

# Public Relations Leaders Earn a “C+” In The Plank Center’s Report Card 2019

*Gender and Hierarchy Gaps Widen, Gains are Elusive*

Juan Meng, Ph.D., Bruce K. Berger, Ph.D., William Heyman, CEO, and Bryan H. Reber, Ph.D.

“The more things change, the more they stay the same,” declared French novelist Alphonse Karr more than a century ago. This aphorism summarizes findings in the Plank Center’s Leadership Report Card 2019 and begs the question: With all the changes in our world and change management programs in our organizations today, should we be concerned that public relations leadership is so unchangingly average?

Despite rapid technological changes, global market shifts, radical political and social unrest, and intense competition for “truth” and talent in the world today, Report Card 2019 reflects little change from previous studies in 2015 and 2017. The underlying fundamentals of leadership linked to outcomes in our field—organizational culture, trust, work engagement, job satisfaction and quality of performance—remain essentially the same. PR leaders received a grade of “C+” in 2019.

Report Card on PR Leaders	2019	2017	2015
Leadership performance	A-/C+	A-/C+	A-/C+
Job engagement	B-	B-	B+
Trust in organization	C+	C+	C+
Job satisfaction	C+	C+	B
Culture of organization	C+	C+	B-
<b>Overall</b>	<b>C+</b>	<b>C+</b>	<b>B-</b>

In 2015 the Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations and Heyman Associates produced its first Report Card on PR Leaders. The 838 U.S. leaders surveyed earned passing grades for the five areas examined—leadership performance, job engagement, trust in the organization, work culture and job satisfaction—but crucial gaps highlighted areas for improvement.

Nearly 1,200 PR leaders in the U.S. completed the same survey in 2017. Grades for performance and trust were unchanged, but slipped for work culture, job engagement and job satisfaction. The overall grade for PR leaders fell from B- to C+. Big gaps between leaders’ and employees’ perceptions of the five areas remained, while gender differences deepened.

The third Report Card was recently completed in the U.S. with 828 PR leaders and professionals. Grades were little changed from 2017, though job engagement, trust and job satisfaction were down a bit. Meanwhile, the gaps between men and women’s perceptions of the workplace and practice, and between top leaders and others in the organizations, deepened further.

Women in public relations remained less engaged, less satisfied with their jobs, less confident in their work cultures, less trusting of their organizations and more critical of top leaders than men. Previous concerns of both men and women about two-way communication, shared decision-making and diversity were again underscored. A new, optional question asked the 828 participants to identify two major barriers to greater work engagement in their companies. More than 500 took time to respond, some at length. The results will be analyzed and presented in a subsequent report.

Commenting on the results, Bill Heyman, CEO and president of Heyman Associates, co-sponsor of the study,

said: “Talking about needed changes and improvements in leadership won’t accomplish the change. We need more leaders who live and model the changes.”

## **Background and Demographics**

### **The Survey**

A 41-question survey examined five interrelated issues in the field: 1) leadership performance, 2) trust in the organization, 3) job satisfaction, 4) organizational culture and 5) job engagement. Questions for each issue were drawn from previously tested and validated item measures used in the 2015 and 2017 surveys. The survey was distributed online to all 22,809 public relations leaders and professionals contained within an extensive database, and 861 completed the survey; 33 surveys completed by non-US-based participants were excluded, leaving 828 surveys for data analysis. The response rate provides a 95% confidence level (+/- 5%). Overall, results in Report Card 2019 represent the larger population of surveyed professionals.

### **The Grades**

Grades were based on mean scores for item statements, or average mean scores for subject areas for some demographics. Comparative data were used to help determine grades when available (e.g., engagement). Respondents shared their perceptions about items using a 7-point Likert-type scale to evaluate statements, ranging from “I don’t agree at all” (1) to “I agree to a very great extent” (7). For percentage analysis, the scale for items in each of the five areas was regrouped and recoded as a categorical variable: unsatisfactory (or disagreement) (scale 1-3), neutral (scale 4), and satisfactory (or agreement) (scale 5-7).

### **Demographics**

Most participants were experienced, high-level leaders and managers. Three-quarters (74.7%) of the 828 respondents were the #1 (35.1%) or #2 (39.6%) communication professional in their organization; 92.4% had 11 years of experience or more with 58.9% specifically indicating having more than 20 years of experience. . In addition, 196 professionals (23.7%) were over the age of 55; 365 (44.1%) were between 46-55 years of age; 213 (25.7%) were between the ages of 36-45; and 54 (6.5%) were under age 36.

