



THE PLANK CENTER
FOR LEADERSHIP IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

In Search of Leadership in Public Relations *A Research Report from the Plank Center*

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This report summarizes the findings of 16 leadership studies carried out through the Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations, established at the University of Alabama (UA) in 2005. The Center's mission is to help develop and recognize outstanding leaders and role models in public relations education and practice. It does so through awards, scholarships, speaker programs, reports and publications, video interviews with leaders, an online magazine, and research grants, among other approaches.

Leaders are crucial to the success, image, and future of nations, organizations, and professions, including public relations. Leaders touch our work and social lives in many ways. They make important strategic decisions. They impact our attitudes, beliefs, and performance. They shape organizational culture and communication climate. They play key roles in helping solve problems in a profession. In public relations, leadership issues include ethical dilemmas, employee trust and engagement challenges, and increasing demands from stakeholders for greater transparency and social responsibility.

Given the importance of leaders, it's surprising that only a few research studies have directly explored leadership in public relations. To deal with this knowledge gap, the Plank Center has begun to build a research-based foundation of knowledge regarding leadership in the field. The 16 Plank Center studies summarized in this report shed some light on this crucial topic. They underscore the pivotal role of ethics in practice, reveal leadership styles preferred by practitioners, and underscore the powerful influences of organizational culture and structure on the practice of leadership.

Overall, many of the studies focus on the values, qualities, and dimensions of what we refer to as "excellent leadership" in public relations, so for this report we completed a meta-analysis of the 16 studies to locate recurring themes or patterns. Collectively, the studies employed surveys, interviews, and focus groups with nearly 3,900 PR practitioners, educators, and students, mostly in the US. Glass (1976) first used the term "meta-analysis" to refer to statistical analysis of the findings from a large body of studies in order to integrate those findings. We didn't conduct statistical analysis of the 16 studies, but we

examined the findings to determine if there were recurring themes and patterns that might reflect principles of excellent leaders.

Our analysis yielded four broad observations about leadership in PR and nine qualities of excellent leaders. We first describe the four observations, which provide a framework for thinking about leadership in the field. We then define the construct of “excellent leadership” in PR and outline the nine qualities or principles of excellent leaders.

Four Observations about Leadership in the Field

1. Excellent leadership in PR is a complex mix of at least six interrelated dimensions: self-dynamics, team collaboration, ethical orientation, relationship-building skills, strategic decision-making capability, and communication knowledge and expertise (Meng, 2009; Meng, Berger, Gower, & Heyman, 2009; Meng & Heyman, 2009). All six dimensions were found to be complementary and related in a meaningful way: none of the six dimensions alone was of significantly greater weight than others. This suggests that public relations leadership should not be seen as an isolated perspective, but rather should be seen and developed in a comprehensive and balanced manner.

2. Leadership in PR may be different from leadership in other professions in two primary ways: 1) PR leaders must possess a compelling vision for what PR can be and how it connects organizations with publics and the larger social system, and 2) PR leaders must possess a complex communication skill set and knowledge of media and new technologies. However, diverse practitioners in three surveys were nearly perfectly divided on whether leadership is different in PR versus other professions (Erzikova & Berger, 2009a; Meng, 2009; Meng, Berger, Gower, & Heyman, 2009). Younger practitioners and students appear to believe in this difference to a greater extent than do older professionals (Erzikova & Berger, 2009a; Meng, 2009).

3. Female and male professionals and practitioners at diverse organizations large and small in the US, share more or less similar perceptions about excellence in PR leadership (Berger, Reber, & Heyman, 2007; Meng, 2009; Meng, Berger, Gower, & Heyman, 2009). One exception is that women and professionals working in agencies and large PR units rate the vision dimension of leadership significantly higher than do men and those professionals working in private corporations and small units. A more limited international survey sample (n=101), and in-depth interviews with 19 professionals in London and Singapore, provided results similar to those in the US.

4. Organizational culture and structure exert great influence on the extent to which PR leaders can be excellent and effective (Kang & Berger, 2009a; Liu & Horsley, 2009; Meng, 2009). This influence is greatest in two ways: the extent to which 1) top management supports ethics and models ethical behaviors, and 2) an open and participative communication system is present (Kang, 2009; Kang & Berger, 2009a). Interviews with international practitioners suggested that cultural values and practices may be even more powerful at the organizational rather than societal level (Meng, 2009).

Definition of *Excellent Leadership* in Public Relations

Based on analysis of the 16 PR leadership studies, we propose that:

Excellent leadership in public relations is a dynamic process that encompasses a complex mix of individual skills and personal attributes, values, and behaviors that consistently produces ethical and effective communication practice. Such practice fuels and guides successful communication teams, and helps organizations achieve their goals and gain legitimacy in society.

