

Recent Studies in PR Leadership

A Research Program of the Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations

The Board of Trustees at the University of Alabama (UA) established the Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations in 2005. The Center's mission is to help develop and recognize outstanding leaders and role models in public relations education and practice. The Center uses many approaches to do so, including awards, scholarships, speaker programs, research grants, publications, video interviews with leaders, and an online student magazine, *Platform*.

This document provides abstracts for many of the 20 leadership studies carried out in the past seven years. The Center provided grants for some of the projects; others were carried out by UA professors and graduate students, and by Center board members. Leaders exert significant influence on the success, future, and image of their profession. Yet, only a few PR studies have explored this important topic. The goal of this program is to build a research-based foundation of knowledge regarding the values, qualities, and dimensions of excellent leadership in PR.

Berger, B. (Ed.). (2008). *Profiles of success: Stories of emerging leaders in public relations*. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama. Available online at the Plank Center Web site: <http://viewer.zmags.com/showmag.php?mid=gspqr#/page0/>

Sponsored by Heyman Associates, this research project was carried out by graduate students at UA to capture the perspectives of emerging leaders in public relations regarding characteristics of excellent leaders. The students first conducted hour-long interviews with 20 young leaders (ages 28-40), who were selected based on recognition they've received, or the recommendations of leaders in the field. Students then wrote a book chapter about each young leader. Content analysis of the 20 individual stories yielded three prominent themes of leadership and six important characteristics of leaders. The themes were: leading by example, learning from mentors, and keeping public relations relevant, i.e., keeping up with the fast-changing practice. The six most important characteristics of excellent leaders were: creativity, integrity, passion for work and the practice, ability to motivate others, possessing a powerful set of communication skills, and diversity of experiences.

Berger, B., & Meng, J. (2010). Public Relations Practitioners and the Leadership Challenge. In R. L. Heath Ed.), *The SAGE Handbook of Public Relations* (pp. 421-3434). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Berger, B., Meng, J., & Heyman, W. (2009, March). Role modeling in public relations: The influence of role models and mentors on leadership beliefs and qualities. Paper presented at the 12th International Public Relations Research Conference in Miami, FL.

Based on a survey of 222 senior PR managers and executives, this study sought to identify: 1) the factors that influence practitioner beliefs about excellent leadership in the field, and 2) the most valuable sources of leadership skills and development. A majority of the professionals said role models and mentors exerted the greatest influence on their beliefs about excellent leadership qualities and values. Formal education, professional development programs, and other factors were mentioned far less frequently. In addition, role models, on-the-job experiences, and individual initiative and desire were named the most important sources of leadership development. The findings support social learning theory and the idea that leaders communicate values primarily through their behaviors, which influence organizational culture and those they lead.

Berger, B., Reber, B., & Heyman, W. (2007). You can't homogenize success in communication management: PR leaders take diverse paths to the top. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 1(1), 53-71.

Interviews were conducted with 97 high-level executives and PR leaders to assess factors related to professional success in the field. The executives most commonly defined success in managerial and strategic terms and indicated that excellent communication skills and a proactive nature were crucial to their success. However, the results suggested that success follows diverse pathways, which appear to be linked by 10 patterns or themes. These include the power of performance, varied experiences, dense networks of relationships, complex communication skill sets, and passion for work and the profession. The research bears implications for education, practice, and organizations that seek to hire and develop successful communications leaders.

Choi, Y., & Choi, J. (2008, May). Dimensions of leadership in public relations: Exploring an organization-wide perspective. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Communication Association in Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

Using a behavioral approach, this research explored leadership dimensions that appear crucial to establishing organization-wide leadership in PR. Through a national survey of 171 PRSA members, the study identified seven distinct behaviors germane to successful leadership in the field: upward influence, coordination of communications, internal monitoring, networking, representing various interests and points of view, providing vision, and acting as a change agent. Overall, two supra dimensions were identified--relations-focused and change-focused behaviors. The enactment of leadership behaviors was positively associated with practitioners' self-assessment of the value of PR in their organizations.

Erzikova, E., & Berger, B. (2008). West Meets East: A Cross-cultural Look at American and Russian Public Relations Students' Perceptions of Leadership Style and Ethics. *Public Relations Journal*, 2(3): Available online at: http://www.prsa.org/SearchResults/download/6D-020304/0/West_Meets_East_A_Cross_Cultural_Look_at_American

This survey of 181 Russian and 196 American PR students investigated similarities and differences between their perceptions of leaders and leadership in the profession. The differences were striking. Russian students primarily defined PR leadership as creative forms of covert influence on decision-making and with publics. American students described leadership primarily through an ethics prism, emphasizing accountabilities to their organizations and publics, trustworthiness, and strong values. Russian students said the most important values for leaders

included being creative and imaginative, capable, and intellectual. American students said excellent leaders should be honest, capable, and helpful. The findings may reflect historical and cultural differences between the two countries, and different stages of professional practice and educational development.

