Academic Papers

Communication managers as strategists? Can they make the grade?

Norwegian School of Management, P. O. Box 580, 1301 Sandvika, Norway; tel: 47 67 55 73 14; e-mail: peggy.bronn@bi.no

Peggy Simcic Brønn *is currently associate professor in the Marketing Institute at the Norwegian School of Management in Oslo. She recently completed her Doctor of Business Administration at Henley Management college in the UK. She has more than 20 years' experience in public relations, primarily from non-profit and educational institutions in the USA. She is published in a number of international journals and also consults for Norwegian firms.*

ABSTRACT
When discussing the role of executives in public relations and their involvement in decision making, much research has focused on the dichotomous roles of technician and manager. From this it is concluded that an executive's input into an organisation's strategic decision making depends on how they enact the managerial role. This paper asserts that there is more to being an accepted member of the top management team than role enactment. Enacting the managerial role is, in fact, nothing more than performing high-level technical activities. A new measurement of is managerial competency is strategic thinking. What this is and how it can be measured is then discussed.

KEYWORDS: strategy, role enactment, strategic thinking, issues management, environmental scanning, planning

INTRODUCTION

Most researchers agree on the increasing importance of the role of communications within organisations. Establishing itself as a contributor to strategy formulation has been identified as one of the most important goals for the public relations industry.[1] According to Potter,[2] enlightened senior managers increasingly demand that communication managers become more involved in contributing to achieving goals and objectives. This includes being involved in putting into action key strategies. Further, it has been demonstrated that a key characteristic of 'excellent' organisational communication is strategic communication management.[3] Grunig and Grunig[4] contend that public relations managers who demonstrate they can behave in a strategic manner can help an organisation achieve its goals. One word repeated throughout the literature is 'strategic'; public relations managers should provide *strategic* counsel, they should take part in *strategy* formulation, and they must be able to implement *strategies*. Why is it, however, that so many agree that public relations managers are still not

making it on to the top management team?

The term 'participation in decision making' is often used without explanation.[5] A number of studies exist on participation in decision making. Cotton *et al.* report on studies of the effects of participation in decision making on employee satisfaction and performance.[6] Jaques[7] criticises the application of Japanese managerial accountability to managerial decision making in US firms. Daniels and Bailey[8] study strategy development processes and participation in decision making, concluding that people who participate in strategic decision making have the possibility to influence their working environment, which influences their job satisfaction. Most of these studies are interested in correlating such things as job satisfaction or role stressors and participation in decision making. Their emphasis could be characterised as being on

employee empowerment, not necessarily on the activities at different levels of decision making.

Chakravarthy and Lorange[9] offer a simplified four-level view of the 'typical multibusiness' organisation with four corresponding types of managers and strategies. These are shown in Figure 1. The four levels, starting from the bottom, are functional-level managers, business unit managers, divisional managers, and, at the top, the chief executive officer and other top managers. Correspondingly, the strategies are functional strategies, business strategies, business family strategies and corporate strategies.

Chakravarthy and Lorange explain that, corporate strategies provide the umbrella under which lower-level strategies are drafted. The team at this level consists of the chief executive officer and a top management team who decide, among other things, where the

Figure 1: Organisational levels and types of strategies
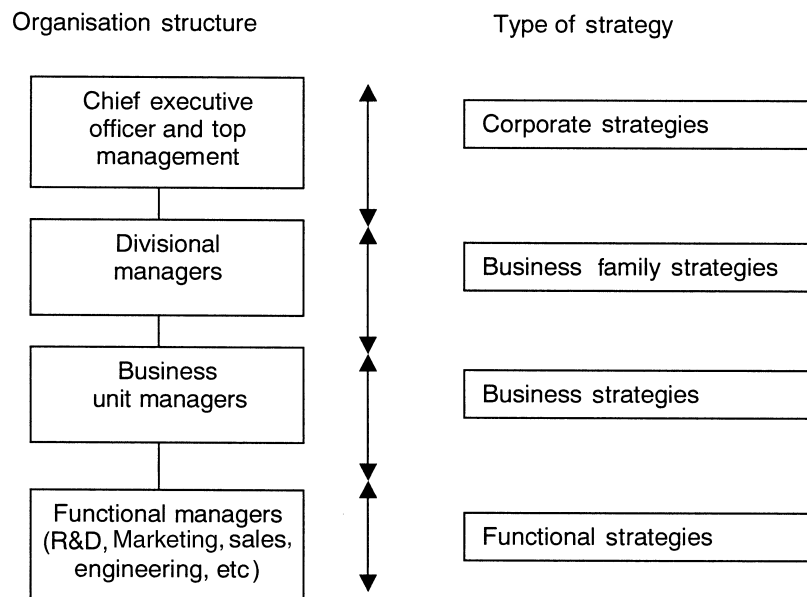
organistion will compete, the allocation of resources and how to strengthen the organistion's business portfolio. The strategies at the lower levels become more operational, culminating in the functional level where managers are most concerned with implementing the various strategies decided at the upper levels.

