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# Revisiting the Personal Influence Model as an Ethical Standard in Public Relations Theory and Practice

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REVISITING THE PERSONAL INFLUENCE MODEL AS AN  
ETHICAL STANDARD IN PUBLIC RELATIONS  
THEORY AND PRACTICE

by

Rita Somfai

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Communications

Department of Communications

Brigham Young University

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

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This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

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As chair of the candidate's graduate committee, I have read the thesis of Rita Somfai in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements; (2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Revisiting the Personal Influence Model as an Ethical Standard in Public Relations

Theory and Practice

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Master of Arts

This thesis attempts to better understand the importance and application of the personal influence model in relationship building between organizations and public decision makers. The personal influence model was added by Sriramesh and Grunig (1992) as a potential fifth model to Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four models of public relations practice (as cited by Grunig in Heath, 2007); however, this essential relationship building approach has not been examined in the public relations literature as it could have been. Scholarly research since the addition of the personal influence model has mostly occurred in Asia and India. Studies on the topic have been published in just a few instances in the United States. Furthermore, the studies have largely focused on internal communication or on exclusively domestic contexts, with no attempts to extend the examination to organizations that necessarily practice relationship building across national boundaries.

This study seeks to contribute to the public relations literature based on the personal influence model by examining the practice of this model outside of Asia, in a global, non-profit religious organization that is headquartered in the United States, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (hereafter referred to as LDS Church). For three decades this global organization has implemented and emphasized the building and nourishing of one-on-one relationships with civic leaders and key decision makers across nations. This research will also examine the impact of such practices.

The method chosen for this study is a qualitative exploration through personal interviews with ten public affairs practitioners of the organization, from both domestic and international arenas. The practitioners of this entity have accumulated decades of combined experiences in cultivating the personal influence model.

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## **Introduction**

Years ago a prominent leader of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (hereafter referred to as the LDS Church), Todd Christofferson (1997) stated,

Personal relationships are and always will be a key to public affairs success in the worldwide [LDS] Church... It may be the relationship with the president or chief magistrate of a nation, or with a functionary at the very lowest level of government processes. It may be a high Church authority on official business or simply a member without title interacting with his neighbor... Whatever the setting or the players, much of our progress in our mission will depend upon personal relationships... Whether it be the president of a country or the clerk of the court, we need them as friends, and we want them to know us as true friends. (p. 4).

This essential, yet not unique or unknown, approach to relationship building theory and practice is key towards establishing and maintaining a flourishing, mutually beneficial relationship between organizations and key decision makers. One of the many aspects of the worldwide growth of the LDS Church lies in building one-on-one relationships between the leadership of the organization and influential decision makers around the world. For decades now the public affairs division has emphasized the importance and urgency in establishing mutually beneficial relationships with influential leaders of various nations.

Historically, the headquarters of the LDS Church had been established in Salt Lake City, Utah, but The Public Affairs Department, for many years, has sought out ways

to establish and maintain advantageous personal relations with almost all parts of the world, regardless of cultural, language, historical, or political and economic background.

The majority of LDS church members as well as its leaders live outside of the United States in various sizes of local congregations called wards and stakes, staffed by mainly local leadership. The continued emphasis of The Public Affairs Department to build one-on-one relations with prominent government, business and civic leaders has enabled much of the fundamental success and the growth over the years that have resulted in an increased respect and recognition of the LDS Church. Although many of these relationships may begin with incidental acquaintances, they are focused primarily on getting to know the *person* with a genuine intent instead of focusing solely on the goals or agenda of the organization. This approach has planted the seeds of friendship and trust in the hearts of those worldwide leaders who are unfamiliar with the LDS Church and its operations. In numerous occasions, the development of trust within these individuals gradually resulted in a positive influence in perception towards the LDS Church and its members. Consequently many of these leaders were able to pledge their support and loyalty to the organization based on their experiences and friendships.

The personal influence model developed by Sriramesh in 1988 and later expanded by Grunig (1991) has not been researched in the international arena but mainly in societies of Asia and India, where the personal influence model has been a prevalent, long term, and effective practice (Sriramesh & Grunig, 1992). Though an understanding of the research behind the theory of personal influence and its application has enormous potential, there have been only a few case studies to investigate its claims since its development. Some of the personal influence literature that has been published over the

years mainly emphasizes the contribution of personal influence in cultures and nations where the social hierarchy and collectivist nature of societies differ considerably from the highly competitive and individualistic practices of western states.

This research claims that the personal influence model can not only significantly aid the reinstatement of the origins and fundamentals of public relations, but by emphasizing one-on-one interaction between practitioners and key decision makers, impact the global perception and outcome of organizational operations. This research seeks to examine how the personal influence model contributes to the ethical practice of public relations and examines the premises of the model through the example of LDS public affairs as personal influence is applied for the successful growth and reputation of the organization worldwide. Additionally, it further seeks to discover in what ways individual practitioners of LDS public affairs have contributed to this practice.

The fundamental principles of the ethical practice of public relations are founded on individual accountability and inherently spring from applied personal characteristics. Such interpersonal relationships by nature involve a mutual disclosure of personal dispositions, attitudes, integrity, and influential personality traits between interacting parties. Through examining the efforts and opinion of LDS public affairs practitioners who incorporate the personal influence model in their activities, this study further provides a case for utilizing this model in the public relations practices of other worldwide organizations. This study also explains why this practice has been and continues to be not only effective but also the most ethical professional approach towards international public relations and perhaps the single most effective way to build relationships.

The main research questions of my study seek to find answers to whether 1) the personal influence model is applicable to the public relations practices outside of Asia and India, and 2) whether it can be ethically practiced in western societies. Finally, it seeks to conclude 3) how personal influence can operate within an ethical framework in the international/cross-cultural arena.

The significance of conducting this research was 1) the initial recognition of the impact one-on-one relationships as they are built between LDS public affairs practitioners and high profile leaders of various nations, 2) and the contribution of such personal relationships in terms of the public perception of the LDS Church globally. The initial interest began with a practical and personal exploration of the public affairs efforts of the LDS Church, and firsthand witnessing practitioners developing such personal relationships with distinguished leaders of nations, governments and civic organizations.

The further significance of this study lies in the scarcity of theoretical writings and research on personal influence within the United States, which served as a catalyst to begin writing this thesis. An added drive for completing the study arose from personally witnessing the public affairs outreach of an organization like the LDS Church without its having a conscious and driven strategy toward building one-on-one friendships with leaders of nations.

## **Literature Review**

### *Historical Overview of the Aim of Public Relations*

Grunig and Hunt (1984) defined public relations as a management function that conducts research about an organization and its publics with a goal to “identify, establish and maintain mutually beneficial relationships through communication” (Stacks, 2002, p. 18). As Stacks (2002) continued, public relations is about more than communication; its goal is to create and sustain relations with key publics based on mutual interest, understanding, and trust. Relationships, however, are not solely built on communication, not even two-way communication; sometimes “accommodation, or negotiation, or even compromise is required” (Stacks, 2002, p. 33). Stacks (2002) explained that at times organizations have to change their performance, behavior or products and policies in order to keep their relationship alive. Hickson (2002) defined the public relations profession as “management of credibility” (p. 19). Grunig and White (1992) stated that through establishing key relationships, “excellent organizations realize that they can get more of what they want by giving publics some of what they want” (p. 46).

Many early public relations practitioners assumed that favorable press relations would enhance positive organizational perception and image among key publics (Bruning & Ledingham, 2000, p. 86). Consequently, up until a couple of decades ago, public relations has been generally practiced through mass mediated communication, although scholars like Grunig (1992) in his study on excellence in public relations have encouraged an increased emphasis on the behavioral outcomes of public relations practices instead of establishing symbolic relationships through information dissemination.

Today multinational corporations have increased their ability to reach millions through technology and various media outlets by applying mass communication, even though this approach inevitably created numerous limitations in the two-way organization/public dialogue. Bernay's persuasion model has developed and remained in public relations practices until this day and has been defined as a one-way transmission process focusing on message outputs rather than behavioral outcomes (Hazelton & Botan, 2006). This process of reaching mass audiences, however, rarely engages organizations in two-way communication practices. Rather, it applies transference of salience to publics without sufficient audience feedback or instigated public conversation. As a result, the outcome of this approach on relationship building with publics is significantly diminished.

As Derville (2008) noted, there is but a small foundation of scholarly research about personal relationships between organizations and publics and about the outcomes of strong personal relationships, especially in the United States. In the following chapters we will look at the development of the four fundamental communication models of public relations and how these approaches broke the ground for the beginnings of the personal influence model.

#### *Development of the Personal Influence Model*

Historically, the main aim of public relations was to create a bridge between organizations and their audiences through personal communication to build trust, reputation, and an effective, mutually beneficial support system. Grunig and Hunt (1984) defined the profession as "the management of communication between organization and



its publics” (p. 194). Ehling (1992) highlighted that relationship “should be the unifying concept of public relations” (p. 622).

Despite such historical foundations, many practitioners today primarily rely on one-way mass mediated communication, or too often allow the practice to be transformed into a *marketing support* function. Thus, the underlying notion of relationship building with publics gradually has been transforming or even unfortunately, disappearing. Influential organizations target publics with primarily one-way persuasive messages without touching the roots of a mutual consumer understanding, conversation and consideration of benefits, feedback, and regular follow-up.

Grunig and Hunt (1984) were the first to identify the four models of public relations. The first specialists to practice public relations were the press agents. These agents applied the *press agency/publicity* model with one-way information dissemination to mass audiences. Shortly after, leaders of organizations recognized the need for a reaction to the attacks of journalists on large organizations, thus, the *public information model*, as a second model of public relations, was developed (Grunig, 2001). Organizations hired their own journalists to write handouts explaining their actions that represented generally truthful and accurate reports. Although news content was more monitored, the communication was still one-way dissemination of information to publics (Grunig, 2001). Following World War II the rise in consumer products created an increase in the need for targeted communication and marketing strategies.

The two-way asymmetrical model was followed by the two-way symmetrical model. Practitioners began using research to get inside the heads of consumers and to help fashion the sell messages. The two-way asymmetrical and symmetrical models

apply communication to negotiate, resolve conflict, and promote mutual respect between the organization and its publics, but they do not necessarily build on interpersonal communication to learn of personalized consumer behavior and attitude.

The two-way asymmetrical model, particularly, uses research to know what the public is thinking, and often reverts to the traditional information dissemination to manipulate publics into doing what the organization desire. Grunig and Hunt (1984) argued for the need of a *proactive* public relations practice that calls for a deeper level of sensitivity between the parties. Consequently, organizational messages must be communicated in a way that builds steady and consistent bridges between senders and receivers. Through one-on-one interaction with publics, organizations will not only gain sufficient knowledge of the organizational values and mission of their target publics, but can also connect with the organization on a much more personal level (Creedon, 1991).

Many scholars have recognized and argued for organizational messages that are communicated face-to-face and suggested that they have a strong bridge-building appeal between the parties and long-lasting impacts in the cooperation and relationship between organizations and publics. Interpersonal communication may be viewed, as the next layer on top of the two-way symmetrical communication model, for it clearly defines the *'how'* of the relationship building process between message senders and receivers and attaches *faces* to the conversation. And yet, personal influence reaches even beyond this capacity by allowing senders and receivers not only to receive, interpret and respond to organizational messages but to convey personal identities, emotions, attitudes, behaviors and individual characters into the conversation and the relationship forming process.

The personal influence model was an additional fifth element to the four fundamental public relations models discussed earlier and was discovered in the late 80's by Krishnamurthy Sriramesh (1992), and then theoretically developed in the early 90's by James Grunig (1991).

This fifth model was defined by Falconi, White, Lorenzon and Johnson (2009) as “individual influence based on attributes and status of individuals; a dimension of relationship management that is based on relational activities; finally he stated that personal influence is a model of public relations found primarily in Asian cultures, indicating that public relations models may vary based on cultural determinants” (p. 2). He continued that personal influence results from *traits* or *attributes* of an individual which notion is grounded in the disciplines of social psychology and interpersonal communication (Falconi, White, Lorenzon & Johnson, 2009, p. 2).

According to Toth (2007), the core of personal influence is found in interpersonal communication and suggested that the public influence model of public relations could be more aptly called the “individual influence model” since the power of personal influence lies in the status, trustworthiness, and credibility of a person (Falconi, White, Lorenzon & Johnson, 2009, p. 3). Similarly, Sriramesh (2007) suggested that interpersonal communication theories have to be revisited first in order to understand this fifth, extended communication model of public relations.

#### *Interpersonal Communication Framework*

Rhee (2001) noted that interpersonal communication is recognized among communication scholars as a fundamental component of public relations practice. He further stated that face-to-face communication methods are preferably applied to develop

personal relationships “with key individuals in the media, government, or political and activist groups” (p. 104). Grunig (2001) noted that “only the unsophisticated public relations practitioner would try to communicate with active publics through the mass media” (Rhee, 2001, p. 105).