Erzikova, E., & Berger, B. (2012). Leadership education in the PR curriculum: Reality, opportunities, and benefits. *Public Relations Journal*, 6(3). Available online at: <http://www.prsa.org/Intelligence/PRJournal/Documents/2012ErzikovaBerger.pdf>

This research captured baseline information about how and to what extent leadership education is included in university PR curricula. A survey of 159 PR educators and two focus groups (10 educators) found that teachers are advocates for leadership education, and they believe they do help develop leaders for the field. However, few universities or colleges offer actual courses, or specific course content in leadership development, though educators said that elements of leadership are integrated throughout public relations courses. Teachers also said that the most important leadership skills and values for PR graduates are communication knowledge and skills, a strong ethical orientation, and problem-solving ability. The most effective approaches to teaching leadership included case studies, group discussions, and student-led projects. Overall, the educators favored a more holistic approach to teaching leadership, which would include a central course, greater access to PR leaders and role models, and more leadership activities and opportunities outside of the classroom.

Jin, Y. (2010). Emotional Leadership as a Key Dimension of Public Relations Leadership: A National Survey of Public Relations Leaders. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 22(2), 159-181.

This national survey of 124 public relations leaders examined the core emotional traits and skills for effective PR leadership. Transformational leadership was preferred by PR leaders, and empathy was seen to play an essential role in this type of leadership. Both transformational leadership style and empathy were found to be significant predictors of PR leaders' competency in gaining employees' trust, managing their frustrations and hopes, and taking successful stances toward employees and top management in decision-making conflicts. The study highlights the importance of the emotional dimension of PR leadership, a dimension that demonstrates more familiarity with conflict resolution, more sensitive expression of leaders' feelings, and more problem-solving effectiveness.

Kang, J., & Berger, B. (2009, May). Organizational environment, autonomy, and the ethics counsel role of public relations. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the International Communication Association in Chicago, IL.

This study surveyed 252 members of PRSA to examine the ethical counselor role in public relations. The research focused on the extent to which the autonomy of PR leaders and organizational ethical culture shape this role. *Autonomy* refers to PR practitioners being free from coercion and self-interests in the decision-making process. *Organizational ethical culture* includes such factors as top management support for ethics, presence of codes of ethics and ethics training programs, and an open, participative communication system. The findings indicate that autonomy is strongly linked to participation in strategic decision-making. Autonomy also is influenced significantly by two organizational culture factors: top management behaviors and their support for ethical practices, and an open, participative communication system. Codes of ethics and ethics training programs were deemed far less important.

Kang, J. (2009). *Antecedents and consequences of ethical leadership of public relations practitioners*. Unpublished dissertation. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama.

Ethical leadership behavior in public relations was defined as the application of moral standards in day-to-day practice, as well as the promotion of ethics in the organization. An online survey of 252 PRSA members revealed the substantial influence of top management's ethical behaviors and support for ethics on the organization's practices and culture. In addition, the personal ethical beliefs of practitioners shaped practice. Practitioners with a high level of idealism and low levels of relativism (being sensitive to contingencies) were more likely to apply ethics at work and to act as ethical counselors. Practitioners with low idealism and high levels of relativism preferred confrontational actions, including forceful advocacy, sabotage, or even leaking information. Practitioners who believe their ethical views and approaches are influential in the organization were more satisfied with their work than those who felt they lacked influence.

Kang, J., & Berger, B. (2010). The influence of organizational conditions on public relations practitioners' dissent. *Journal of Communication Management*, 14 (4), 368-387.

This study was designed to (1) understand the extent to which public relations leaders and practitioners use dissent tactics, in the face of unethical organizational decisions, and (2) examine how organizational environment facilitates practitioners' dissent. Results of an online survey of 252 PRSA members suggests that assertive confrontation was the most frequently adopted tactic to resist poor or unethical decisions. Leaders were more likely to confront management in an organization where top management does not exhibit ethical behavior. In addition, when an organization doesn't have an ethics code, practitioners were more likely to organize others to resist the decision. Selective use of information and sabotage tactics were adapted when an organization doesn't value open communication. As one of the grounding studies in public relations dissent, this research contributes to better understanding how practitioners attempt to promote organizational ethics by resisting unethical decisions.

Lee, S-T, & Cheng, I-H. (2011). Characteristics and Dimensions of Ethical Leadership in Public Relations. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 23(1), 46-74.

This research was based on in-depth interviews with 20 leading and current or retired public relations executives—pioneers in the field and high-profile members of PRSA and the Arthur W. Page Society. According to the executives, ethical leadership is grounded more in personal rather than professional values and characteristics. These personal ethics, along with interpersonal behaviors and advocacy of ethical standards, emerged as the three most important characteristics of an ideal PR leader in facilitating the knowledge transfer of ethics in public relations departments and organizations. Since ethical knowledge is implicit, intangible, and often difficult to articulate, this study suggests that ethical modeling may be far more important than formal approaches (e.g., ethics codes and ethics training programs or workshops) in facilitating the transfer of ethics knowledge and appropriate behaviors in the organization. These findings support social learning theory.