This configuration corresponds with the chart adapted in White and Dozier,[10] which delineates seven levels of decision responsibilities within an organisation. The lowest level is the shop and office floor and the highest is the chair of the corporate group. In this configuration, level 2 consists of the corporate or sector executives. Moving up the hierarchical ladder in the organisation, as demonstrated in both Chakravarthy and Lorange and White and Dozier, decision complexity increases from 'concrete operational decisions' to more 'social and more abstract decisions'. These more complex decisions are most often referred to as *strategic* decisions. These decisions would correspond to Chakravarthy and Lorange's corporate strategies.

Again, there are a number of definitions for strategic decisions. Schwenk,[11] after looking at many different definitions of strategy, describes strategic decisions as decisions that are ill-structured and non-routine, ie are unique and use complex decision rules, are especially important to the organisation and are generally very complex. According to Quinn,[12] strategic decisions determine the overall direction and viability of an organisation. They are recognised as superior to goals, policies and programmes. Operational decisions, in contrast, are those that tend to be short term and which are based on the strategic, or long-term, plans of the organisation. They result in

tactics or policies, ie the specific actions that organisations take to implement strategies. As stated by Quinn,[13] strategic decisions are critical in determining the viability of an organisation in 'light of the predictable, the unpredictable and the unknowable changes that might occur in its most important environments'.[14]

PUBLIC RELATIONS EXECUTIVES AND INVOLVEMENT IN STRATEGIC DECISION MAKING

Research indicates that public relations practitioners are seldom included in the dominant coalition,[15] defined as the senior managers who control the organisation.[16] Similarly, White and Dozier[17] provide evidence that communication managers are rarely formally empowered as decision makers at the strategic level where they would encounter the dominant coalition. Grunig[18] cites several reasons for this: lack of broad business expertise, passivity, naiveté about organisational politics, and inadequate education, experience or organisational status. As a result public relations professionals often do not have an influential position in their organisations.

Guth[19] notes that the 'perceptual' gap between management and public relations practitioners' view of the role of public relations is a serious problem. In this case the gap has to do with the differences between management and public relations managers' views of the importance of public interest, with the public relations managers feeling as though neither they nor the public are taken seriously by upper management. Mintzberg,[20] writing on the manager's job, perhaps reflects this view when he says, not very flatteringly, that public relations jobs are those that are 'free of content; limitless, frameless and action-

less . . . a job detached from its internal roots'.[21]

As noted by Vercic and Grunig,[22] public relations traditionally is relegated to a functional level as opposed to the strategic decision-making level where decisions are referred to as more social and more abstract.[23] Vercic, however, proposes that public relations is at its most effective within the framework of organisational strategic management, ie at the corporate level made up of chief administrative officers and executive managers. MacMillan[24] also found that the extent of consultation and involvement in strategic processes is key for public relations managers being accepted in top management. This has been characterised by Dozier[25] as being involved in management decision making, or decision making taken by senior level managers. In this paper, the term strategic decision making will be used to connote decisions taken at the corporate level of the organisation, implying that those involved in strategic decision making are executives of the organisation and are thus members of the top management team.

PREREQUISITES FOR INVOLVEMENT IN DECISION MAKING

A number of antecedents have been identified within the public relations literature as necessary for participating in strategic decision making (see Figure 2). These include managers' previous education,[26] their perceived position in the organisation,[27] and the dominant role enacted by the public relations manager.[28] It is this last antecedent that has received the most attention, however, as a determinant of whether or not public relations practitioners participate in strategic decision making. Two primary roles have been identified: the technician role and the managerial role.[29] These two roles represent the main role dichotomy of public relations practitioners within organisations and provide the basis for a number of propositions dealing with role enactment. According to Dozier,[30] roles are related to participation in management decision making,