Toth (2007) also pointed out that research exploring interpersonal communication processes in public relations has been scarce. She suggested that “public relations should be focused on interpersonal communication, in which the public serves as the bridge between an organization and its publics” (Toth, 2007, p. 446). Toth also emphasized the long-term perspective, in a sense of responding to how public relations should utilize interpersonal relationships. This idea well corresponds with Grunig’s (1992) point of advocating interpersonal relationships in public relations in order to build long-term and quality relations. Bruning and Ledingham (2001) similarly argued that the manner the “public perceives an established relationship with the organization” has a significant impact on the level of consumer satisfaction (p. 86).

Coombs (2001) argued that interpersonal communication has exceptional values, and qualities for clarifying the discussion and building understanding, which attributes are not as distinctly recognized in mass mediated communication (p. 106). He further stated that interpersonal communication differs from mediated communication by providing the opportunity for “immediate behavioral observation of others”, such as facial expressions, vocal tones, emotional state and prompt feedback, and reactions between communicators (p. 106). Grunig’s two-way symmetrical communication model practitioners adopted a wide range of interpersonal communication strategies for the development of organization and public relationships (Rhee, 2001, p. 104). According to

this model, it is the responsibility of practitioners to develop a communication plan to manage differences of opinion and improve understanding with their publics (Rhee, 2001, p. 105). The main aim of practitioners should not be the *persuasion* of publics but rather to help them to identify with organizational messages through personalized communication. Understanding, rather than persuasion, is the core concept or principle objective of public relations (Rhee, 2001, p. 104). Grunig (2001) recognized relationships as patterns of interactions, transactions, exchange and a clear linkage between the organization and its publics. He further argued that it begins when there are consequences created by an organization that affects publics, or when behaviors of the publics have consequences on the organization (Hung, 2007, p. 444).

Coombs (2001), all throughout his scholarly research, invited the profession to inquire of itself how practitioners can improve already existing communication theories and develop these theories to be more functional (p. 107). He suggested that the field of public relations has only a few theories to build the practice on and many of these theories have been drawn from mass communication. Grunig (2001) defined effective public relations as a type of practice that “attempts to balance the interests of client organizations with those of publics they affect” (p. 12). Grunig (2007) conceptualized this organization-public relationship by emphasizing the organization’s intent and willingness to initiate changes, in contrast to merely trying to change the cognitions, attitudes, or behaviors of the publics (as cited by Huang, 2007).

Essentially, public relations professionals have to seek opportunities for interpersonal communication with their target audiences and strive to understand them by researching their history, culture, communication, and protocol practices. Once the

historical and social background is understood, publics need to be approached with the purpose of establishing connecting points in due time to mature into mutually reliable relationships. Grunig (2001) argued, however, that this type of initiative should not be primarily directed to organizational aims but rather focus on establishing *common ground* with the hope of mutual and constantly unfolding interests.

### *Personal Influence Framework*

All relationships must be cultivated, evaluated, and followed-up in order to establish long-term and quality associations. As the previous chapter noted, it is equally important that personal relationships build on a common base of interpersonal communication. Once two-way communication is set in motion, relationships begin to “escalate”, resulting in constantly increasing processes throughout which each stage of development derives from the previous one (Hung, 2007, p. 454). Dozier and Repper (1992) argued that dissemination of information can help opinion formulation, but it rarely changes the behavior of a person or a group. “The linkage between messages and behavior is not direct, straight-forward, uniformly consistent or powerful” (p. 189). What is the missing link then? Perhaps it is the *personal touch*.

A late leader of the LDS Church, David O. McKay, noted that every person radiates a certain influence:

There is one responsibility that no man can evade. That is the responsibility of personal influence. The effect of your words and acts is tremendous in this world. Every moment of life you are changing to a degree the life of the whole world. Every man or woman has an atmosphere or a radiation that is affecting every person in the world. You cannot escape it. Into the hands of every individual is

given a marvelous power for good or for evil. Man cannot escape for one moment the radiation of his character. You will select the qualities that you will permit to be radiated (as cited by Manscill, Freeman & Wright, 2008, p. 243).

This *personal radiation* or atmosphere often explains a lot more, much faster and more effectively about someone than directly witnessing of a person's words or actions would. Based on the initial stages of opinion formulation, other influential elements can also impact how the quality of a relationship is evaluated in terms of outcome and the perception of the organization. Hung (2007) highlighted that in order to understand how to successfully manage relationships, it is vital to look beyond the perception and "examine the context of the relationship" (Hung, 2007, p. 450).

Hung (2007) described relationship building approaches as based on personal integrity, trust, a two-way symmetrical dialogue, positiveness, legitimacy, mutual sharing of tasks, ethical communication without manipulation, persuasion, and openness (p. 450). Hung argued that in order for organizations to build "solid, win-win relationships with publics", they must listen to public concerns, garner public support, and facilitate public opinions into the organizational decision making process so that they may be recognized as organizations which safeguard public interests (p. 469). This pursuit is not a one-time assignment, but requires persistence, cultivation, and a long-term commitment.

Montgomery and Baxter (1998) described personal relationships as interpersonal autonomy, connection and openness, and at the same time closeness. Hung (2007) pointed out how people in relationships experience an interaction differently and perceive the other person differently in this light; thus, they act and react and the relationship shapes and reshapes accordingly.

The motivation behind continuing the practice of one-way, mass mediated communication and the spending of millions to support persuasive and often manipulative messages then, is debatable. This question is especially critical knowing that the trustworthiness and reputation of the professional field has been long doubted by publics.

As a theoretical frame for the personal influence model, Grunig (2001) identified the applied communication strategies as *cultivation strategies*; and he stated that these strategies are mostly drawn from interpersonal communication and conflict resolution theories. According to Hung (2007), “cultivation” of relationships indicates development and defined communication not merely as constant but as progressing toward long-term and improved associations (p. 459). Perhaps one of the stumbling blocks of the profession is to continue to define relationships as a management function, instead of a cultivation approach. Hutton (2001) argued that the process of managing an organization’s reputation can be in the hands of the management, but the outcome certainly will be determined by those impacted. As Grunig (2001) put it, “it is possible to manage processes but not the outcomes” (p. 14). Along with that, Hon (2007) indicated that an important indicator of measuring organizational success is by examining the *outcome* of well-established relationships. Thus, not only the establishment and cultivation of these relationships are essential, but they also are important towards measuring impacts on organizational success and establishing the benefits of strong personal relationships.



### *Personal Influence and the Notion of Face-work*

In order to successfully cultivate the development of public relationships with key publics around the world, the organization must maintain a representative image or face. Coombs (2001) described this process as a practitioner's endeavor to create a meaningful bond with the public. He suggested that this personification process results in a greater understanding and appreciation of the aims of the organization; mostly it reaches the desired effect. He further added that face-to-face communication allows the organization to dispel any vague or undefined aspects of its nature. As soon as the public attaches a face to the organization, the organization will bestow new meaning upon the mindset of its audience. Even more so, this *enfacing*, or as Huang (2000) defined it or *face-work* process helps to eliminate past perceptions and misconceptions that are the potential initiators of most speculations (p. 223).

Therefore, the research of Coombs (2001) indicated that cultivating *face-work* can result in positive and effective relationships. For instance, global organizations, such as Microsoft, can provide an excellent example of the face-work notion, as well as political spheres (p. 110). Bill Gates has inevitably grown in popularity to capture the face of Microsoft. Also, during the 2008 U.S. presidential elections, for many voters President Barack Obama has become the face of a *new hope* in America. In both cases publics attached faces to organizational or political operations and ideals that provided them with the opportunity for personal identification with these entities. Publics can easily build ties with these representative faces, which they would be incapable of doing with impersonal entities. Inarguably, Bill Gates has added his personality, achievements, expertise, style, character, identity and emotions, in other words the *human touch* into his

public associations on behalf of Microsoft. This is where the formation or alteration of opinions, attitudes and behaviors begins. This phenomenon can occur in any organization where people naturally seek to overcome the influences of impersonal operations and messages. In addition, the human touch has the potential to transform any nameless, faceless ideas into persons with identity, charm, and character, as well as create connections, trust, and direct involvement that help publics better connect with organizations.

As practitioners represent the organizational mission by becoming the *face* of the organization, the organizational image becomes their *face* in the eyes of the public. As discussed earlier the reinstatement of the *personal touch* in the relationships building practices in the U.S. could eliminate the marketing and advertising umbrella that is generally overshadowing the public relations field today. Inarguably, the personal touch used by organizations is stronger and more effective in building trust and long-term commitments among publics, than only the one-way impersonal dissemination of information.

Kent and Taylor (1999) suggested that public relations professionals who understand the importance of personal influence are able to recruit highly influential individuals to help with public relations efforts and seek out individuals with ties to target publics. In order to gain access to these highly influential individuals, Dozier and Repper (1992) defined publics as a collection of regular citizens who have banded together in a common cause and who can exert power to influence the fate of organization. Sriramesh (1996) argued that personal influence has often been seen as a “pervasive public relations technique,” but personal relationships with key decision makers again need to be

recognized and incorporated into public relations strategy rather than exerting one-way mediated public influence (p. 175). Grunig (2001) further argued that in order to remain ethical in practicing international public relations; organizations must commit to research about the needs of key publics and rather invest in personified community sustaining and development than mass-media campaigns (p. 21).

Schriner (2008) stated that at a professional level personal influence equals social networking. Sriramesh (2007) suggested that public relations practitioners not only exchange information, but gifts, favors and personalized interactions as well. He further observed that these social connections and interpersonal relationships have carried into broader influence and wider circles of social structures influencing public opinion, agenda, attitudes and collective behaviors and social norms (Sriramesh, 2007).

Interestingly, in the center of these established networks are the decision makers or key influentials, who not only help the flow of social networking and exchange of information, but they can also become the face of the organizations in public. They not only uphold organizational values but personal reputation as well. These individuals stand out in a sense from other organizational members with their personality and skill set to become spokespersons that are more influential bridging management, key publics and individuals. Huitt (2006) described these social professionalized interactions participants influencing each other with behavioral, personal and environmental factors. The character traits of practitioners—whether these professionals come from a position of influence and leadership or not—must include a winning charisma that can further guarantee the success of applying personal influence in relationships.

### *Ethical Framework: Main Objectives of Applying Personal Influence*

Hutton (2001) stated that as organizations convey mass mediated messages to their publics, often promises are made without being kept, which ultimately led up to the reduced credibility of public relations practice. Based on the considerable amount of personal involvement in applied personal influence, this approach prompts and promotes promises to be kept and followed up between organization and its key publics. This relationship building method based on reliability and trust indisputably results in greater accountability from organizational representatives who do not want to suffer the enormous risk of losing face before key publics who can blame a *faceless* organization if things go wrong.

In order to further and more thoroughly understand the personal influence model, it is vital to examine the involvement of the *persona* in efforts toward relationship building. As Nielsen (2006) explained public relations has a reputation of putting a spin on messages to create favorable opinion of organizational pursuits, when in reality some of them are “sinking ships” (p. 4). His research raises the concern of who is to be held accountable in uncertain situations, management or the practitioners whose job it is to save such sinking ships. In either case, personal reputation is tied to the organizational outcomes. This is no different when considering personal influence. Organizational outcomes often affect individual reputations, and practitioners want to avoid damaging their own personal reputation or compromise their integrity in their professional activities.

Some organizations may view the personal influence model as a potential risk of *perceived integrity* of the individual as well as the organization. Organizational values

can often vary from personal beliefs, traditions and convictions. Sometimes people may not feel as comfortable to place their personal reputation at risk for representing an organizational strategy contrary to their own beliefs. Some practitioners may even find it challenging to become the face of an organization to represent certain values and programs not aligned with their personal preferences.

According to Hanson (2008), ethics derive from the ancient Greek culture, discussing the rational way to decide what is good for individuals or society. Morals, on the other hand, refer to a “religious or philosophical code of behavior” that may or may not be rational (Hanson, 2008, p. 462). Hanson (2008) stated that moral decisions depend on the values held by a particular individual, but an ethical decision should be explainable to others in a way that they will appreciate, regardless of whether they agree or not. Ethics, therefore, consists of ways in which we make choices between competing moral principles.

Stacks (2002) defined ethics as ethical codes that society lives by in everyday interactions, or universally accepted regulations of conduct and behavior. These codes of conduct have an enforcement nature, especially in occupations where professionals have to be licensed in order to operate. As a result of these licenses any unethical conduct can be punished by the law (Stacks, 2002). This is not the case with public relations practices, however; organizations may publicly condemn unethical behavior without legally censuring such professionals in their practice.

The International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) developed the Code of Ethics for Professional Communicators and they based their principles on three essential elements: “the professional communication is legal, ethical and in good taste”

(Stacks, 2002, p. 73). Related to the research subject of personal influence, some articles state that professional communicators uphold the *credibility* and *dignity* of their profession by practicing honest and timely communication and fostering the free flow of essential information in accordance with public interest. Furthermore, disseminating correct information, correcting erroneous communication without delay, being sensitive to cultural values and beliefs and engaging in fair and balanced communication activities that foster mutual understanding. Moreover, IABC code of ethics encourages practitioners to refrain from any communication processes that the profession considers to be unethical. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the code of ethics states that communicators are honest not only with others but also and most importantly with themselves as individuals, for “a professional communicator seeks the truth and speaks the truth first to the self” (Stacks, 2002, p. 74).

