. The only requirement for symmetrical public relations is that it provides both organizations and publics an opportunity to have their voices heard and their problems solved.

My colleagues and I have emphasized research on publics and the development of an organizational infrastructure for listening to them as perhaps the most important symmetrical tools in public relations. In our research on organization-public relationships, we also have identified a

number of symmetrical strategies for cultivating relationships—several of them derived from theories of conflict management. In addition, in the last 10 years, a large number of public relations scholars have embraced theories of dialogical communication, which are symmetrical tools even though most of these theories require more stringent conditions for dialogue to take place than does the broader two-way symmetrical model.

Our first foray into conflict management as a symmetrical public relations strategy used the theories of the Harvard Negotiation Project as a source of ideas (*Getting to Yes* and *Getting Together*). In his doctoral dissertation at the University of Maryland in 1999, Kenneth Plowman integrated negotiation and conflict management styles into the symmetrical model, and with William Griggs and Yi-Hui Huang elaborated on this integrated model in the first *Handbook of Public Relations* in 2001. Lastly, in 2018, Lan Ni, Qi Wang, and Bey-Ling Sha made conflict management a central concept in their book *Intercultural Public relations: Theories for Managing Relationships and Conflicts with Strategic Publics.* Much research needs to be done, however, to make conflict management a relevant tool for public relations professionals.

I hope I have set the stage for the research on conflict management and public relations reported in this special issue. Symmetrical public relations typically includes an asymmetrical element, which both results from and produces conflict. Today's public relations relies heavily on digital communication, which has enormous potential for creating conflict as well as managing it. I look forward to reading what my colleagues have written about conflict management and its potential in the discipline that I have spent most of my life studying.

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