Figure 2: Summary of antecedents of involvement in decision making
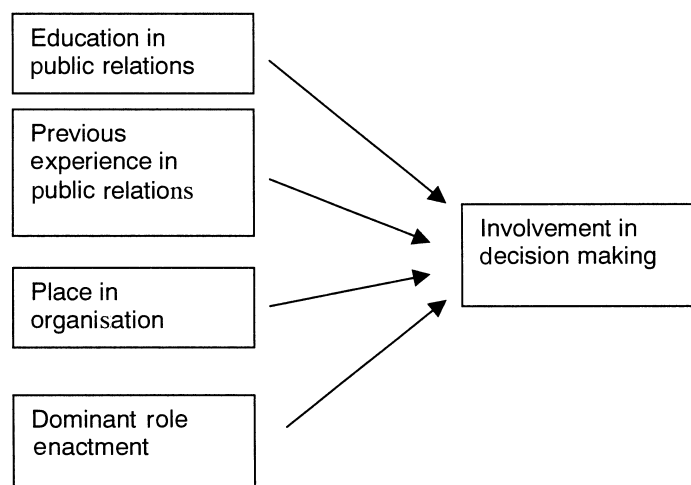
and those who enact primarily the manager role are more likely to be involved in management decision making.

The technician is seen as someone who produces, for example, brochures and pamphlets. In other words, they perform the various task-related or operational aspects of public relations. The managerial role, as described by Dozier, is measured by asking respondents if they 1) take responsibility, 2) are viewed as an expert, 3) observe that they are held accountable, 4) make policy decisions, 5) operate as a catalyst in management decision making, 6) recognise the need for planning, and 7) keep management informed. It can be argued that it is relatively easy to measure the technician role primarily because it results in the production of things that can be observed. Measuring the managerial role, however, entails asking public relations managers to assess themselves on not very concrete descriptors. It does not address their competencies to carry out the activities that Dozier associates with the role of managers. Further, by continually relying on the role dichotomy construct, researchers and practitioners miss the wealth of new thinking regarding how today's organisations are developing, including the role of senior-level communications practitioners. Perhaps there are other, more critical issues that need to be addressed as part of the above model.

IS MEASURING ROLE ENACTMENT STILL RELEVANT?

Researchers and authors have begun to contend that being a manager is not as important as being a 'leader'. Katzenbach[31] asserts that managers know how to *do* things — they can create budgets, enforce policies and carry out procedures. But, asks Katzenbach, are they able to encourage people to help an organisation change and grow? Sanborn,[32] who maintains that there are substantial differences between managers and leaders, echoes this. He cites the original etymology in Greek in defining the word 'manage' as meaning to handle or maintain and the word 'lead' as meaning to go from, taking followers from one place to the next. Further, according to Sanborn, managers may have positional power but leaders have power with people.

Sjøberg[33] also differentiates between leaders and managers. He maintains that leaders have vision, create change and motivate others to realise their fantasies. Managers, on the other hand, work hard, are analytic, tolerant and fair. Eriksen[34] looked at leader competencies as a career anchor. People who desire careers as leaders are motivated to take positions of responsibility where their competencies can be demonstrated. This includes analytical skills (the ability to identify and solve problems under uncertainty), interpersonal skills (the ability to work effectively with people in groups and in difficult situations with many groups), and emotional skills (the ability to take difficult decisions without being emotionally affected).

Zabriskie and Huellmantel[35] differentiate between strategic leaders and operational leaders. Operational leaders have skills that enable them to manage resources. Strategic leaders, on the other hand, are skilled in 'selecting future markets to enter and achieving growth for the organization'.[36] Other studies have generated lists of leadership competencies, including both 'soft' and 'hard' variables.[37]

Hinterhuber and Popp[38] ask the question: 'Are you a strategist or just a manager?'. According to these authors, there is a clear dividing line between

managers and strategists, those who are successful at, among other things, visioning, empowering and embracing an entrepreneurial approach to business. And it is important, say these authors, that organisations are able to differentiate between these managers for the long-term success of the organisation, particularly in environments with constant change.

NEW ANTECEDENT: STRATEGIC THINKING

Strategic planning is concerned with what shall be done when it comes to an organisation envisioning and developing the necessary procedures and operations to achieve their future.[39] Mintzberg[40] is of the opinion that there is no system, technique or programme that can help with the planning process. The only necessary competency is 'sharp minds in touch with the situation'. He intimates that the best thing planners can do is to stimulate others to *think* strategically, and that the real art of planning has to do with the ability to detect what he calls discontinuities. Kenichi Ohmae[41] contends that 'successful business strategies result not from rigorous analysis but from a particular state of mind'. He refers to the mind of the strategist and allows that the analytical and operational roles of managers are necessary but they must also have a sense of mission, and be creative and intuitive. In other words, a strategic leader is both operational and creative.