More women (449 or 54.2%) than men (379 or 45.8%) completed the survey. The majority of participants worked in public (324 or 39.1%) or private/state-owned (120 or 14.5%) companies, followed by professionals in nonprofits and government/educational/political organizations (254 or 30.7%), communication agencies (107 or 12.9%) and self-employed or others (23 or 2.7%).

Most participants (712 or 86.0%) were Caucasian; 47 (5.7%) were Black/African American; 23 (2.8%) were Latino/Hispanic; 20 (2.4%) were Asian or Asian American; and 25 (3.1%) were mixed race or “other”.

A little more than half (438 or 52.9%) of respondents indicated they belonged to one or more professional associations. Those mentioned most frequently were: PRSA (224), Arthur W. Page Society (88), IABC (70), PR Council (14), IPRA (12), and ABC (9). Nearly half (47.1%) of those surveyed said they didn’t belong to any professional association.

## **Results—Grades for the Five Areas**

Public relations leaders again received passing grades for their performance, trust in the organization, job satisfaction and work engagement. They also gave a passing grade to the organizational cultures within which they work. Overall, scores for the five areas were similar to those in 2017, though slightly lower for trust and job satisfaction. Significant gaps between perceptions of women and men, and leaders and employees, still loom large. Based on the scores, leadership in the field remains pretty average and improvement seems elusive.

**Leadership Performance:**    **A-/C+**            (2017—A-/C+)

This is a split grade because leaders' and their employees' perceptions of performance continue to differ sharply. Top leaders (291 or 35.1%) rated their performance (6.09 /7.0 scale) about an "A-," while other employees (537 or 64.9%) rated their top leaders' performance (4.49/7.0) a "C+." Scores for leadership performance were slightly lower than in 2017 (6.14 vs. 4.53), but the size of the gap is similar. Leaders often rate their performance higher than their employees do, but the statistical difference here is vast.

In addition to an overall performance grade, leaders were evaluated on six dimensions: self-insights (vision), ethical orientation, participation in strategic decision making, team leadership capabilities, relationship building skills and communication knowledge management. Survey participants rated ethical orientation (5.75) and involvement in strategic decision-making (5.50) the highest; visioning (4.98) and team leadership capabilities (5.00) were rated lowest. Leaders gave themselves significantly higher scores than did their employees for all six dimensions.

Men ranked all six leader dimensions (5.38) significantly higher than women (5.12), who gave higher grades than in 2017 (4.94). Agency professionals ranked the six dimensions (5.62) highest of all organizational types, while those working in nonprofit, governmental, educational or political organizations rated their leaders relatively low (5.12).

"The impression about top communication leaders' performance hasn't changed nor improved much in the professional communication community, based on results from our three Report Cards," said Juan Meng, Ph.D., co-investigator and associate professor at University of Georgia. "Such consistent but not-so-promising gaps present persuasive evidence that merits serious attention. Improving top communication leaders' performance shall be a priority. More critically, such changes and actions shall be well communicated to and received by employees in order to close the gaps."

**Job Engagement:**    **B-**                            (2017—B-)

The grade for job engagement remained a "B-" (5.20 on a 7.0 scale), changed little since 2017. Results from Report Card 2019 continue presenting some concern about a creeping rise of actively disengaged professionals, especially among women. Gallup's employee engagement survey is the framework used to assess work engagement among PR leaders and managers. Hundreds of organizations and more than 25 million employees have used the actual survey in the past two decades. Based on responses to the questions, employees are grouped into three categories: engaged, not engaged and actively disengaged.

Engaged employees give greater discretionary effort, work with passion and feel strongly connected with their organization. Not engaged employees do the minimum, just enough to get by. They show up, go through the motions, but bring no energy or passion to the workplace. Actively disengaged employees can harm or weaken the organization. They act out their unhappiness or resentment on the job and adversely influence others—they can undercut organizational programs and goals.