In Asian cultures, where personal influence is routinely practiced, Wu (2005) argued that interpersonal communication skills have become the most important among practitioners, even beyond their writing abilities. Huang (2000) pointed out that Chinese culture is best described as “relation oriented” and “social oriented” (p. 224). Thus, in that case, there is a significant emphasis on social ties and specific characteristics follow this kind of disposition, such as social conformity, non-offensive strategy, and submission to social expectations, social acceptance, harmony maintenance and avoidance of rejection, conflict, and embarrassment (Huang, 2007, p. 224).

Hung (2007) also examined the functionality of the personal influence model through a case study in Taiwan based on the country’s political climate, societal culture, and economic background, and concluded that “relationships drive outcomes, not

perceptions” (p. 443). Anyone can revamp the image of a company, a message or a product to appear favorable in public eyes, but no one can counterfeit a positive and nurtured relationship (Hung, 2007).

Perhaps for the above reasons, unfortunately, the personal influence model has been claimed to be applicable and functional exclusively in Eastern cultures, such as Asia or India, given the cultural background of hierarchical structure of those societies. This is perhaps why this model has mainly been researched, tested and developed in that particular part of the world. Based on these attitudes towards social relationships, it is no wonder that most people in Asian societies define all their relationships as hierarchically centered and choose to interact with others accordingly (Huang, 2000). Therefore, most people take it as a serious responsibility to strive to satisfy the needs of each member in the hierarchical order. Sometimes, this demand supersedes the need to be transparent, a need that is readily recognized in western societies. This type of situation might regrettably create circumstances when trust, loyalty, reliability and overall ethical approaches are compromised.

Furthermore, the personal influence model has been challenged because in some Asian cultures where certain practitioners have used the model unethically in their personal relationship building initiatives. As an example to such unethical practice, Yudarwati’s (2008) research shed some light on such approach through the example of an Indonesian organization that made an attempt to reach out to and get to know community members through establishing personal friendships *under cover*. Her study revealed public relations officers who were assigned by top management to live in these communities and identify key decision makers, and cultural and religious leaders, all

while establishing informal and personal friendships with locals without exposing themselves as representatives of the company (Yudarwati, 2008).

While this example indicates that personal influence model can be practiced unethically, it is equally true that any model of public relations can be practiced unethically. Just as people have challenged the personal influence model, several scholars have questioned the ethics of both the one-way dissemination model typically practiced in the U.S. (Macnamara, 2006) and even J. Grunig's (1992) two-way symmetrical model (Stoker & Tusinski, 2006).

This being the case it is important for scholars to not just shed a spotlight on the possible unethical practices of the personal influence, but also look at the possibilities of the ethical practices of the model. This is particularly true when considering the connections scholars have made between personal relationship building and ethical public relations practice. My study addresses how this relationship building approach is an indeed ethical way of practicing public relations not only in Asia but in the western professional practices as well. Based on a genuine personal involvement of practitioners in building relationships with key publics, personal influence is often viewed as a potential contribution to accurately discerning organizational image. A sincere relationship built on face-to-face interaction and consistently nourished, will inevitably result in greater accountability, trustworthiness and respect between organizational representatives and publics as long as the relationship building efforts stay transparent. Publics will not only learn about the norms and mission of the organization through the organizational representatives, but also discern the intent, objectives, standards and norms of the organization based on the practitioner's interactions with them; their



conversation, their demeanor and the personable environment they create for the publics. While it is likely true that publics can more rapidly learn about organizational objectives from mass mediated messages, they also more likely will develop concerns about a faceless organization in terms of the credibility and dependability than by learning about it first hand through personal associations.

This study intended to reveal that the use of the personal influence model can make significant contributions to U.S. public relations practice. Additionally, it examined where personal influence can function and provide contribution in the cross-cultural arena as well.

#### *Cross-cultural Framework*

Taylor (2004) added a cultural variable to the definition of personal influence as she argued that the model is based on Hofstede's culturally based power distance theory. Taylor (2004) noted Hofstede's explanation regarding the low levels of trust in personal relationships deriving from the low level of tolerance of ambiguity and high level of uncertainty avoidance that most of the Eastern societies were characterized by for decades (p. 147). As a result, circle of friends and networks started to develop and such associations happened primarily through face-to-face communication so they could avoid uncertainty and to compensate for the low level of trust. Taylor (2004) in her research concluded that personal relationships could only become long-standing as they cultivate rich face-to-face communication and reciprocity, based on more trust instead of constraint by uncertainty avoidance (p. 147).

Kent and Taylor (1999) suggested that the personal influence model goes hand in hand with Hofstede's power distance theory as public relations is studied in cross-cultural

environments (Sriramesh & Grunig, 1992). Kent and Taylor (1999) argued that not only the cultural but political restraints can also alter the public relations landscape. Kent and Taylor (1999) argued that international public relations became government relations, especially in developing countries, where practitioners view and approach the practice as building government relations instead of community relations. Returning to the example of Asian nations, depending on the socioeconomic and political landscape, social status is the key determinant of public relations practices; these nations are characterized by Hofstede as high power distance nations, in which employees or subordinates are not willing to step over hierarchical boundaries, but rather stay submissive to management and key leaders for securing acceptance, peace and approval (Kent & Taylor, 1999).

Yudarwati (2008) reinforced the validity of Hofstede's power distance theory, according to which a communities' low trust results in high power distance due to collectivist instead of personal values among ethnic groups; the aim to build interpersonal relationships supports an increase of trust among these groups. Managers are assigned to specific fields to establish personal relationships with subgroups and smaller communities. Favorable relationships with key decision makers in governments and local offices decrease the occurrence of legal challenges as well as unfavorable media coverage.

#### *Additional Theories in Relation to Personal Influence*

In terms of outcome of personal relationships, Hung (2007) highlighted additional theories associated with personal influence such as the system and resource theories to understand how organizations and publics impact each other with their field specific behaviors. A study from India conducted by Sriramesh and Grunig (1992) noted that

personal relationship building between individuals cultivate the exchange or use of favors. In relation to the *social capital* and *exchange* theories, Grunig (2001) identified two types of relationships in public relations: *communal* and *exchange* relationships (p. 17). The first happens when benefits are provided in order to please the other party, and the giver does not expect the receiver to return the favor. An exchange relationship, however, suggests that the parties both benefit from one another's interaction and relationship, though it may happen in different times. In order to avoid abusing a positive, flourishing and long-term relationship, organizations must make sure that they refrain from exploitive and manipulative relationships. It seems harder to execute the first approach of Grunig (2001), namely, the communal relationship, because it is not based on mutual principles, but it is a single-sided approach. Mutual relationships, however, serve the best interest of both parties. They are concerned for the welfare of the other without return expectations.

Kim (2001) examined this field of measuring relationships from interpersonal dimensions and found that trust and commitment, local and community involvement and reputation will significantly determine the relationship building process. Kim (2001) examined two further interpersonal theories; the first is *equity* theory, in which people prefer to maximize their rewards than to limit their costs. People seek after equity in a fair manner and look to restore the unbalance of the relationship if it has occurred (Kelly, 2001, p. 283). The second, *interdependence* theory, by Kelly (2001), similarly outlined people's anticipated reliance on each other. This reliance is most beneficial when both parties are tested for their level of commitment, because this reliance reflects the impacts of interdependence in the cultivation process.

### *Strengths and Criticisms of Personal Influence*

The strengths of personal influence are rooted in its very criticisms. First, many western practitioners claim that personal influence practice is exclusive to Asian nations. Others criticize the use of the model because of its alleged unethical nature within western professional practices. These criticisms, however, provide a venue to examine the merits of the model by studying an organization, the LDS Church, which has practiced personal influence for several years. The LDS Church serves as a solid base for the study because this non-profit organization although headquartered in the United States (outside of the typical Asian region of previous studies), it operates globally across multiple cultural and political boundaries. It operates mainly through local leadership in many nations of the world and thereby supersedes borders without imposing the U.S. way of thinking on local customs, traditions and beliefs.

My research inquiry focuses on the exploration of scholarly literature on personal influence. In order to fill in the gaps of this literature, the study addresses three specific research questions, as follows:

RQ1: Can the personal influence model applied in public relations practices outside of Asia? If so, how is this done?

RQ2: Can this model withstand challenges based on ethical standards and be shown to have ethical application in public relations practice?

RQ3: Can the LDS Church serve as an example of ethical practice of the personal influence model across national and cultural borders?

## **Methodology**

In this study we conducted a qualitative exploration of the personal influence model through examination of the public affairs practices of the LDS Church. Qualitative methods through a grounded theory approach and constant comparative analysis were used in this study.

### *Grounded Theory*

According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994), “the grounded theory [research] perspective is the most widely used qualitative interpretive framework in the social sciences today” (as cited by Chesebro & Borisoff, 2007, p. 4). Grounded theory was first introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967), with the purpose of developing an integrated set of concepts in order to provide a thorough theoretical explanation of a studied phenomenon. Chesebro and Borisoff (2007) defined grounded theory as a “from the ground up” building of a theory, an inductive way of building theoretical meaning from data (p. 10). Corbin and Strauss (2007) also noted that in studies based on grounded theory, the representation of concepts, and not persons, is crucial.

The purpose of grounded theory to extract fresh understandings about relationships between social actors and how these relationships and interactions actively construct reality (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). According to the constructivist approach of this theory, researchers view the studied phenomenon through an interpretive lens. Glaser and Strauss (1967) stated that this methodology is most appropriate when the researchers discover an interesting phenomenon without explanation in prior literature and during the process seek to “discover theory from data” (as cited by Chesebro & Borisoff, 2007, p. 3). Therefore, grounded theory is an interpretive and not a deductive

process, in which interpretation is the responsibility of the researchers. Researchers create key categories and resources to collect data from and they also assign meaning to data. It is an interpretive process and depends upon the sensitivity and ability of the researcher. In a way, the researchers submit themselves to a complete data immersion process to best describe the studied phenomenon.

This data immersion process, as Pauly (1991) suggested, begins with an idea, followed by identifying the research area, developing a research plan, identifying means for data collection, collecting data, examination of theoretical assumptions, establishing and refining theory, then data analysis followed by refining the original idea as projected in potential findings and finally reporting the final results so as to “tell the researcher’s story” (p. 21). He described the steps of the qualitative research process as formulation of questions, defining categories of evidence, analyzing findings and reporting results. He further stated that data in qualitative research take the form of words rather than numbers.

#### *Criteria for Evaluating Qualitative Research*

According to Pauly (1991) qualitative research is an ongoing process of discovering, questioning, describing, rediscovering. It is a process of pattern, regularity, coherence but no ultimate guarantees and the research itself is modest in nature, always in process, personal if not intimate that invites further conversation, participation and reinterpretation of results. The beauty or advantage of qualitative research is the meaning-making process of an observed or studied phenomenon, without the rigorous data intervening in this process. Qualitative research is best described as a meaning

making process, instead of interpretation of data through operational definitions and statistical analysis as known in quantitative methods.

For examining the public relations field, qualitative methods are suitable through a variety of approaches such as case studies, focus groups, in-depth interviews and field observations (Wakefield, 1997). As Grunig (1992) suggested, qualitative methods provide answers to the *why's* behind descriptive data. Toth (2007) explained that critical, qualitative methods can be well used to extend theoretical understanding of public relations and its theoretical models such as the symmetrical model. J. Grunig, L. Grunig & Vercic (2003) used the qualitative methods of in-depth interviews to examine variables of effectiveness of the public relations practice in Slovenia. The fundamental questions of the research methodology considered the accessibility and recruiting of participants, the way of gathering data from participants as they responded to interview questions, and finally how these responses will aid the understanding and meaning-making process and reflect the aim of this study.

Criteria for evaluating qualitative research are different from those that set the standard for quantitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Pavlik (1987) explained that good research in an underdeveloped domain contributes to its current practice as well as to the establishment of a theoretical framework for future research. Exploring a new field through qualitative research provides an ongoing conversation where others are invited to criticize, add and question the discussion, which gradually expands the knowledge of the field.

Criteria for determining the effectiveness of a qualitative study are different from evaluating quantitative research. A quantitative study must meet the criteria of validity

and reliability. In other words a study is valid if it measures what it claims to measure, and reliable if the measurement tools used throughout the study are replicable (Wakefield, 1997). Qualitative experiments, on the other hand, are highly reliable but their validity can be questioned due to results obtained from an artificially created, laboratory environment (Wakefield, 1997).