The concept of strategic thinking is only now obtaining some status, perhaps spurred by the enormous interest in the 'learning organisation'.[42] It is recognised as a prerequisite for planning activities within an organisation and is an important characteristic of managers. Prahalad and Hamel[43] have stated that strategic thinking must be a core competency of an organisation, requiring that managers develop strategic insights to guide the company. Christensen[44] asserts that strategic thinking tends to be lacking as a managerial core competency in organisations that find it difficult to change strategy. Chakravarthy and Lorange[45] list nurturing strategic thinking as a critical element of top management when it comes to successful strategic processes.

Janis[46] outlines steps that he says characterise a vigilant problem-solving approach to decision making: describing the threat or opportunity, formulating the problem, using information resources, analysing and reformulating, evaluating and selecting and so on. These steps form a descriptive model of what Janis says executives are capable of doing when they are trying to make the best decisions possible. They are reflected in Mintzberg's[47] seven routines of the steps involved in strategic decision making: recognition, diagnosis, search, design, screening, evaluation/choice and authorisation, with the diagnostic step being the most important. Hayes[48] says managers must be able to think strategically in order to:

— understand the appropriate external environment
— understand the capabilities and objectives of the organisation
— understand the connections between loosely connected events
— recognise several influencers
— sense new opportunities
— see a number of strategies or solutions.

Dulewicz and Herbert[49] studied the career progress of general managers over a period of seven years to identify those competencies and personality characteristics that are associated with current success and rate of advance-

ment. They identified what they call supra–competencies, 12 independent higher–order factors for measuring success as a manager, including strategic perspective. A strategic perspective was defined as the ability to see broader issues and implications, taking into account issues both inside and outside the organisation before planning or acting. Zabriskie and Huellmantel[50] developed a six-step model for strategic leaders, which they contend is a blueprint for thinking strategically. A strong component of this model is successfully establishing a relationship with an organisation's external environment in terms of, among other things, expected changes, strategic issues caused by changes, projected scenarios, new opportunities and threats, formulating strategy responses, and creating operational plans. Additionally, they say strategic leaders employ futures thinking, ie 'an orientation to the future and being ready for tomorrow's . . . opportunities'. Campbell[51] suggests that Mintzberg's argument that the ability to see the future, what Mintzberg calls intuition, is actually being visionary.

Schilit[52] examined the factors that are important in the process of upward influence between middle-level managers and their superiors in a number of strategic decisions in an organisation. He found that the most often mentioned method of upward influence was the ability to present ideas logically through rational or persuasive argument. It could be argued that this compares to Zabriskie and Huellmantel's description of a strategic leader. Finally, Vaghefi and Huellmantel[53] found that at the leadership level of senior manager, defined as directors, vice presidents and executive vice presidents, among others, 70 per cent of the skills needed were strategic, conceptual and entrepreneurial. They defined these as strategic thinking, scenario planning and issues management. Table 1 provides a summary of the characterisation of strategic thinking by the authors presented above.

Strategic thinkers appear to be people who are both creative and analytical/logical. Creativity is required because of the need to be futures-oriented, to make or create scenarios based on today's view of the world and possible

Table 1: Characteristics of strategic decision making/strategic thinking by author

| Author	Characterisation of strategic thinking
Mintzberg (1976)	Seven steps
Ohmae (1982)	A state of mind
Mintzberg (1989)	Sharp minds in touch with the situation
Janis (1989, 1992)	Vigilant problem solving
Senge (1990)	Learning organisation
Prahalad and Hamel (1990)	Core competency
Quinn (1991)	Prerequisite for planning activities
Zabriskie and Huellmantel (1991)	Six-step model for strategic leaders
Schilit (1993)	Necessary for upward movement
Dulewicz and Herbert (1996)	Factor for measuring success of managers
Christensen (1997)	Lacking in organisations that find it difficult to change
Vaghefi and Huellmantel (1998)	Skill needed for senior management

futures. Analysis is required to make sensible and logical extrapolations and to present them in a readable and understandable manner. It also seems that being able to think strategically is a primary requisite for being able to perform at the highest levels of an organisation. The ability to create 'sanity' out of an often unpredictable environment by making decisions that are complex and have a huge impact on the organisation appears to be a key characteristic of managers who are part of the dominant coalition. As pointed out by Belardo and Harrald,[54] the more complex the environment organisations find themselves in, the more they must be decision- as opposed to process-focused. This is particularly true for the decision-making abilities required for being future-oriented.