Liu, B. F., Horsley, J. S., & Levenshus, A. B. (2010). Government and corporate communication practices: Do the differences matter? *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 38, 189-213.

A survey of 976 government (n=640) and corporate (n=336) PR practitioners was carried out to determine whether public relations practices and leadership requirements differ between the public and private sectors. The study found some similarities but more differences. Professionals in both sectors indicated that media relations is their dominant activity, and external PR is emphasized more than internal efforts; communication frequency with target publics is similar; and both have more to do to educate management about the value of PR practice. Important differences for government practitioners were: greater impact of external legal frameworks, politics, and federalism on practice; more but less favorable media coverage; and greater pressures to meet the information needs of publics. These findings suggest that PR leaders must understand and be sensitive to these differences, and that public relations is not purely a strategic management function in either sector.

Meng, J. (2009). *Excellent leadership in public relations: An application of multiple-group confirmatory factor analysis models in assessing cross-national measurement in variance*. Unpublished dissertation. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama.

Perhaps the most comprehensive research on leadership in public relations, this study defines the construct of “excellent leadership in PR” and identifies and validates six key dimensions of leadership: self-dynamics, team collaboration, ethical orientation, relationship-building skills, strategic decision-making capability, and communication knowledge management. These dimensions were then tested and examined through surveys with 386 US practitioners and 101 international practitioners, and in-depth interviews with 19 practitioners in London and Singapore. The findings provide strong evidence that excellent leadership in PR includes these six interrelated dimensions. The study also confirmed the significant influence of organizational structure and culture on the practice and achievement of excellent leadership. This research integrates a disparate literature on leadership, provides a holistic approach, and bears implications for professional development and education programs.

Meng, J., Berger, B., Gower, K., & Heyman, W. (2012). A test of excellent leadership in public relations: Key qualities, valuable sources, and distinctive leadership perceptions. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 24(1), 18-36.

This project captured the perceptions of 222 senior-level executives regarding leadership in public relations and key qualities related to excellence in PR leadership. About half of the executives said strategic decision-making capability, problem-solving ability, and communication knowledge and expertise were the most important qualities or dimensions of excellent leadership. Ethical orientation, relationship building, and being visionary and possessing other personal traits were ranked significantly lower. Role models, on-the-job experiences, and individual initiative and desire to lead were named the most valuable sources of leadership development. About half of the executives also said that leadership in PR is different from leadership in other fields, in two primary ways: PR leaders must 1) have a compelling vision for how PR connects the organization to publics and the social system, and 2) possess comprehensive understanding of media and new technologies and information systems.

Meng, J., Berger, B., & Heyman, W. (2011). Measuring Public Relations Leadership in the Trait Approach: A Second-order Factor Model in the Dimension of Self-dynamics. *Public Relations Journal*, 5(1). Available online at: http://www.prsa.org/SearchResults/download/6D-050105/0/Measuring_Public_Relations_Leadership_in_the_Trait

This study was grounded on Meng's dimensions of excellent leadership in public relations: self-dynamics, ethical orientation, relationship-building capabilities, communication knowledge and expertise, and strategic decision-making capabilities. The self-dynamics dimension (key personal attributes or traits) was studied in this research project through a national online survey of 222 senior PR executives. Results confirmed that many individual traits may contribute to successful leadership. However, three components of self-dynamics appeared most crucial to excellent leadership: *self insights*, or the capacity to know one's strengths and limitations; the ability to create, articulate, and enlist others in a *shared vision*; and *team collaboration*, or the ability to build and collaborate with teams to carry out projects and achieve goals. The findings bear implications for professional development and education programs.

Werder, K. P., & Holtzhausen, D. R. (2009). An analysis of the influence of public relations department leadership style on public relations strategy use and effectiveness. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 21(4), 404-427

This survey of 885 members of PRSA sought to identify leadership styles present in PR departments, and to explore relationships between those styles and PR strategy use and effectiveness in the organization. Results showed the prevalence of two leadership styles in PR departments: transformational leaders and inclusive leaders. *Transformational leaders* have a clear vision for the future, motivate change, are good policy makers, inspire others through communication, and are innovative risk takers. This leadership style was found to be linked to the use of facilitative and power strategies and to the effectiveness of persuasive and cooperative problem-solving strategies. *Inclusive leaders* are collaborative, share decision-making, and engage in participative practices. Their style is related to the use of facilitative, cooperative problem-solving, and power strategies, and to effectiveness of informative and facilitative strategies. Inclusive leadership is a little more prevalent, but the two styles are strongly related.