Based on the field of study, the interviewing technique should have more validity than a mass survey questionnaire addressed to randomly selected practitioners. The product or outcome of the studied phenomenon is the ultimate judge of the research success. Qualitative research design tests trustworthiness and determine the effectiveness of a study through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Marshall and Rossman's (2006) defined credibility as the accurate portrayal of a subject under investigation or "how truthful are particular findings of the study" (p. 144). In order to reach this accuracy, the researcher must depict the theoretical framework and realities of patterns of interaction. As a result the study "cannot help but be valid" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 108). They further added that credibility is also established when the researcher is consistent in her or his interpretations of what the respondents meant (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Transferability refers to the extent to which the results can be extrapolated to other groups and situations (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). This approach is similar to the concept of generalizability in quantitative methods. Marshall and Rossman (2006) pointed out that transferability is one of the weaknesses of qualitative methods but they also suggested that the responsibility of such transfers rests with the researcher who is



conducting follow up research and it is not the responsibility of the original researcher. By maintaining the original theoretical approach and parameters of the data this weakness can be overcome.

Dependability is another construct that correlates with the reliability criterion in quantitative studies but in qualitative studies, this concept means the adaptability to the situations being studied. Lincoln and Guba (1985) described that as a successful inquiry process (as cited by Wakefield, 1997, p. 242). This criterion helps the research to reflect the perspective of the respondents rather than the researcher (Wakefield, 1997).

The fourth criterion, confirmability suggests that results of the study must reflect others confirmation of the study rather than reflecting the biases of the researcher (Wakefield, 1997). It answers the question as to whether the findings could be replicated with the same participants in the same context (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

In summary, qualitative researchers consider the world as a research laboratory; they think of issues that can connect with reality and assess how they can be explored and answered. Pauly (1991) stated that in a qualitative approach, research questions are developed in relation to the whole. Without specified independent and dependent variables, analytical processes are interpretive and not statistical, findings are narrated, and knowledge is partial instead of complete and cumulative. For these reasons, Pauly (1991) described qualitative research as a modest, personal approach that creates a story based on evidence, rather than a report of absolute proof.

#### *Possibility of Bias*

Similar to other research methods, qualitative research is often tinged with personal bias in observation and coding, and may be characterized by disorderly data

collection methods, broadly generalizable results, and the data's inability to be replicated (Lofland & Lofland, 1984). In grounded theory, researchers must engage in an ongoing self-reflection to ensure that they eliminate personal biases, world-views, and assumptions while collecting, interpreting, and analyzing data.

In order to guard against researcher bias, the data collection method must be relevant to the phenomenon allowing for an evolving theory (Pauly, 1991). Although a researcher may pay particular attention to a certain concept, which is not proven to aid, elements that are not relevant to the phenomenon must be discarded from the study. In the analysis process, the researcher uses constant comparison in order to guard against bias; thus, incidents should be compared to other incidents and examined for their similarities and contrasts. Such comparisons further assist the precision and consistency of the studied phenomena.

#### *Constant Comparative Analysis*

In their treatise on grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss (1967) proposed an interpretive process that is built upon the concept of constant comparison. Constant comparative analysis of the transcribed interviews used in this study to generate themes and identify patterns. Text passages were coded for emergent themes that reflected participants' experiences. Analyzing the emergent themes from the data formulated concepts that created subsections in the analysis segment of this study, which were supported by transcripts verbatim. These subsections include short summaries of explanation of the emerging themes. Transcripts were read individually to identify and then code possible themes.

In my study the use of constant comparative analysis was particularly applicable because the research allowed detailed information gathering through personal in-depth interviews with individuals among a small group of professionals from the LDS Church's public and international affairs divisions. In other words, the research aimed to discover how practitioners engage in the process of making friends for the LDS Church from high profile circles without an agenda. Most importantly it examined how these relationships impact the perception of the organization on a wide scale.

### *Research Participants*

Ten experienced LDS public affairs professionals were selected who had extensive experience in building relationships with high profile leaders around the world and who had an in-depth understanding of the historical background of LDS international and public affairs. Each participant had at least five years of experience working with LDS public affairs and the interview process fit exceptionally well for the purposes of this study; not only did the participants share their professional views, but the sharing of their feelings was also prevalent throughout the interviews.

The study consisted of seven male and three female public affairs practitioners. The ages of the male participants ranged between 38-61. Two of the three women participants were in their late twenties, and the third female participant was in her late sixties. The group consisted of four LDS public affairs directors, one assistant director, two former public affairs associates and three current public and international affairs representatives. Nine of them were U.S. citizens, and one participant was from Germany. The participants took part in this study voluntarily. The data primarily consisted of voice recorded and transcribed interviews with the selected participants.

### *Purposive Sampling*

The participants for this study were selected through *purposive sampling*. The sampling in grounded theory is not defined by how the drawing of the sample occurs, neither by the selection of specific individuals for the interviews, but in terms of concepts and their properties. These concepts, related to the phenomenon, its dimensions and variations, are those that the researcher wants to know about; in a sense, the researcher has a narrow lens through which he or she sees the desired outcome of the research.

Throughout the purposive sampling process, every researcher must have a preconceived idea of the phenomenon that he or she selected for the study and thus they focus their interview questions accordingly. Based on this prior knowledge, researchers have the freedom to select the group of individuals who may best provide insights to the researched subject and the selected study. As soon as the researcher selects this group of individuals for the study, the sampling does not derive from these individuals but rather from their approach to the studied phenomenon, events or occurrences.

### *Interviewing Process*

The data collection occurred in the form of semi-constructed, qualitative and personal in-depth interviews, which lasted approximately an hour each. The interviews were conducted from December 2008 until the end of February 2009, in various locations throughout the country, including Provo, Utah, New York City, Washington D.C, and Salt Lake City. Participants chose the location of the interviews; in most cases the interviews took place in the office environment of the participants according to their comfort and work schedule.

The invitation to participate in the interview happened through a brief description of the study via email, then a phone invitation when the final appointment scheduling with participants happened. With the exception of one interview, all interviews occurred in person. One participant, because of his location in Germany, was not approached by phone but via email. After sending him a brief synopsis of the study, he agreed to participate. The synopsis contained the questions used during the oral interviews, which were used as a base of elaboration in his written response.

The personal interview sessions started with a brief introduction by the interviewer consisting of an explanation of the purpose and nature of the study, and informing them of why and how they were selected to participate in the research process. To gather the data, an open-ended interview guide was prepared with a semi-structured questionnaire (see Appendix I) with a post-interview comment sheet that served as an aid to ensure that the same basic line of inquiry was posed to each one of the participants. This interview guide also served to identify the recurring, highlighted or significant themes, the characteristics of the interviewees and the setting or location. The interview guide was structured but flexible enough to allow participants to clarify meanings expressed by them, as well as to probe for and identify ideas that were not previously raised. There also was a mechanism of recording further impressions during the interview.

The interview process occurred as open conversation, with lead questions that allowed participants to elaborate on the subjects freely. In most cases the typical opening questions in the interviews were, *“How did you get involved in working with public affairs for the LDS Church?”* As Chesebro and Borisoff (2007) wrote subject-based

communication allowed the participants to determine or identify topics relating to the researched subject, and even provided transitions and insights from one topic to another.

Participants were also informed that there are no right or wrong answers during the interview, and that the main interest of the study lies in the respondents' opinions and experiences; therefore, that they should feel comfortable to interrupt and ask for clarification from the interviewer if they did not understand a question. Participants were invited to talk about their professional background before they accepted their positions in public affairs and explain how they were led into the field. In addition, the interviews were arranged to allow slight adjustments for the sequence and content of questions in order to discover deeper meanings. It was essential to phrase questions in a way that was conducive to unbiased answers, and that therefore negated the possibility of creating responses preferred by the researcher from the participants.

Each respondent was asked for permission to voice record the interview. For the protection of the subjects, an assurance of anonymity was given prior to each interview, with an agreement that real names of persons will not be used in the research report and will only refer to them by their title. Exact verbatim quotations without name reference were included in the data analysis section of this study, which allowed for the analysis of the data and for further support and understanding or clarification of the studied topic. As Lofland & Lofland (1984) wrote the absence of names supports both the investigator as well as the reader to focus on generalizable patterns emerging from the data rather than on the people themselves.

After the recording of each interview, they were subsequently transcribed by the author. The transcription of interviews allowed reflection upon whether the main aim of

the interviews was accomplished and recorded; thus, it stimulated analysis as the interviews were further studied during and after transcription.

The voice recording allowed the researcher later to be engaged in the conversation and be fully focused on the information that the respondent was communicating as well as thinking, elaborating and probing for further explication and clarification on what is being said. Without voice recording it would have been difficult to fully pay attention to the particulars of the responses, although throughout the voice recording, field notes, key words, sentences, and details were recorded. This note keeping ensured that the interviewer stayed on top of the conversation and picked up on details that required further elaboration or clarification from the respondents.

Throughout the process of gathering data, field notes were a crucial part of the recordings, from which the final analysis material emerged. According to Lofland & Lofland (1984), field notes are an important condition for comprehending the objects of the interview. Furthermore, impressions and questions were recorded in the form of memos and file notes relating to the verbatim data.

Finally, the transcribed interview consisted of summary and notes of the responses of the interviewee with verbatim transcription of responses of particular significance. The writing up process of the interviews required at least twice as much time than the conducting of the interviews. Throughout the transcribing sessions, new questions, ideas, explanations, and understandings often occurred, which were also recorded and considered for incorporation into the interviews with other practitioners.

## *Coding*

The data was coded by open and axial coding. Categories were organized and theoretical insights emerged during this process of coding raw data. Coding may entail open, axial coding, and selective coding. Open coding involves the comparing and contrasting of initial patterns to discover and define preliminary categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Axial coding allowed the relationship between these categories to be analyzed and linked to subcategories. Finally, selective coding refined and brought the categories together.

Selective coding is most suitable for analyzing this research by which all established categories revolve around the same core concept, being the personal influence model. This core category represents the central aim or phenomenon of the research. Through this coding category, the researcher is able to conceptualize the findings in a few sentences and describe the interactions and variations between the categories. This main core category or concept may be the end result of emerging categories already identified, but the other categories stand as linkages to the core concept. In order to avoid poorly developed categories, the researcher must make sure that enough properties are covered in the data to provide explanation, and therefore conceptual density is essential (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Furthermore, researchers in grounded theory studies must be committed to a core category that binds all the links together.

The transcripts were reviewed several times, and as categories and codes were selected, memos were kept to record and discover themes and meaning. These memos added to the foundational materials and final analysis of the data. Finally, a last search



and review of the interviews allowed the identification of central insights within each category, as typical quotations were sought out in each interview to validate the context.

Concepts that emerged from the data that pertained to the studied phenomenon were grouped into categories, although not every concept formed or became its separate category. The main characteristic of these categories is that they are more abstract than the concepts they represent. For this study these concepts were generated through a constant comparison process, and by highlighting the similarities and contrasts between the concepts that initially created the categories. These categories became the cornerstone of a developing theory; the grouped concepts were color-coded to form categories, which became the means of an integrated theory. Once the category was identified, the researcher assigned characteristics to best describe the meaning, and through such specification the categories were defined and given explanatory power. As these categories were formed over time, they became related to one another and formed a theory.

### *Analysis*

In the analysis process, theorists work with the conceptualized data, not the actual collected data. Strauss and Corbin (1998) emphasized that researchers must pay special attention to the “theoretical sensitivity,” or the relevance of categories as they emerged from data comparisons (p. 4). In order to build new theories or see that a new theory is evolving from research, investigators must avoid working from raw data. This data must be viewed and analyzed as potential indicators of a phenomenon, thus, they are provided with conceptual labels. This process is the actual categorization; the raw data is not taken literally by its content but the ideas and concepts represented within sentences are given

summary or descriptive labels. As Strauss and Corbin (1998) also observed, only by comparing incidents and naming them with a descriptive term can researchers come up with the basic units of a theory. The coded content and created categories emerging from the gathered data form a theory and result in a new approach. This process is defined by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as the “theory coming to the researchers” (p. 93).

For this study the interview transcripts were analyzed and field notes were examined in depth, then read and re-read in order to discover concepts, themes and patterns. Each of the interviews were taken individually in order to look for indicators of corresponding and recurring subjects, and were marked to highlight and record significant statements, observations of interview participants describing and directly relating to the studied phenomenon, personal influence, with codes and consequently categories being formed accordingly.

During the analysis process the raw data were studied and highlighted observations were listed in a sequence handwritten on a blank sheet of paper. Depending on the interview length these observations occupied the average of two-three pages. The individual findings were then entered into an Excel sheet and reread and refined into shorter descriptive definitions, followed by a search for themes and patterns to create subject categories. The main goal was to create 20-25 main subject codes that most directly relate to the researched phenomenon and provide the most accurate explanation of the relation of the studied phenomenon and practitioners’ view of its use and importance.

Next, the analysis continued through a comparison of the ten individual interviews, based on the subject codes discovered in the individual interview materials.

The codes were then compared to find consistencies and differences, to identify patterns and common categories. Memos were taken during the comparison process, which occurred in the same Excel sheet where the handwritten codes were entered into the sequence of interviews. After the subject codes were compared and entered into an Excel sheet, they were color-coded for more convenient grouping of the recurring codes in the respective interview materials. During this process, certain categories became more central than others and thus they became the core of the comparative analysis and ultimately led to the creation of seven subject categories.