CONCEPTUALISING STRATEGIC THINKING

The concept of strategic thinking is a difficult abstraction. It is a generally acknowledged concept but one that many view or perceive in different ways. There are, however, a number of models that reflect, and are recognised as being employed by, organisations that are proactive or futures-oriented. They all deal with detecting and analysing issues, selecting courses of action, and evaluating outcomes. They thus mirror the processes that represent a strategic way of thinking. They are all also systems models in that they imply iterative processes that occur continually within organisations as they seek to survive in rapidly changing environments. Analysis of these models can provide the basis for identifying assumptions that underlie visible quantifiers of strategic thinking. These models include issues management,[55] strategic issues management,[56] integrated strategic planning systems,[57] and issues life cycles and planning and issues life cycles.[58] From these models three major attributes associated with strategic thinking are identified. These are using

Figure 3: Conceptualisation of attributes associated with strategic thinking.
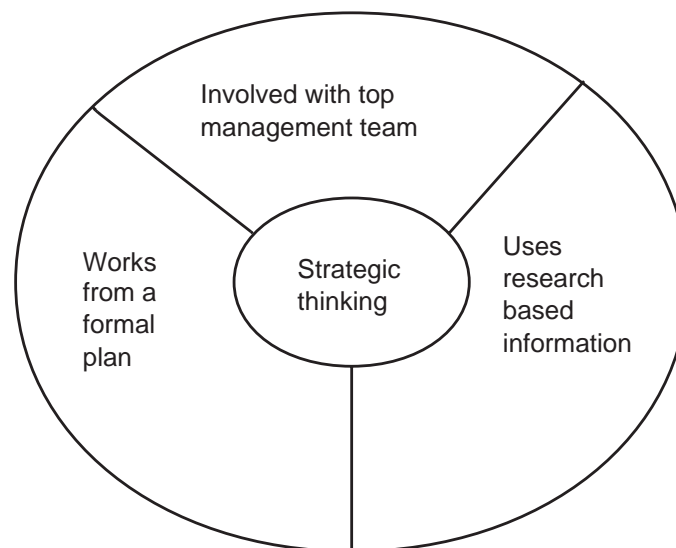
research-based information, working with a plan and being involved with top management (Figure 3).

Research-based information

Information gathering, also referred to as environmental scanning, concerns the collection of information from within and without the organisation.[59] It is a means of identifying sources of opportunities and threats using a variety of methods.[60] It is generally agreed that this activity is a key component of strategic processes, as the acquisition of information is a major organisational effort. The importance of tracking issues and the methods and sources of gathering information (arguably issues management and environmental scanning) are also a source of power:

'When there is no reliable alternative for assessing a decision-maker's knowledge, visible aspects of information gathering and storage are used as implicit measures of the quality of information possessed and use. For example, being the first to have information and having more and different information indicate the proximity of an individual or organization to important information sources.

'Similarly, the resources expended on gathering, processing, and displaying information indicate the quantity and quality of information an individual or organization is likely to have. Displaying information and being able to explain decisions or ideas in terms of information indicate an ability to use information easily and appropriately.'[61]

Furthermore, scanning is positively associated with participating in management decision making and being a member of the top management team.[62] Cutlip et al. conclude that scan-

ning actively for information to be used in decision making is a prerequisite to being 'invited to the management table'.[63] Gayeski[64] believes that for PR managers to have an impact they need to be continually engaged in scanning the environment. Dozier found that PR practitioners who operate in a technical role do not necessarily do any scanning at all, while managers use both scientific and informal approaches to scanning.[65] He further proposed that PR practitioners' involvement in decision making is a separate function of the manager role and of the practitioner's use of research.

Working from a plan

Managerial planning normally takes the form of strategic or tactical plans.[66] Strategic plans are long range and are usually made by upper management, while tactical plans are specific operational instructions on how things should be done. As stated earlier, strategic planning is concerned with what shall be done when it comes to an organisation envisioning and developing the necessary procedures and operations to achieve their future.[67] The existence of a plan is recognised as an essential management tool. White and Dozier[68] found that when PR managers are able to put their findings into the local, idiosyncratic language/coding schemes they are able to provide other members of upper management with the tools necessary for developing strategy. Therefore it is possible to conclude that operating from a plan is an indication of strategic behaviour.