In our survey, 59.4% of respondents were engaged (vs. 57.2% in 2017); 32.6% were not engaged (vs 35.9% in 2017); and 8.0% were actively disengaged (vs. 6.8% in 2017). As indicated below, scores for engagement have changed modestly over the past five years:

## Job Engagement of PR Professionals

Demographic	% Engaged			% Not Engaged			% Actively Disengaged		
	2019	2017	2015	2019	2017	2015	2019	2017	2015
All respondents	59.4	57.2	59.7	32.6	35.9	34.4	8.0	6.8	6.0
Men	62.3	62.1	57.9	31.7	32.5	35.2	6.1	5.4	6.8
Women	57.0	52.9	61.3	33.4	39.0	33.6	9.6	8.1	5.1
Top leaders	68.7	71.7	72.3	25.4	24.5	24.5	5.8	3.8	3.2
Non-top leaders	54.4	50.1	54.2	36.5	41.6	38.6	9.1	8.3	7.2

Consistent with Gallup’s reports, top leaders were more engaged (68.7%) than those at all other levels (54.4%), and engagement was strongest among high-ranking, long-service PR professionals, and weakest among lower-level professionals with less than 11 years of service. More men (62.3%) than women (57.0%) were engaged, though female engagement increased from the previous survey (52.9%). Men’s job engagement was significantly high on three of the 12 items used in the assessment: my opinions count at work, my supervisor discusses my performance, and I have the opportunity to do what I do best at work.

Since 2015, then, engagement levels for all surveyed respondents have remained within small ranges. The range for engaged is 57.2% to 59.7%, and the range for not engaged is 32.6% to 35.9%. The more concerning trend, though percentages are small, is growth of the actively disengaged among top leaders and especially women. The percentage of actively disengaged top leaders rose from 3.2% to 3.8% to 5.8% in the three surveys. The number of actively disengaged women nearly doubled, rising from 5.1% to 8.1% to 9.6%. Meanwhile, the percentage of actively disengaged non-top leaders also gradually grew from 7.2% to 8.3% to 9.1% over the years. Overall, nearly one in 12 professionals (8.0%) was actively disengaged.

Understanding leaders’ engagement is important because they strongly influence employees’ engagement, which in turn strongly affects employee trust and job satisfaction, as indicated in the predictive model at the end of this report. As Gallup suggests in its State of the American Workplace Report (2013), this puts a premium on finding and hiring the right manager and leader—a set of distinctive skills and capabilities—so that hiring itself becomes a crucial engagement strategy, i.e. selecting the “right” individuals to lead, support, empower and engage others.

To learn more about this issue, for the first time the study included an optional, open-ended question regarding engagement: What are the top two leadership challenges in driving employee engagement in your organization? More than 60% (512) of participants answered this question. The responses will be explored in depth in a subsequent report.

### Trust in the Organization: **C+** (2017—C+)

The overall grade for trust in the organization (4.71 on a 7.0 scale) was a “C+,” down a little from a mean score of 4.76 in 2017. Trust has received the lowest grade among the five subject areas in each survey. Trust scores were consistently lower at each level in the chain of command. Top leaders rated trust (5.17) significantly higher than professionals at other levels (4.42).

Six trust items were assessed, and participants gave highest marks to trusting their organization’s capabilities to accomplish its goals (5.05), and to feeling confident about their organization’s skills to compete successfully in the marketplace (4.86). Lower marks were given to trusting their organization to take the opinions of employees into account when making decisions (4.55), and being concerned about employees when important decisions are being made (4.22).

Female professionals (4.55) continued to be much less trusting of their organizations than male professionals (4.90). Women were significantly less trusting of relying on their organizations to keep its promises (4.59 vs. 5.06), taking opinions of employees like them into account when making decisions (4.37 vs. 4.76), and treating employees like them fairly and justly (4.58 vs. 4.97).

Trust is crucial in building and sustaining relationships in our work and personal lives. In work trust is heavily influenced by organizational culture, as noted in our predictive model. Employee identification with work teams and organizations is built around trust, which influences job satisfaction. Top leaders and front-line supervisors influence trust through their decisions, communications and especially their behaviors, which help shape the extent to which an organization’s culture is supportive, inclusive and open.

Yet Report Card 2019 reveals small but steady declines in trust factors as well as growing divides between men and women, and top leaders and all others in organizations, regarding their evaluations of trust in the work place.

**Job Satisfaction: C+ (2015—C+)**

Job satisfaction was again graded a C+ as it continued a small decline from 4.94 (2015) to 4.76 (2017) to 4.73 in 2019. In terms of percentages, the numbers changed little from 2017. In 2019, the percent of PR leaders and professionals who were satisfied with their job was 62.1% (vs. 61.9% in 2017); those dissatisfied rose slightly from 24.1% (2017) to 24.4%; and those neither satisfied nor dissatisfied declined from 14.0% in 2017 to 13.5%.