This definition of leadership, unlike previous ones, integrates skills, attributes, styles, and behaviors. We see excellent leadership as a complex and dynamic process that combines six crucial dimensions: self-dynamics, team collaboration, ethical orientation, relationship-building skills, strategic decision-making capability, and communication knowledge and expertise. These dimensions represent the core of excellent leadership in public relations, which helps produce positive outcomes at the team, organizational, and societal levels. In addition, the extent to which PR leaders can be excellent and effective is influenced by other factors, notably organizational culture, structure, and external environment.

To date, this model has been tested and validated through three surveys (n=562) of diverse practitioners in the US, one survey (n=101) with practitioners in Europe and Singapore, and depth interviews with 19 practitioners in London and Singapore. In pursuing the construct of excellent leadership in PR—what people evaluate as excellence—we are seeking to learn what excellent leaders do, or what they ought to be like. This represents a normative theoretical approach, which is appropriate because the most important evaluations of leaders' qualities and values occur in the minds of followers. They determine the relative strengths, weaknesses, and success of leaders based on behaviors they observe and what they believe to be the best or most appropriate values and behaviors.

Nine Qualities of Excellent Leadership in Public Relations

In our analysis of the 16 studies, we also identified nine qualities, or principles of excellence in leadership in the field, each of which is supported by 3-6 studies. We contend that excellent leaders in public relations:

1. *Lead by example: they model the way through two-way communication and exemplary behaviors.* Role models and mentors exert the greatest influence on practitioner beliefs about what constitutes excellent leadership qualities and values (Berger, 2008; Berger, Meng, & Heyman, 2009; Erzikova & Berger, 2009b; Lee & Cheng, 2008; Meng, Berger, Gower, & Heyman, 2009). In-depth interviews with 20 young PR leaders also suggested that “leading by example” is one of the most important qualities of excellent leaders (Berger, 2008). Educators indicated that greater access to role models would help students learn appropriate values and behaviors (Erzikova & Berger, 2009b).

2. *Participate effectively and credibly in strategic decision-making arenas in organizations.* Strategic decision-making capability is the most crucial dimension of leadership, according to senior practitioners (Kang, 2009; Meng, 2009; Meng, Berger,

Gower, Heyman, 2009). The ultimate PR leader is an effective and valued strategic counselor who's engaged in important decision-making moments in the organization.

3. Exemplify a strong ethical orientation and set of values for doing the right thing and practicing professional standards at all times. Ethical orientation touches every aspect of leadership practice and is crucial to individual reputation, organizational success, and the profession's image and future (Erzikova & Berger, 2009b; Kang, 2009; Kang & Berger, 2009a; Meng, 2009).

Many surveyed educators said that a strong ethical orientation was among the most important values for PR students to possess, and American PR students defined leadership in PR primarily through an ethics prism, emphasizing trustworthiness and strong values (Erzikova & Berger, 2009a). In interviews, 20 long-time leaders in the field said that personal ethics, along with interpersonal behaviors and the active advocacy of ethical standards, are the most important characteristics of PR leaders who help spread ethical behavior throughout the organization (Lee & Cheng, 2008).

4. Possess complex communication and rhetorical skills. We take this knowledge requirement for granted in the profession: leaders should be technically proficient and familiar with the tasks of employees. However, research begins to reveal the multi-layered nature and complexity of this capability and suggests four levels of knowledge and skill (Berger, Reber, & Heyman, 2007; Meng, 2009; Meng, Berger, Gower, & Heyman, 2009).

The basic technical level involves strong writing and design skills and knowledge of a range of communication channels and media. At the strategic level, practitioners use their knowledge and skills to select and implement appropriate communication strategies and tactics. At the relational level, practitioners use interpersonal skills to build relationships, collaborate, negotiate, and work effectively in teams. At the political level, practitioners possess and employ rhetorical and persuasive communication skills and strategies that make them effective participants in senior decision-making circles.

5. Possess clear self-knowledge that guides successful interactions, formation of relationships, and self-development. Self knowledge--knowing the strengths and limitations of one's character, skills, and knowledge--helps guide successful decisions. Many individual traits contribute to successful leadership, but self-dynamics may be the core set: self insights, sense of vision, and team collaboration. Self insights help locate and deal effectively with blind spots that can produce unintended consequences. They also enable practitioners to interact more effectively with others (Lee & Cheng, 2008; Meng, 2009; Meng & Heyman, 2009).