One example of this is the area of crisis management. The reputations of many organisations suffer because they have not responded properly to a crisis. It is here that strategic planning is invaluable. Cutlip et al. advise that suc-

cessful handling of crises requires antici-pating possible scenarios, planning how to respond to these scenarios, recognis-ing early stages of a possible crisis and responding immediately as part of a systematic crisis management plan.[69] Baskin *et al.* find that the key to crisis public relations is having an up-to-date workable crisis plan and taking positive action.[70] Fortune 500 companies tend to have crisis plans in place, according to research from 1993, and nearly half of those who did not have a plan were developing one.[71] The ability to carry out the steps necessary in creating a crisis plan is critical.

Member of top management team

According to Grunig,[72] the role of public relations managers in the deci-sion-making process is to be communi-cators, and as members of the dominant coalition they can perform a two-way function; communicating sta-keholder views to senior managers and vice versa. They also communicate to other managers the consequences of decisions based on their knowledge of how various stakeholder groups react to certain issues. This special boundary-spanning role between organisation and environment demands input into the strategic decision-making process at the highest level. Grunig[73] acknowledges that professionals who want to have an influence on strategic decisions have more effect if they are part of the dominant coalition than if they are operating as technicians. Dozier[74] believes that if corporate communica-tors are truly to help an organisation adapt to change in its environment they *must* participate in the strategic decision-making process, not merely implement decisions made by others.

Using these constructs as measure-ments of strategic thinking, Brønn[75]

was able to map senior public relations managers' beliefs regarding what she refers to as espoused strategic orienta-tion and perceived strategic orientation in use. The quantitative methodology of conjoint analysis was used to mea-sure whether or not the managers pre-ferred to use the constructs in a crisis situation. It also measured how impor-tant they found each construct. Key was finding those managers who believed using the constructs was the best way to handle crisis planning and who also believed that the constructs were equally important. Very few managers found the constructs to be equally important. In a few cases, man-agers found involvement with top management to be the only important construct. About 26 per cent of the managers believed that employing the above constructs was the best way to proceed and that the constructs were equally important. Using these criteria, these managers were defined as espous-ing a strategic orientation.

Similarly, only about 17 per cent believed that they were actually employing the constructs when dealing with crises and that they found them equally important. These managers were defined as employing a strategic orientation. Further research on a very small sample, using a self- and peer assessment paralleling the constructs in the conjoint analysis along with partici-pant observation, found that public relations managers do not perceive themselves, nor are they perceived, as having very much more than average competencies that would allow them to participate in strategic decision making. Some of this research is reported in Brønn and Olson.[76]

It is necessary to take the planning models discussed earlier and study their components to see what managers

must learn to implement them. Both issues management and environmental scanning have an extensive literature, much of it of the 'how-to' nature. Furthermore, stakeholder analysis is a growing area and tools for conducting it have existed for some years. It has been recognised as part of the public relations literature for a number of years, but managers need to carry it out. The practitioner community should insist that their membership organisations, which often arrange conferences and seminars, have courses and seminars that address strategically oriented not tactician-oriented subjects.

CONCLUSION

In his study of practitioners' roles Dozier addresses the measurements of strategic thinking identified here.[77] For example, he proposes that those who enact the manager role, as opposed to the technician (operational) role, engage in social scientific research, informal evaluation (individualistic, subjective techniques) and environmental scanning more often than those not enacting the manager's role. Theaker,[78] however, asks 'Has anything really changed?' She still sees media relations forming the bulk of senior public relations executives' work in spite of what she calls the growing concerns of the use of strategic planning, issues management and evaluation. As pointed out by Grunig, in spite of all of the normative theory regarding what he refers to as 'excellent practices', public relations managers usually are not perceived as strategic managers.[79]

Vaghefi and Huelmantell suggest that 70 per cent of the skills necessary for upper managers include strategic thinking.[80] According to Hamel, the need for strategic thinking has never been as great as in today's turbulent times.[81] It appears that those responsible for communicating with an organisation's stakeholders, those who are in natural boundary-spanning positions and who have their fingers on the pulse of what is happening in society, need to play a major role in strategy innovation.

Research indicates that public relations managers are aware of the steps needed to become more strategic.[82] They believe that public relations education needs changing, that the profession needs to be redefined, and that public relations should be recognised as a management discipline. Perhaps it is time to move away from the constant focus on role enactment and start looking at individual competencies.

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