This selection process occurred through a repeated but gradual study of the interview transcripts. It was a relatively mechanical process, as participants and their responses were reviewed several times and their words contrasted. Following the exploration of refined categories, the interview transcripts were reread again to select relevant verbatim quotations in order to validate and support the content of categories, and to express the central insights of each category.

Through open coding, the significant or outstanding subjects were entered sequentially into a data sheet. The subjects were color coded, which supported the final categorization and regrouping process of the codes. Then, as the groups were categorized and pasted accordingly, the comparison of concepts followed, which led to the defining of the conceptual linkages as systematic relations between the categories.

It was crucial that throughout the interview process there was consistency in the indications of all important concepts relating to the study, even those that carried over from a previous observation or those that emerged in the situation. For example, the notion of *face-work* or becoming the face of an organization evolved from the initial

interviews and has become a recurring concept; thus all indicators that underlie this idea were sought after in the subsequent interviews in order to support or counter the point. Other leading topics used in this study focused mainly on the importance of building influential, interpersonal, one-on-one relationships and friendships with key decision makers, and how these relationships impact the perception of the LDS Church in various communities across the globe.

It was expected, then, that after the analysis of the first observations regarding the term *personal influence*, more specific meanings would emerge from the interviews. The general interview questions began to shift into more structured and targeted questions based on the research objectives and the main research questions that drove the main aim of the study. These questions were targeted towards the understanding of the main research questions of the study, namely to discover whether personal influence can be applied outside of Asia, how it is done, and how it is ethically practiced in western public relations practices. In order to explore these possibilities this study examined the answers to the questions specifically relating to the LDS Church's public affairs operations. This information was gathered from the interview participants who provided a comprehensive review of how the mission of LDS public affairs provides an example for the ethical practice of personal influence in their day-to-day relationship building initiatives. There also supplied evidence that these ethical practices take place internationally and not just in the United States.

## Findings and Key Results

Through constant comparative analysis and the identification of subject codes and categories in the interviews, seven key components emerged.

The first component, *interdependent nature of relationships*; is seen as a conditional factor. It is defined as the mutual expectations between practitioners and stakeholders, a balanced give and take attitude, without ulterior motives from either the practitioners or the influential party, or a preset agenda in the friendship initiation process. This first category serves as an encompassing theme or conditional factor that was significantly prevalent during the interviews. It is seen as a conditional factor because without an interdependent relationship between an organization and its publics it would be difficult, if not impossible, for the other six components to exist.

The second category refers to the goals and objectives of building personal relationships with highly influential decision makers. The majority of responses focused on the pure motives of a *relationship based operation not an agenda based relationship*. This is defined as building friendships without a set agenda of expectations or strings attached.

The third, fourth and fifth components focus on the characteristics of practitioners. The third component addresses how practitioners have to develop and cultivate personal relationships. In other words, *practitioners must become natural friend-makers*, possessing with characteristics of integrity and credibility in order to initiate, develop, and nurture relationships that can develop into personal friendships. The fourth category represented what scholars defined as *conveying personal touch or the "self"*. In order to establish interpersonal relationships with key leaders, practitioners

naturally convey their identity in their interactions; thus, the relationship takes on a personable aspect. This process includes personalities, emotional ties, and disclosure of personal identity and mutual confidentiality that are directly attached to established relationships. It further allows the deepening of friendship between the practitioner and key individuals, creating ultimately a mutual interest in each other's wellbeing. The fifth component is *face-impact*, defined as characterized practitioners with essential core values in order to represent the goals of the organization and to become a window through which the organization is observed and perceived by stakeholders. This category characterized practitioners as personal relationships that become direct associations to the organization's values, operation and goals.

The sixth category focuses on the outcomes of these personal relationships. It defines the process, through which *personal relationships positively contribute to the perception of the organization* by broader audiences. Through trusting interpersonal relationships, the portrayal of the organization by other entities or individuals can be perceived differently.

Lastly, the seventh category revealed that the outcome of personal relationship building processes are closely associated with cultural differences, or the way friendships translate in key individuals' native environment. This is seen as a *challenge factor, linking to cultural and transitional sensitivity*. These transitional challenges were defined as the process by which flourishing friendships with influential leaders had to be handed off to new incomers, requiring sufficient time for overlap between the outgoing and incoming individuals in the relationships.

## *Key Components with Supporting Verbatim Statements by Practitioners*

Now that these seven components have been introduced they are explained in greater detail below:

### *1.) Conditional factor: Interdependent nature of relationships*

Throughout the interviews, a recurring theme played a significant role in the understanding of the implications of personal influence, namely, the *conditional* factor of interpreting the premise of mutually beneficial relationships.

The word conditional signifies the inherently *interdependent nature of relationships*. This is the notion that *whatever you do for someone*, there are *expectations in return*. Throughout the analysis of the first category, the results asserted that unless the mindset is centered in a genuine, *giving of oneself* and *neighborly type of service* attitude, without expectations in return, the relationship classifies as an agenda-based relationship instead of the relationship based operation. Said one participant:

Practitioners must be able to assess the situation and to know how far they can push as far as return expectations are concerned... [Some attitudes] can harm the relationship more than the favor in return is worth. However, there is clearly interdependence in relationships because there is always somebody who has control. However, without them having clear understanding and trust in our organization they would never grant us permissions to operate. All church operations are established only at the invitation of governments [*corresponding with the "entering through the front door" stance*]. Governments approve visas, and approve missionary presence in foreign countries. Being able to build

buildings, whether it be chapels or temples or other facilities, welfare facilities, we are subject to all of the governments, and those who control the processes of building permits. This means that in the case of a missionary visa, there is somebody with a stamp, who processes visas, and missionaries are only allowed to enter under those conditions. There is a similar man with a stamp, if you will, in approach to everything we are trying to accomplish. In situations when interdependence is recognized, we may need to call on friendships that we have developed in one way or another, but we don't bribe people nor unduly influencing them, but relying on the kind of friendship that you might have with somebody you have grown up with. When you are a friend, others know that you'll be there for them in times of need. That's the kind of relationship we strive to develop. It is one where we have mutual respect and mutual trust, and one where we have a genuine desire to help each other. And that happens all the time. People come to our organization and say "*I would like to help you in your efforts to do good in my country.*"

It was commonly remarked that decision makers or influential media representatives by their *obligatory objective nature* live by a different set of rules, as they only want practitioners to be their unbiased sources, not their friends. Thus, they embark on finding ways to gather the necessary information. Nonetheless, once they're properly befriended with pure motives, they have the tendency to make practitioners their reliable source.

In the interview accounts, it was similarly noted that the anticipation of expectations upon initiating or entering into a relationship is only legitimate when they *don't* cause practitioners to *compromise core values*. Said one participant:



Ulterior motives backfire. That doesn't mean that practitioners do not have a reason to build relationships, but they know that you know that and that mutual acknowledgment of interdependence, so to speak, does not compromise principles. If you have a desire to serve them or help them in some way, which is needful for them, they know you would do it regardless of return of favors. Furthermore, interdependence is closely related to the process of bringing people together that have key common interests to offer their assistance, without even the direct approach of the LDS Church's public affairs practitioners.

The ambassador of a country in western Asia is a good friend of the [LDS] Church and is now on an assignment in Indonesia. He assured of his friendship by stating, *"Dear Sister and Friend, if there is anything your Church needs while I'm here in Jakarta, please, let me know."*

Similarly, respondents noted that based on the merits of a genuine friendship, ambassadors tend to offer their help without hesitation. An ambassador of a south Asian nation has processed visas for missionaries so they were able to enter into the country to proselytize. Prior to that, who ever had the stamp, for whatever reason, refused to stamp visas into the missionary passports.

The ambassador, during a personal meeting with one of the LDS senators, received the contact information of this senator and the ambassador shortly after their meeting called him and said, *"I think, I know the answer to your problem. I will process those visas personally."* [Our office] made the initial contact as we already have established a positive relationship with [this ambassador].

Finally, the interview accounts agreed in the pattern of mentioning the maintaining of a healthy *balance of give and take*. As part of this approach, the following two accounts stand as an illustration of such practice in high profile communities.

The disposition of our public affairs practitioners is “*don’t change a winning game,*” but follow traditions. When the world collapsed financially, we organized an event for ambassadors, legislatures, senators and congressmen with a financial background, and arranged that an LDS member, a distinguished executive financial officer in a big corporation, accepted to be a speaker at the luncheon and offer his expertise and professional advice. It was a successful event and an opportunity for great interpersonal interactions.

On a more intimate level, here is an account featuring the generosity of a prominent leader from the Arabian Peninsula who was invited from one of the LDS public affairs offices to speak to a small group of boy scouts who were studying international relations.

He agreed and invited us all over to his home. Instead of ten boy scouts that we informed him would attend, 27 showed up. He set up his home for the occasion with tables, fine linen, silver, and china and spoke to them for a while then treated these boy scouts with an elaborate banquet of food and middle-eastern dessert, and gave them all big boxes of dates and a book on his country.

## 2.) *Relationship-based operation, not agenda based relationship*

The second core theme that emerged from the analysis, which meant initiation of service as a preparatory stage for building friendships without expectations were centered on the *good neighbor attitude*. It is the disposition of *going the extra mile for the benefit*

*of others, and initiating conversations by offering assistance.* The LDS Church is often viewed by the media and government officials with a preconceived idea that is contrary to the real beliefs and practices of the organization. The building of friendships with dignitaries or key leaders was described as

...The simple idea of being a good neighbor. This is what you do to your next door neighbor; you become friends with them, you serve them, you get to know them, and you get to know their interests, they get to know you, and a trust develops. It is the same process as an experience of a PR professional, building relationship with an editor, the same process of building a good relationship with a neighbor... when clients see that we are willing to go the extra mile for them as to when they are willing to share and open up.

The analysis of practitioner responses agreed that the initiation of relationships always starts on a personal level as practitioners meet influential leaders from all over the world. They share with them what the Church is doing in their native lands to help their citizens and give them information on what the members of the Church are doing in their lands. For example, in Washington D.C., offering of relief funds face to face to ambassadors for their countries opened up great relationships that developed into personal friendships.

Because the Church was offering assistance, they were seeing the good and the good motivation the Church was having in their country and tremendous doors were opened and lasting relationships were formed.

Further analysis revealed an overall consensus among policy makers about the driven mission of the organization, which attempts a genuine Christian approach to the building of another in the relationship. Nevertheless, the religiously motivated operation of the

organization has a primary focus on establishing key relationships with decision makers in governments, embassies, and civic entities, and strives to accomplish its mission. This mission includes sending professionals, such as doctors and engineers as humanitarian missionaries to various parts of the world to offer assistance, such as arranging the delivery of wheel chairs to nations in need, helping with road constructions etc.

...To accomplish certain things in the world that we have to work by world's perimeters, government structures, power structures influence structures of the world in order for us to be effective, and accomplish our work.

The participant responses also revealed that the sole purpose of reaching out to others and establishing relationships is to benefit nations, as well as to bring peace, knowledge, contentment and relief to communities and individuals, wherever it is needed. The organization is often viewed, however, as a competition by other religious groups, or even by secular governments, creating barriers to accomplish of the goals of this organization.

In order to combat this negative view, respondents revealed that in every relationship initiating process, the practitioner doesn't enter the conversation with a preset agenda but with an interest of the opinion leader at heart.

We don't go into a country, saying we have food you need, you have visas we need, let's make a deal. We don't do that. Humanitarian [service representatives] will see the needs, and there would be no thought at all, of what we can get for them at any time. This is the characteristic of a truly Christian organization, and that's what we strive to do. The relationship is only a relationship when it's

genuine, when it is not forced and not contrite or official. This has to be the heart of it, the consideration of another person.

The responses further revealed that government officials or high profile leaders are accustomed to having people find them with an expectation approach or preset agenda, which mostly creates a defensive attitude in the approached leaders. Thus, these key leaders are by nature distant and almost unapproachable, instead of open and willing to cooperate. Consequently, the respondents' strategy for approaching such officials and building a mutually beneficial relationship is to take a "*what can we do for you*" approach. Said one of the interviewees:

The nice thing about working for the Church is we have wonderful resources at our disposal, and one of our greatest resources is the willing hands of our members, who when there is a worthy cause [will run to the aid of others]... We can offer goods from our storehouses if there is a need. At the very least we can offer principles that help make people lives better.

The following account contains one example of offering unconditional assistance to a foreign nation shared by one of the public affairs directors.