<b>Percentage of Job Satisfaction: Report Card 2019</b>			
<b>Demographics</b>	<b>Dissatisfied</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Satisfied</b>
All 828 respondents	202 (24.4%)	112 (13.5%)	514 (62.1%)
Women (N=449)	117 (26.1%)	71 (15.8%)	261 (58.1%)
Men (N=379)	85 (22.4%)	41 (10.8%)	253 (66.8%)
Top leader (N=291)	52 (17.9%)	35 (12.0%)	204 (70.1%)
One level below (N=328)	83 (25.3%)	44 (13.4%)	201 (61.3%)
Two or more levels (N=209)	67 (32.1%)	33 (15.8%)	109 (52.2%)

The biggest declines in job satisfaction were among top leaders as their mean scores continued to fall from 5.51 (2015) to 5.31 (2017) to 5.11 in 2019. However, they were still significantly more satisfied with their jobs than those at all other levels (4.48). Mean scores for men and women also continued small declines from previous surveys. Scores for females dropped from 4.94 (2015) to 4.64 (2017) to 4.61 (2019). Job satisfaction is significantly higher for men if compared to women (4.87 vs. 4.61), but men’s scores also declined from 4.99 (2015) to 4.90 (2017) to 4.87 in 2019.

On a percentage basis, 66.8% of men were satisfied with their jobs (vs. 65.9% in 2017), while 58.1% of women were satisfied (v. 58.3% in 2017). Those working in agencies rated job satisfaction the highest (5.05). Those working in the category of nonprofit, governmental, educational or political organizations (4.65) and the category of public corporations (4.57) rated job satisfaction the lowest. In contrast, professionals working in nonprofit, governmental, educational or political organizations rated job satisfaction highest in our 2017 Report Card.

## Organizational Culture: C+ (2017—C+)

Overall, surveyed participants graded organizational culture a “C+” (4.94 on a 7.0 scale), quite similar to previous scores of 4.86 in 2017 and 4.95 in 2015. Culture refers here to the internal environment and processes and structures that facilitate or impede communication practices. Item measures for culture include the extent to which: 1) the CEO values and understands PR, 2) other functional leaders value and understand PR, 3) the organization shares decision-making power among employees, 4) two-way communication is practiced, 5) the organization values and practices diversity, and 6) the quality of the top PR leader (this item was discussed in the leadership performance section above).

Rated highest was the CEO’s or top leader’s understanding and valuing of public relations (5.48); understanding and valuing of PR by other functional leaders was rated significantly lower (4.95). Graded much lower were the extent to which the organization shared decision-making (4.19) among employees and practiced two-way communication (4.69). The extent to which the organization values and practices diversity was rated 5.22 (up from 5.10 in 2017). Shared decision-making and two-way communications were again the weakest cultural factors across all demographics.

Overall, top leaders rated cultural factors significantly higher (5.29) than professionals at lower levels (4.73). Men rated culture more positively (5.07) than women (4.83), who rated most cultural elements significantly lower than men, notably two-way communication, shared decision-making and diversity. Women gave shared decision-making one of the lowest scores in the survey (4.08). The biggest gap between women and men lies in the evaluation of organization’s efforts in valuing and practicing diversity and inclusion (4.99 vs. 5.49). Among organizational types, agency professionals rated cultural factors highest (5.59); the group of nonprofit, governmental, educational and political organizations rated culture lowest (4.76).

## Summary

Grades for the five areas for leaders remained passing grades. However, most mean scores for the 2019 report card were a bit lower than they were in 2017. In short, the 2019 survey looks very similar to the previous one. Little has changed: leadership in public relations is graded a C+, still pretty average. In addition, three crucial gaps revealed in previous studies still remain. They must be reduced or closed to strengthen leadership, practice and outcomes for the profession and organizations. The three gaps are:

1. The perceptions of top communication leaders and their employees. Top communication leaders rate their performance, trust in the organization, work engagement, job satisfaction and organizational culture significantly higher than their employees. Things look different—and far better—at the top. Leaders may often rate their performance and some other factors higher than do followers, but the size of the gap is Grand-Canyon sized. If leaders by definition have followers, then at what point do perception gaps adversely affect followers?