6. Possess a strong desire to lead. Individual initiative and desire to lead appear to be fundamental to excellent leadership over the long term. Practitioners can improve their professional skills, process ethics codes, study role models, and participate in management development programs. But the fundamental desire to lead is a rich, continuing source of energy, power, learning, and determination (Berger, Meng, & Heyman, 2009; Meng, 2009; Meng, Berger, Gower, & Heyman, 2009).

7. *Employ transformational and inclusive styles of leadership that are sensitive to context and environment, as well as individual needs and differences.* Transformational and inclusive leadership styles are consistently preferred by PR professionals (Choi & Choi, 2008; Jin, 2009; Werder & Holtzhausen, 2009). *Transformational leaders* have a vision for the future, motivate change, inspire others through communication, and are innovative risk takers. *Inclusive leaders* are collaborative, share decision-making, and engage in participative processes. These styles are more effective in gaining trust with employees and teams, managing employee hopes and frustrations, and resolving conflicts and solving problems (Jin, 2009; Werder & Holtzhausen, 2009).

8. *Demonstrate passion for the work and the profession that encourages and inspires others.* Passion for work and the profession may be the lifeblood of leadership. Exhibiting passion and positive energy on the job brings projects to life and spurs hope. Passion for work also may facilitate shared vision, build esprit de corps, and enrich organizational climate. Excellent leaders in public relations fully engage in the challenges of leadership on the job and often in the community and profession. (Berger, 2008; Berger, Reber, & Heyman, 2007; Lee & Cheng, 2008).

9. *Serve as agents for change and for helping to create a culture for communication.* The extent to which PR leaders can be effective and excellent is affected by organizational culture, structure, and environment (Kang & Berger, 2009a; Liu & Horsley, 2009; Meng, 2009). PR leaders may be most effective and excellent in open communication environments and when organizational leaders support and model ethical behaviors (Kang, 2009; Kang & Berger, 2009a). Thus, excellent PR leaders push back on restrictive or closed communication environments and inappropriate behaviors for the benefit of employees, the overall organization, and the practice and profession.

Abstracts of the 16 Plank Center Research Studies

We acknowledge that this is a preliminary report about leadership in the field, and more research studies are necessary to confirm or refute these insights, or discover others. In fact, we've prepared this report to inspire more research about leadership in PR and provoke professional and academic debate on this important topic, which we believe is crucial to our profession and its future. We conclude this report with brief abstracts of the 16 leadership studies, which have been published or presented at academic conferences.

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 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 leaders were: creativity, integrity, passion for work and the practice, ability to motivate others, a powerful set of communication skills, and diversity of experiences.

Berger, B., Meng, J., & Heyman, W. (2009, March). Role modeling in PR: 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.

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. (2009a, March). Russian and US public relations students' perceptions of professional leadership and leaders. Paper presented at the 12th International Public Relations Research Conference in Miami, FL.

This survey of 181 Russian and 196 American PR students investigated similarities and differences between their perceptions of 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 were 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. (2009b). Leadership education in the PR curriculum: Reality, opportunities and benefits. Paper completed in July 2009.

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. (2009, May). Emotional leadership as a key dimension of public relations leadership: A national survey of public relations leaders. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the International Communication Association in Chicago, IL.

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 and its value in conflict resolution, expression of leaders' feelings, and greater 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. (2009, August). The influence of organizational conditions on public relations practitioners' dissent. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication in Boston, MA.

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.

Lee, S-T, & Cheng, I-H. (2008, August). "Talk the talk, walk the walk:" Characteristics and dimensions of ethical leadership in public relations. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication in Chicago, IL.

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, were the three most important characteristics of an ideal PR leader in facilitating the 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.

Liu, B. F., & Horsley, S. (2009). Public relations leaders in the public and private sector: Peas in a pod or polar opposites? *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, XX(X), xx-xx.

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 information needs of publics. These findings suggest that PR leaders must understand and be sensitive to such differences, and that PR 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 562 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. (2009, May). A test of excellent leadership in public relations: Key qualities, valuable sources, and distinctive leadership perceptions. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the International Communication Association in Chicago, IL.

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., & Heyman, W. (2009, March). Measuring excellent leadership in public relations: A second-order factor model in the dimension of self-dynamics. Paper presented at the 12th International Public Relations Research Conference in Miami, FL.

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.

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 explore relationships between those styles and PR strategy use and effectiveness. Results showed the prevalence of two related 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.

This report was prepared for a panel session on leadership in public relations that was delivered by Bruce Berger, Keith Burton, and Ron Culp at the PRSA International Conference in San Diego, CA on November 9, 2009.

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