In a far eastern nation, government leaders were invited to come and observe a family home evening [held by the LDS Church]. For us in the [LDS] Church this is a very simple practice; we take one night each week and we sit down with our families, and we play games, or talk about issues we're dealing with in our family, or studying together, basically, how we spend time together. These government officials were so impressed as they watched this family home evening, that they said, we want all of our citizens to know about that and in fact,

we want them to take a class on principles of building a strong family, of which this is one thing we can do. Now, that government, through the cooperation with the [LDS] Church, has taken those principles and written their own curriculum, for married couples. There is even a requirement for anyone applying for marriage license that they either read or take a class. All we wanted to do is expose them to things that help their families grow stronger. Here they have gone and adopted it in its almost complete form. We have to continue to do that, find ways to continue to make them feel that we are not only a friend, but we are helpful and have the interest of the opinion leader at heart.

The participants described the rewards of their endeavors as they were engaged in building high profile relationships on a one-on-one basis. The rewards by their account are not measured in monetary values, prestige, nor in the anticipation of the building of glamorous careers, but the unexpected rewards of giving of oneself to help another; those who succeed in the task of relationship building are those who have a genuine conviction and honest belief to share the values and principles they believe in for the benefit of others.

Another common theme that emerged from the conversations was that relationships are not generated or initiated based on manipulative intents. In the corporate world, it is unheard of to give of oneself for the benefit of another without having strings attached and expecting a favor in return. Without exception, the participant responses reveal that in this non-profit organization, they are all initiating relationships of high importance with a genuine desire to become friends and see who needs assistance.

The [LDS] Church often initiates service to leaders of nations, without expecting anything back. The [LDS] Church as an organization is very distinct about welfare or humanitarian outreach. Practitioners do have a give and take attitude, which is natural to have. It's important to remember, though, that when I just come in to two tickets to an event, and I think these people of influence would like those tickets, I could call them up and say, I thought you might like to use these tickets I have.

Another participant noted that these relationships come about through a “*never stop knocking and caring attitude*,” by using the organization's resources for the benefit of others without any preconceived agenda. A common theme emerged and is specifically exemplified in the following account, namely, bringing personal experiences into the relationship in order to understand the needs of another.

We're trying to make friends... We have established a relationship [with one ambassador] when [an] accident happened to their son. We went to visit their son every day [in the hospital]. He was in a coma months after months. Personally, I have been experiencing many hospitals with the many surgeries I had, thus, I know how does it feel like sitting in hospitals and waiting and not knowing the turnout, so I know what it feels like. People just sit and talk if they want to talk, you take donuts to nurses, because they are the ones who are taking care of your son. We brought them some cookies and some Thai dish. Through that experience as [the wife of the ambassador] calls we developed a *relationship of forever friends* and after they returned to Thailand we kept in touch. ... That is our goal to keep moving relationships forward until you become friends. As [the

wife of this ambassador] says “*I am Mormon in my heart, I can never join your church, but in my heart I am Mormon.*”

Furthermore, another participant noted the importance of initiating humanitarian help around the world by learning of emergency situations in their respective countries and facilitating help immediately. The headquarters of the organization evaluates requests to see what can be worked out to send immediate help. Said she:

I am not initiating the help with an alternative motive in mind such as I am trying to make friends with you, or trying to win your trust. It is naturally built.

Other common themes that were repeated throughout the interviews included *kindness and example goes a long way*, as well as *representing the pure motives of Christian living*, and *relationships are about giving of one-self*. Listening and understanding others’ needs makes the difference. As one respondent noted:

We really listen for 96% of the time, and speak for 4% of the time, and we hope that percentage chain will build a friendship.

The results revealed that this [LDS] Church organization is recognized within the United Nations missions, and its public affairs representatives are often approached with the question of what the organization is doing there since they don’t ever make any statements, or own a desk, nor do they have the position of observers like other faiths do, who also make statements.

What we do is represent the pure love of Christ and that’s in the gospel of Jesus Christ to these countries and diplomats. We would like these influential people to taste the pure love of God as it is preached by The Church of Jesus Christ of



Latter-day Saints. ... We really show them that we do love all mankind, and care about them.

Finally, the last recurring idea was the essential factor of Christian obligation—that is, having a pure motive to act out of consideration and care, as well as engaging in non-confrontational information sharing without any preaching of the doctrines of the religion.

When this office is actively contacting embassies, mostly because we're trying to do something for them. When the organization offers some sort of a service for them, often in the traditional sense of the PR world, it is automatically expected to give returns. The [LDS] Church does not expect the return of favors. The relationship is often one way, since the [LDS] Church may provide ways of service or benefit, but not necessarily receive anything back. One explanation is rooted in the nature of the organization. This is a church, therefore, religion is based on tenants of being pure in intent and motives and delivery. The organization's agenda and motives are clear and very transparent. Particularly with the diplomats, there is a sense of religious Christian obligation. This approach may also be skewed from the perspective of ambassadors and other key leaders who are trying to reach us with a certain motive already inherent in the nature of the organization. Sometimes it is just given to provide service or assistance without any strings attached, and often with the personal connection it becomes an open dialogue. As we request or they request something, this initiation has never come with a mutual agreement of having strings attached. It makes the job pure in the motive and intent.

### 3.) *Character of personal integrity and credibility*

The third category of the analysis results is characterized by core themes that emerged from the analysis, namely, *building credibility as a person, going through the front door, no attempt to hide the nature of the organization, organizational transparency, fulfilling promises, the heart of the relationship is trust, and sticking to core values*. These codes or themes are directly related to the qualities of the practitioner; therefore, the category was defined: *natural friend-makers with a character of personal integrity and credibility*.

At the end of the day, when you [practitioners] make some decisions, if you said you're going to do something, you do it, do it effectively and efficiently, and in a very professional manner. Trust, dependability, sincerity, and being yourself, and not coming across someone that you are not, just being yourself. Experience, sound judgment, dependable personal, articulate, willing to talk and perhaps answer questions that have not been asked but are essential to reveal about the organization.

Respondents highlighted that upon initial meetings, the key attribute of a practitioner is to find *common ground* with the decision makers to build a level of comfort in conversation and to establish a mutual knowledge about the background of the other.

You can't dominate a conversation; you have to know the right pace to maintain a conversation to build credibility. It's the balance of speaking and listening and also being articulate, expressing things that create kind of a trusting relationship between the two parties. You have to have core values. It is so important that

you don't step outside of the bounds of those relationships. I think the component of that trust is confidentiality.

The responses also shed some light on the question about putting the practitioner's personal integrity at risk when representing organizational values and goals. In the case of the [LDS] Church, the core values and mission statement inherently align with personal preference and values. However, in regular public relations terms, situations regularly arise when practitioners must represent operations or ideas that create controversies with their personal belief systems.

A former international client at one time would have gotten tremendous exposure [in the media], but the opportunity was against my personal core values. When these happen you have to look at yourself, and you have to stay true to your personal core values. Core values will come through in how you act in a daily day basis. A PR firm in general that uses twists and turns to succeed but will a practitioner be still willing to put his or her own reputation at risk in order to succeed?

Additional responses revealed that the nature of this organization often creates dissonance with key influential individuals outside the [LDS] Church. The religious and non-profit nature of the organization, and the fact that the entity operates merely by faith-governed principles, seems to create a distant disposition between leaders of governments and practitioners, almost as if these leaders were expecting religious preaching to take place. Respondents agreed that initiating relationships through conversations regarding the religious aspects of the organization would be an agenda based ultimately upon a manipulative approach to the building of personal relationships and friendships.

If an agenda was used to make others listen (if not embrace) the doctrinal teachings of an organization and the organization simply would become its own stumbling block in its growth and reputation. Instead, practitioners highlighted the importance of “*going through the front door,*” without any attempt to hide the nature or mission of the organization but also never coercing others to be partakers of it. The main responsibility these practitioners must accomplish is to preach without a voice; in other words, to live according to what they profess to believe, fulfill their promises; seek to serve and benefit others, and honor individual choice.

I can think of many parts of the world, where relationships consist not of trust, or friendship, but of greed and corruption. We will not operate that way, we will not pay bribes, we will not do things that are underhanded or illegal, or under the table. We will go through the front door, and we will always make sure, whatever relationship we build, it is built on the foundation of honor, and trust. [Those] who do not want to operate above board, or have self-interest that they’re motivated by, we won’t work with. Wherever we are allowed to be there as a religion, we are representatives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and we make no effort to hide that. ... It is a deliberate effort on our part to break down the mistrust and concern over what we represent. We say it right on our badge. As public affairs practitioners we have a business card we give out freely and it tells who we are and we have a church logo on it. We make no attempt to hide who we are. We are also very protective of who carries the logo of the [LDS] Church, and when practitioners are acting in an official capacity,

they have to be honorable, honest and upright in doing the things as we profess as a faith. It is a true, heartfelt conviction that leads us to do what we do.

In order to achieve this approach, the characteristics valued by the public affairs professionals of this organization included being *knowledgeable, skilled, industrious, friendly, outgoing, able to constantly supplement their intellect by reading and researching* and having *experience* in the worlds of business, academia, politics, or law. Most valued, however, was the *ability to understand people and the processes of relationships* between people, as well as being able to say the right things and not to say the wrong things; in short, to be trustworthy individuals who build trust. As one interviewee said:

If you want them to believe that you are trustworthy, you have to fulfill you promises you made. If you want them to know you have their best interest at heart, you have to demonstrate that you are not just there for your self-satisfaction. Being up to date about the happenings in the countries, and when news is out about a country, as to express regrets or congratulations, the [LDS] Church is willing to take that step and follow up. It is labor intensive.

Interestingly, the descriptions by practitioners also included that in order to build long-term personal relationships and friendships with influential individuals, practitioners must be sincere and genuine, to simply be one's *self*. Consequently, a practitioner must have the ability to express genuine interest in the other persons' background. They also must be able to show sensitivity and remember to follow up on commitments. In other words, they have to make the attempt to build relationship in a more personal but natural way.

Respondents commonly pointed out that the aforementioned characteristics of public affairs practitioners may not occur naturally, but can be learned, cultivated, and acquired through years of experiences. Said one interviewee:

A certain [inherent] skill set is always helpful, but most skills can be learned. The essential characteristics are having good manners with people, being well-informed, well-read, being able to be conversant on a variety of topics, be able to know generally or tend to know something about what the other person is sharing, including your opinion and interest. The most important is to approach everyone in a friendly manner, with sincerity and integrity. It certainly is an advantage to seek to be a person of integrity and work for the [LDS] Church, which fosters integrity and doesn't want to take any shortcut or engage in any effort that is dishonest, as it is consistent with our articles of faith and values, being true, chaste and benevolent.

Further themes emphasized the importance of the practitioners being able to think outside of the box, to be creative and have a natural curiosity about people, and to have an extrovert type personality, someone who is comfortable initiating conversations on a personal, one-on-one or face-to-face level. These characteristics are critical, given the limited amount of time a practitioner often has to establish a relationship. For example, it was expressed that many luncheons and meetings do not provide opportunities to carry deep conversations with influential people, but they may provide opportunities to create an expression that can serve as the soil for a gradually maturing friendship.

You need to shake hands with somebody and look them in the eye before they remember who you are. They most likely won't have the chance to engage an

ambassador in a deep conversation, but rather to shake their hands and say something kind to them. Sometimes, however, we have to be very careful that we don't overstep our boundaries. These people are diplomats [by their profession, open, kind and welcoming], and no one will ever say will you stop sending these invitations to us? I do believe that as a representative of the [LDS] Church, am I professional and all the other things, but more than anything, when I walk out, what is it that they think and feel, have I said the right thing, and at the same time being warm and inviting? It is crucial that they don't let them catch you in any type of fabrication. That would be detrimental.

Another essential character element needed in practitioners is the ability to socialize. To excel at socializing, a practitioner must be able to handle the tremendous trust and accountability placed on him or herself as they build personal friendships with key decision makers.

Being able to talk about the organization in a non-confrontational way is the key to success. Knowing quick and important facts about the organization will be important to diplomats, and a practitioner is only successful when he or she is graceful about it. This is a combination of both natural attributes and additional ways to be open about the organization with audiences. In this particular case the [LDS] Church is initiating in a one-on-one approach. [To some] it is seen as a [highly] sociable type of position. Some people gain energy from that but some others may feel depleted by such constant social involvement. Some of it is about retaining information mainly, ability to connect dots together, and some of them are personal attributes, or skills that can be learned. Some people are more

natural in certain sociable circumstances or situations, for some others it would be difficult and a daunting task to walk into a room and have to try and stimulate conversations.

The interviewees likewise stressed that as practitioners bring their personal characteristics, background and even dispositions into issues in relationships, extreme caution must be practiced about the expression of personal ideologies. They need to remain neutral, no matter what context the representatives are portraying themselves; they need to remain neutral for the sake of the organization, which politically stands for neutrality. Maintaining pure motive and accurate information dissemination, building on the integrity of the person and the organization, and being consistent in communication is also part of the solution.