The gaps may be reduced through: 1) increased power sharing, or leader empowering behaviors, 2) strengthened two-way communication, and 3) enhanced interpersonal skills in team work, such as conflict management, active listening and change management. Leaders at all levels can benefit from relying less on the transmission mode and more on the reception mode when communicating with employees. These approaches also may help build trust.

2. Existing culture and a culture for communication. Several issues—lack of two-way communication, limited power sharing in decision-making, and concerns about diversity—point to differences between existing organizational cultures and a rich, open communication system, sometimes referred to as a culture for communication.

Such a culture is characterized by: 1) an open communication system where information and best practices are widely shared, 2) listening is valorized, 3) two-way and multiple channels are the norm, 4) employees feel free to speak up without fear of retribution, 5) decision-making is widely shared in teams and work units, and 6) leaders support and value communication. Organizational culture exerts a very strong influence on leadership performance and a strong influence on trust especially among employees at lower levels.

3. Perceptions of women and men in the profession. The gender gap deepened in the 2017 and 2019 Report Cards in every subject area. Women's perceptions of shared power in decision making, two-way communication, and the valuing of their opinions differed significantly as reflected in trust in the organization, culture and engagement issues. Women said they want more involvement in strategic decision making, they want their opinions to count for more, and they want a communication system that places greater emphasis on two-way communication.

In addition, progress in diversity in many senses in public relations remains painfully slow. Such slow progress is mirrored in the deep gap between women and men. Similar to the leadership performance gap revealed by top leaders and their employees, women and men see their organization's efforts in practicing diversity significantly different. These gaps won't magically disappear. They require action, and the power to act resides in the minds, hearts and hands of current leaders at all levels in organizations.

"The purpose of this biennial report is to assess leadership in PR and identify enrichment opportunities," said Bruce K. Berger, Ph.D., co-investigator and professor emeritus at the University of Alabama. "If we identify the gaps and work to close them, we strengthen our profession's leadership—a crucial strategic asset. This Report Card underscores the continuing gaps and the urgency to act."

### **The Power of Engagement**

The reduced levels of engagement among PR professionals in the 2019 study represent a final concern for several reasons. First, engagement affects the bottom line. Organizations and work teams with more engaged employees have significantly better customer ratings, productivity and profit levels, and lower turnover and absenteeism (Gallup Report, 2013).

Second, previous research has demonstrated that top leaders and front-line managers strongly influence engagement levels through their behaviors, communications and interactions with others. Highly engaged leaders, then, can energize and inspire greater discretionary efforts. Third, engagement appears to be a key driver that strongly links to each of the other issues in the study.

The study also found work engagement is strongly influenced by leadership and culture. The predictive model below (Leadership Performance Model) indicates culture and leadership very strongly influence each other. In turn, culture strongly influences trust and engagement. Leadership strongly influences engagement and has a small influence on trust. Engagement very strongly influences trust and job satisfaction. In this model, employee engagement appears to be both a key outcome and a powerful driver. Engaged employees are productive workers, positive influencers and even role models.

Insights in the collective report cards provide knowledge of key needs in the profession—increased two-way communication, shared decision-making, leadership decisions and behaviors that build trust and enrich relationships, and equal opportunities for men and women of all races. We can speak and write about this knowledge. We know, or can learn, how to address the needs.

But knowing the gaps and needs, knowing what to do and how to do it to resolve them, is not enough. We must move from knowing to doing, and this transformation requires real leadership in the profession—not words and commitments, but action. Doing it.

Citation of this publication in APA style:

Meng, J., Berger, B. K., Heyman, W. C., & Reber, B. H. (2019). Public relations leaders earn a “C+” in The Plank Center’s Report Card 2019: Is improving leadership even on the radar screen in the profession? Tuscaloosa, AL: The Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations.

Short quotation to be used in legends (charts/graphics):

Source: PR Leadership Report Card 2019

Contact:

The Plank Center and Heyman Associates will conduct the leadership survey again in 2021. If you’re interested in a presentation and discussion of the Report Card 2019 results in your organization, please contact Bruce Berger ([berger@apr.ua.edu](mailto:berger@apr.ua.edu)), Juan Meng ([jmeng@uga.edu](mailto:jmeng@uga.edu)), or Bill Heyman ([bill@heymanassociates.com](mailto:bill@heymanassociates.com)).