#### 4.) *Conveying a personal touch*

The third category described the heart of personal influence, namely *conveying the personal touch or self* in newly initiated one-on-one relationships that over time develop into personal friendship and consideration for the other person. Although these relationships start out on a professional level, as practitioners embrace a new acquaintance with a genuine interest in the well being of the other, these acquaintances, according to the participants, gradually, or sometimes even instantly, develop into friendships upon which parties can comfortably rely or refer to in the future. Such personal touches was best described by respondents as *going the extra mile*, which established *immediate associations*, as well as *entering the world of the opinion leader*, *establishing a relationship with persons instead of organizations or causes*, and



*manifestation of personal identity and emotional attitudes as an enhancer of relationships.*

While generally in mass mediated communication individuals do not discuss personal matters with reporters or reveal emotional attitudes and preferences, these situations do presumably occur on a face-to-face level. In order to facilitate these personal level encounters, personality traits are crucial in forming and shaping friendships. Said one participant:

Personalities, personal identity in fact, and often, emotional attitudes are indeed shaping high profile friendships. In any activity in life, within the [LDS] Church or other areas of life, as people meet, for some reason certain people seem to be more attracted to converse with some than others, which could be accounted to various reasons such as same interest in sports and other personal qualities or just even observing personalities of individuals that can make or break a friendship. Based on the responses, there is sort of a *law of interaction* appeal between individuals when they come together for business assemblies, conferences, or other larger gatherings. This interaction appeal consists not only of the desire for information exchange, but it also has personal components of getting a feel for others in terms of credibility, determining the dependableness of the other, and prompting personal exchanges. Upon the next meeting, these one-on-one interactions will most likely not focus on the business side of their initial acquaintance but on exchanges of personal experiences. Said one participant:

Sometimes the first contacts when made are merely professional, but as times go on, conversations and opportunities to share more personal things arise on both

sides, and that strengthens the relationship, turns into a friendship. There is a fine line of being appropriate and going overboard or being dominating. Having to be the right person who knows the balance, when to push an agenda, or be assertive and at the same time respectful in knowing where the boundaries are and where it is the time to stop instead of becoming overbearing.

One-on-one information exchanges do still require tangible information; but with a personal relationship already in place, there is a greater likelihood that information provided by individuals will be tested and found to be truthful and correct based upon the judgment of personal character. Said one participant:

The [LDS] Church at one point in time decided that it is essential to go and sit down with reporters and talk to them on a one-on-one basis and if for nothing else, but to put a real person or face to the name or voice. The [LDS] Church didn't have to do that and they could keep putting out press releases and press conferences, having the leaders to just speak to the press in general, but you can't generate good press without the personal touch. It just doesn't happen without the personal component. It is almost seen exactly reverse, the personal component is the major part of [relationships].

By another account,

Whenever we have a conference call one of our clients goes into things about her personal life that we really don't want to know, but it is a way for her to get some of her frustrations out and she built that trust towards us and she knows that we are not going to divulge anything that is said to us in those conversations. She's willing to open up and share things about her personal life but you have to

maintain your own integrity in the decision-making and loyalty to the trust the client placed in you. It has also strengthened her loyalty to us.

The interviews also revealed that one essential mindset is that of building long lasting and flourishing relationships with persons instead of organizations. This process might happen through various degrees of relationships that are dependent on personal qualities, but ultimately every single interaction on a face-to-face level matters, as it leaves marks and impressions of an individual in another person. Often practitioners perceive that the relationship could progress to a certain point of finding some mutually working initiative, only to have these relationships go well, and well beyond that, become very close and personal. Said one participant:

Relationships by their very nature are personal. The [LDS] Church in reality as an organization does not have a relationship with other organizations. Rather, people within the [LDS] Church organization have relationships with people in other organizations. The relationships we have are with individuals, individuals in relief agencies, in governments, within the media, and or individuals in academia, or some other influential organizations. We want to enter the world of the opinion leader, which means we have to put ourselves in their shoes and understand what's important to them. There is no other way to do that but be where they are, read what they read and read what they say, study their background, and where they've been, and whatever is publicly available, we try to gather that information so we understand them better. We understand what challenges they have. We have to understand what's not only important in the long run, but what's currently on their minds and what are the issues they are

dealing with. These people are all important, they all have big and heavy responsibilities, and we have to be respectful of that and even empathetic, at least sympathetic, if not empathetic to the kinds of things they having to deal with. A common observation stated that some high profile leaders don't want to establish a personal friendship with practitioners, nor make themselves accessible to them. Or, sometimes the interaction is defined as forming a relationship with the conversation instead of the person. Said one participant:

The personal influence model is very useful, but sometimes you also need a *relationship with the conversation*. You need to be part of the conversation in order to give it a little bit of a balance, because we can't control the messages anymore. If you want to be influential in [the sharing of opinion], stay with the conversation.

Moreover, the interviews revealed the importance of recognizing various degrees of personal relationships. To begin with, a certain number of key decision makers may not agree with the LDS Church's religious principles, yet they may still choose to endorse the organization based on the personal friendships they built with representatives of the organization throughout the years. They might say something like:

I know the Mormons, I understand what they stand for, I believe that they are here doing good; therefore, I will endorse their continuation in the country to engage in such and such activities.

Eventually, by the account of the respondents, this endorsement may develop into authorization to permit the organization into someone's native land. Based on these

endorsements, for example, the LDS Church has been able to obtain a building permit to construct properties of the organization in given nations.

Finally, the relationship may develop to highest level of degree, that is, of defending what the organization stands for. All the preceding is to show that establishing close relationships with high profile leaders doesn't come on the first day, but by degrees.

Respondents further highlighted the essential element of *doing your homework* before commencing a meeting. One of the late prominent leaders of the LDS Church, Neal A. Maxwell, provides an example of such an attitude while spending three weeks in China on an assignment.

[Neal A. Maxwell]'s preparation was absolutely amazing. He had an amazing memory. Every evening we would find ourselves be hosted by some dignitary and part of that process was speeches and gift exchanges. He had memorized so many sayings of Confucius, he never duplicated them. He always had the right one for each occasion. It totally endeared the people to him, because they knew that he had taken the time to know what was important to their culture and the things he was able to say in his speech represented and reflected his preparation.

Additionally, the conversations noted the *interconnectedness of personal relationships* and networks. Although mass media have the tendency to provide much greater exposure to organizational causes, without the personal connectedness, the outcome can't be more beneficial since only reading an article will not build a relationship or shed light on the organization or its representatives. Said one participant:

The way to define the core elements of the interpersonal relationships for PR purposes is an interpersonal dynamic with someone of influence that is strong

enough to be the basis for that person deciding to take some action that you want him or her to take. It means building a friendship or relationship strong enough to call upon someone to do something for the organization and they will do it if they can.

Equally important, as a couple of respondents outlined, the [LDS] Church's relationship building efforts with prominent leaders is a *curious workmanship*. Said this way "curiosity" in a sense is centered on the sincerity, honesty, integrity and willingness of practitioners to share those relationships with others, as opposed to "holding them tight as if we were the sole owner of them." As one participant defined it:

Doing work for PR firms in a PR way is one thing, but in the [LDS] Church you don't do things in the PR way, but in a way that is sometimes a little odd or different from how the world would do it. It is because they are of *curious workmanship*.

Consequently, by establishing high profile relationships, practitioners noted the essentials of reciprocation of interest in each other's wellbeing. Without that component, relationships remain agenda-based associations, as opposed to remembering and recognizing the individual. Said one practitioner:

We're conducting our outreach in a very person-specific base. The interesting part is those people who respond to our outreach and those who reject it, or make it very hard for us, because in all relationships there has to be some reciprocation on the other end. We just don't knock on the door and knock on the door, but we have to get real creative and find other ways and other people with influence to knock on their door. With the advancement of time these relationships develop

from professional relationships into caring friendships. Trust takes a long time, because [many of these leaders] are diplomats. We start out at the lowest level hoping that we will establish an ongoing relationship.

To illustrate the magnitude of establishing personal relationships, one practitioner shared the following personal encounter with an ambassador from an island country in East Asia during a cold morning of the presidential inauguration exercises in Washington, D.C.

Visiting his country saved my life. [Upon meeting this ambassador] he immediately asked me, “You had hand warmers, didn’t you?” to which I responded, “I did and I put them in my shoes and coat.” If you can share an experience and a story, it just helps and will make the greatest difference.

Sometimes you just see the ice cracking. On a similar note, it has helped that I was once elected as a mother of the year for the District of Columbia by the American Mothers Association. The question usually comes, how do you compare one mother to another? These things elevate me to get me through the door.

Likewise, respondents agreed on the vital element of personalized relationships as the process of building on *common grounds*. Upon one occasion, the ambassador of a central Asian country and his wife visited with the president of the [LDS] Church.

When he and his wife came, his wife was eight months pregnant and was told she was going to have another little boy. President Hinckley gave [the couple] a statue with a little girl running to her mother [as an appreciation of their friendship]. She said, oh so sorry, the doctors tell us that we’re going to have a

little boy to which President Hinckley looked at him and said, “*Don’t be too sure.*” Three weeks later she gave birth to a little girl.

Furthermore, practitioners recognized and defined friendship as a transaction, wherein influential strangers and early acquaintances become close friends by owning a relationship, yet not adamantly asserting the friendship. Said one participant:

Friendship is a transaction. It’s a two-way street. You do something for somebody and they do something for you. I can tell you most about how we make strangers acquaintances and next how to make acquaintances friends. You need to shake hands with somebody and look them in the eye before they remember who you are. At the national day of India I shook hands with one of the ambassadors of a south Asian nation and he said, “oh yes, I remember you.” They will remember and put a face to the name. Friendships are not between institutions, but people. We want to represent the [LDS] Church as individuals, because people we will remember the people.

Finally, participant observations had a common element of allowing personal relationships to become regular contacts through consistent follow up activities and showing signs of appreciation and support. While it is challenging to overcome the barriers of limited access to key opinion leaders, finding meaningful activities and occasions where such associations can occur is vital. Practitioners must work with the limited time and financial resources they have, while bearing in mind the weariness of opinion leaders.



### 5.) *Face impact*

The fifth category in the discovery process of the impact of the personal influence model was the shared definition of *face impact* associated with the image or perception of an organization. By definition, Huang (2007) stated that face is a sense of worth that comes from knowing one's status and reflects concern with the congruency between one's performance or appearance and one's real worth.

Any time you put a face to any organization you become the window by which the organization is seen. When the Public and International Affairs office is presenting or attending anything social we are the representatives of the organization and thereby we become a window to it. One of the challenges, while the relationship is a face-to-face environment, person-to-person, you really never know where it goes from there. Sometimes, face-to-face is very friendly, but a practitioner can never be sure what happens when he or she steps away from the conversation.

The term *face* may be defined as the respectability claimed by a person for himself or herself from others, a status the person occupies in his or her social network, and the degree by which the person is judged by others based on his conduct (Coombs, 2001).

Face, furthermore, can also be defined as an emotional investment in a relationship, with the possibility of losing, maintaining or enhancing that emotional investment depending on the level of attendance in interaction (Yudarwati, 2008). It is an evaluation of a person by others, accompanied by desired attributes such as honor, respect, dignity and prestige. Said one participant:

Our reputation as an organization depends on every single interaction that anyone has with a member of the [LDS] Church. As faces of the organization, we need to represent that organization the best way we can. They will get to know the organization from the representative or practitioner, and will make an immediate association as they link together what the person stands for, hence what the organization stands for. Speaking with a consistent voice, wherever the [LDS] Church is found, whether it is doctrinal or simply communication messages from our organization to those not of our faith, is essential. Those are messages that help people to understand us better, and answer misconceptions that are out there, and give them more of an understanding of what we are doing in the world, and what our relationship is to other faiths and their pursuits.

Common terms that emerged in the interviews describing this “face impact” included *putting a face to the organization, putting a name to the face, and identifying actions of individuals within organizations*. Particularly in Asian cultures, face is the key towards the roots of human actions. As Yudarwati (2008) identified it, *face* is an abstract or intangible concept; yet in relationships, it is a phenomenon that essentially can be lost, fought for, and granted. It is a delicate standard by which social intercourse is regulated. Working with the media and prominent leaders of various nations, controversial things will come up from time to time regarding the organization that practitioners have to deal with. The way these matters are handled and responded to is a conscious balance practitioners need to maintain, with the consequence in mind that anything said can come back and haunt them at the end of the day. Said one participant:

Upon meeting with civil groups, particularly groups who haven't had a lot of exposure to the [LDS] Church, who hear you and need you and see you, you literally become a face of the [LDS] Church. They will have an LDS experience through you and with you. Therefore, it is crucial that the designated spokesman for the [LDS] Church in any situation reflects values and standards of the Church.

Reflecting on the outcome of face impact, respondents agreed that professionals, as individuals representing the organization, have a tremendous responsibility. By becoming the *face* of any organization, the person also becomes a representative for organizational goals, attitudes and missions. Particularly in Washington, D.C., where politics is a very dominant yet sensitive ground, the LDS Church as a religious organization has a strict policy to remain politically neutral, while practitioners may have their own political ideologies.

#### 6.) *Perceptions of the organization as an outcome of personal relations*

With the result of the previous category, entitled *face impact*, participant conversations revealed a subsequent, sixth category, called *perceptions of the organization as an outcome of relationships*, which functions as a response to the *face impact* of individuals representing the organization. The following terms defined this category, namely: *changing the opinion of masses through individuals, changing and correcting mass opinions* by one-on-one relations, and *engaging third party validators of influence* in the shaping of the organizational perception. Said one participant:

Perception in business is key. Perception is reality. There is a direct relationship.