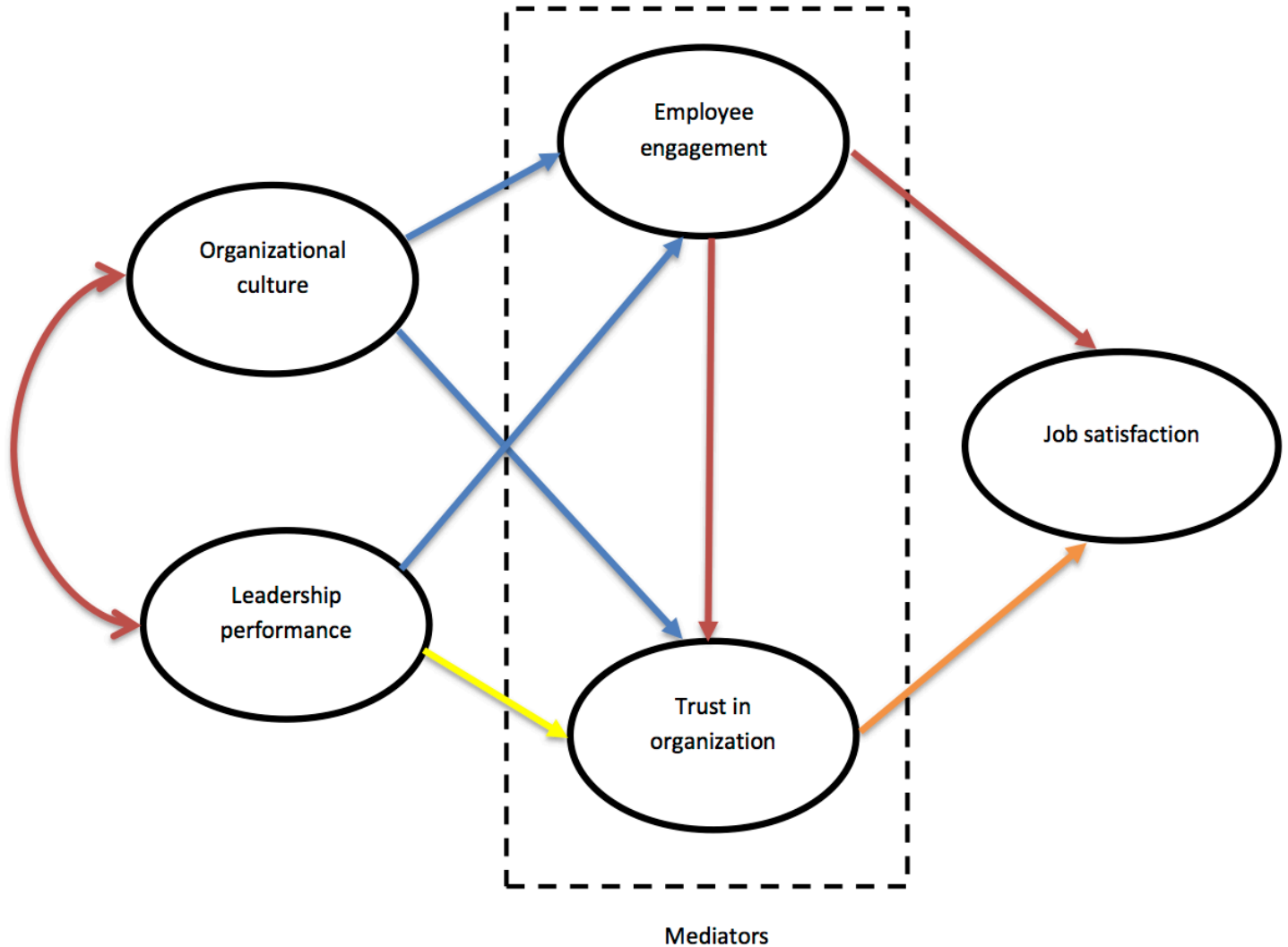
©2019 by The Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations

All rights reserved.



## Leadership Performance Model

This model depicts the impact of supportive organizational culture and excellent leadership performance on communication practitioners' job satisfaction as mediated by their engagement and trust in their organization.



*Note:* Chi-square = 9.49,  $df. = 2$ ,  $p < .001$ , RMSEA = .069, RMSEA = .067, NFI = 1.00, NNFI = .99, CFI = 1.00, AGFI = .97.

**Red line** indicates very strong and significant direct effects.

**Blue line** indicates significantly strong direct effects.

**Orange line** indicates moderate and significant direct effects.

**Yellow line** indicates non-significant direct effect.