Willingness and ability [of practitioners] are equally important and determine the

success of representing the [LDS] Church in public. The perception of the organization is based on and heavily influenced by relatively *few opinion leaders*. In the United States there are 200 people who influence everybody else. Positive media coverage enhances the chances of initiating and deepening relationships with influential leaders. Negative media coverage consequently decreases such opportunities.

The interviews further revealed a consensus among participants that the perception of an organization is a crucial judgment factor for leaders of prominence and publicly elected office holders. They cannot afford associations with entities that are seen to be a risk, danger or suspicion over their approved name. To eliminate the possibility of risk association, reputable leaders, senators, and business professionals who are part of the LDS faith can in effect build credibility, as well as grant favorable opportunities to associate themselves with the LDS Church, hence increasing the desire and willingness of other professionals to build such associations with the LDS Church. To this effect, respondents recognized the significance of receiving public recognition. To illustrate, the following account states:

Throughout the years, [Gordon B. Hinckley] was willing and open to encourage the receiving of recognition for all the relief work the [LDS] Church was doing worldwide, whereas before, humanitarian operations were done through the Catholic Relief Services, and the [LDS] Church didn't really receive any recognition. He recognized that if the public would know that we did those things it would bring credibility to the organization of the [LDS] Church and would not be perceived as boasting. When dealing on levels of prominence, less on the daily

basis of creating media headlines, if someone is trying to establish the credibility of an organization, giving it status helps.

The interviews revealed that high profile leaders may convey positive or even less favorable reports and opinions regarding the LDS Church, its history, operation and members, based upon personal associations established with insider public affairs professionals. Typically those interpersonal relationships channel their choice of assessing and validating the organization in public, as well as constructing their public statements accordingly. As one participant noted:

The discipline and practice of changing and correcting opinions is primarily based on personal relationships followed by mass media. Influential people can say good things about the organization in the media, thus building interpersonal relationships and sending out accurate mass mediated messages can be strongly interconnected. By building or fostering these high profile, or influential, relationships, individuals will simply and naturally come to know who are the people in the organization and what the organization is not. If someone within influential circles becomes your friend and the media interviews this person, he or she will most likely share positive things about you and your organization, which is even more powerful than when the organization is trying to make a statement about itself. Different influential people have been in active in defending the [LDS] Church where it was needed.

Subsequently, conversations also revealed that from a legal and ethical perspective, correcting and influencing mass opinions are certainly more structured in terms of holding judgments, or making statements to written constitutional laws and

principles that afford entities or people their personal rights or representation. However, in public relations practices, as well as in media, although there are written ethical standards and regulations, the correction of statements and opinions is not as well grounded as in the field of law.

We in public relations need to make sure that our PR is good for our own field. Sometimes the PR discipline gets a bad name, and it does not have principled regulations as opposed to the field of law, with rules of professional conduct to which lawyers are held accountable and for which if violated they can be disciplined. PR unfortunately does not have the self-governed formula necessarily. Certainly personal influence can be an asset in better regulating the practice, much better than any mass media attempts.

Furthermore, respondents' comments agreed that experiencing the operation, mission and character of an organization through a firsthand experience makes a significant difference in terms of phrasing opinions and perceptions thereof. Based on the opinion of one participant validators with influence can essentially have an accurate grasp on the organization based on firsthand experiences. One respondent defined this approach as the *pyramid communication model* that is built on personal experiences. The top of the pyramid represents the outcome of personal experiences and results, while the bottom level corresponds to personal beliefs. Accurate beliefs are best grounded in first hand experiences. Respondents also agreed regarding the *defense disposition* of prominent individuals upon confronting negative statements about the organization, which compels these influential people to stand up and stop rumors and backbiting.

Changing mass perception about the [LDS] Church has no shortcut, or a quick and effective recipe, it happens through meaningful relationships. The [LDS] Church many years ago was for a long time very well known by its commercials, as they tried to reach out and improve the image and perception of the organization. It was a mass audience type of approach and people knew *of* the [LDS] Church based on these commercials, which influenced their opinion.

According to these practitioners' accounts, the [LDS] Church's organization starts out as being merely a perception in audiences' minds, which is vague and broad, with no personal experience.

Public affairs practitioners have gradually evolved to an understanding that a relationship with people of influence is how to get things done – having a personal relationship with someone who is strong enough [to make supportive or defending] statements, even if it's unpopular to do so. This person might speak out, "Well, that's not true, the Mormons, in my experience have always honored their promises and I will not let you make those kind of statements, and have them go unchallenged." We have a number of times when that's happened. We have been recognized in the highest government offices in many nations.

Granted that there are few opinion leaders who may influence broader audiences in formulating their opinions, participants emphasized that the *Internet* must be incorporated into that equation. Although there may still be a list of core opinion leaders with a dominant voice, a transformation has occurred that has changed our conventionally information gathering society into an *information disseminating* and social media

generation, where practically anyone can become a publisher and giving everyone a potential voice.

Gained impressions and experiences about our [LDS] Church and practices accompany [ambassadors] wherever they travel later to live and settle for another three-year term. [Public affairs practitioners] direct them to unbiased sources such as other ambassadors who previously attended [various public affairs] events. They are willing to share their candid opinions about it. There are so many rumors and impressions out there about the [LDS] Church that we are trying to correct, therefore, the work that we do hopefully carries on as they take those positive experiences and remember them. Our friendship will follow them and go wherever they go.

To enumerate the significance of the interconnectedness of media coverage and personal influence, practitioners found it critical that in order to receive the right press coverage, when personal friendships are established with influential members of the press, reporters will remember to call upon public relations practitioners as their close acquaintances and friends to ask for accurate information and facts. This approach can help to restore previous loss of trust in the public relations profession; hence personal influence could to a great extent contribute to credibility of the [LDS] Church.

Above all, based on the accounts of the interviews, a common observation, namely the influence of one in a foreign culture and the phenomenon was characterized as the well-known saying states “*physician heal thyself.*” Said one participant:

We had one ambassador welcome the [LDS] Church to legally register in his country because of a close friendship with church public affairs representatives.



Similarly, ambassador as friends are willing to look into problems the [LDS] Church may have with legally registering in a particular country, or having challenges with owning property, or with missionaries simply entering or being present in their countries.

Foreign cultures and nations may not be directly exposed to updated media accounts and portrayals of perceptions of the organization. In many instances, the opinion leader alone may reflect his or her personal disposition and opinion of the organization and its members to a larger audience, and in many instances it depends on one prominent individual, ambassador or foreign minister to provide broader audiences in their respective lands with the opportunity to gain their own direct experiences with that particular organization. In the interviews, it was mentioned in particular that often these leaders hold the keys to the doors of nations. An earlier account mentioned an ambassador in particular whose son fell into a coma for months, and public affairs practitioners, acting as genuine friends, assisted the family through that difficult time. The consequences and example of such neighborly attitude went a long way.

The ambassador's wife is part of the royal family, as well as a devoted singer, and because of our friendship now she takes the LDS missionaries with her to musical gatherings and performs with them.

One concern was mentioned by participants that although recognizable names may help to establish more credibility for an organization, as ambassadors regularly report to their presidents in their native lands about their meetings with the [LDS] Church, as a caution to the previous examples and practices, respondents identified a fundamental principle to be kept in the forefront at all times in order to suffice the very first category of a good

neighbor prerogative, namely, practitioners must avoid of becoming name-droppers for the advancement of position and reputation.

On another account one of the participant highlighted how a previously solidified reputation may aid the well being of an organization and encourage high profile intervention or assistance in times of need:

We had once the ambassador of China turn on our lights at [one of our annual events] the Festival of Lights. Having a Chinese ambassador participating at the Mormon's event was significant. As a result, we were invited to China with my husband and at that occasion at least in their minds, we were the *face* of the [LDS] Church. We were their guests and hosted by them for two weeks. Interestingly, our humanitarian missionaries were working with the Chinese government, and one day, the [LDS] Church's name got involved with a false scandal about a substandard humanitarian shipment to China and they arrested one of the humanitarian missionaries. Someone in higher government circles was found with a personal connection to the [LDS] Church who helped this missionary and who ordered an immediate release and apology extended to the missionary. Someone was in a powerful position to release an innocent LDS stranger from jail, because people were linked to him who understood that these missionaries were from the Mormon Church, and they had respect for them and did not allow them to be treated that way.

Finally, practitioners frequently mentioned the themes of *public opinion starts with public perception*, and not only *influence within the circle of influence*, but also being in a position to *influence the decision making* of key leaders. Said one participant:

Particularly the Washington D.C. public affairs office by its dominant political environment started to focus more on the one-on-one based relationship building with leaders of various nations. It may be too broad to say that they can change the perception of the [LDS] Church in their respective countries, but the decision makers certainly have an influence within their own circle of influence. That circle of influence can be very large and impactful. They not only influence their circles, but most importantly they influence decision-making. Changing the image has perhaps less dominance on a larger scale than the actual cultivation of a decision making-environment whereby influence is manifested and by which an image can be changed or modified or approved.

7.) *The challenge factor: Cultural and transitional sensitivity*

Lastly, the seventh or final category with critical importance evolved from the emerging themes of the *challenge factors of cultural and transitional sensitivity*. These two significant complexities are the barriers to implementing the personal influence model at all times. The latter one, according to the participants, is the challenge of the frequent turnover in leadership assignments, ambassador missions, and practitioner replacements. As it is with any friendships, when it happens that close, confidential and personal ties are broken between parties, many of these once flourishing relationships simply cannot be handed over to another. They are typically personally sensitive with an involvement of emotional attachments. Said one participant:

Some ambassadors may be very connected to the [LDS] Church, and when a new diplomat comes, it may be hard to reestablish a relationship or fill the gap. ...

Often relationships are temporary. It's difficult, in certain societies like in Asia, where relationships are everything. You don't just show up and hand off a relationships and the next person has it. Their cultures honor people on the basis of these relationships. Nevertheless there are certainly changes in assignments, and transitions happen in high profile circles.

Similarly, when a practitioner retires or leaves the organization, personal relationships are taken away or leave the organization. Time and again, personal relationships that were useful to the organization become suddenly lost, and with the relationship goes the understanding of key issues. Said one interviewee:

It was explained to us before we took this assignment that we would make friends that last forever and while sometimes you see them first only as a contact information in a database, with time you will *own* that relationship. For instance a former public affairs professional lived in Japan for several years on a [LDS] Church assignment. He has strived to establish friendships with the ambassador but it never happened. Instead, he and the deputy ambassador, with time and through several personal interactions, became good friends. Just before the departure of this practitioner from our office as his assignment came to an end, this deputy ambassador invited him with his wife over to their home for lunch. Now, we don't know any personal acquaintance or friends at the mission of Japan, and we have not made any progress in that regard.

Despite the problems inherent in establishing personal relationships, the responses by and large confirmed that personal influence could certainly be a powerful asset in more successfully regulating public relations practice, much better than any other mass media

attempts. Nevertheless, among downsides of this approach include not getting media coverage that can enhance visibility or losing relationships when personnel are transferred. Having sufficient time to overlap between practitioners is strategically vital as well as to pursue the friendship until it is solid with the new person. There should be an introduction and an explanation as to why the transition is being made.

Moreover, findings indicate that when diplomats leave, it also presents a significant concern in a political sense. Said one interviewee:

An overlapping in relationships can be politically very sensitive; there are times when change in ambassadors or other government officials can occur because of political alliances in the given country; or for instance a regime change. That has to be done with a great deal of sensitivity, because if you are too closely aligned with the political regime then you're seen as a supporter of that particular regime, or the agenda, which may actually be a detriment to a future relationship.

As a solution to these challenges, respondents' insights showed parallel patterns. The resolution is often found in the willingness of proactive practitioners who without delay start over a new initiation of relationships with the following assigned diplomat or ambassador. The respondents indicated that one element that creates the most stress to them is relocation to different countries, where they're going to be meeting with new high profile people constantly; but if a practitioner builds relationships for her or himself, after eighteen months when they leave, these friendships likely die as well. Said one participant:

We always counsel the public affairs volunteers to build relationships on behalf of those who are facilitators of the relationships for those locals who are going to be

there long-term. We would rather have a relationship built with somebody who is there permanently.

Seeking out opportunities to meet with the newly assigned official is top priority to practitioners; thus, the pattern of *following established traditions* and *the consistency of annual events* allows public affairs to be engaged in discovering and instituting new acquaintances all over again. These events are planned and implemented with the purpose of bringing people of the same interests together. Essentially, these occasions allow practitioners, as well as high profile leaders, to participate in planned conferences and meetings where new associations follow-up with former associations, deepen existing acquaintances, revisit already close ties, and finally receiving updates on contemporary discussions. As one of the interviewees put it:

The Family Picnic annual event has been going on for 17 years now. The Festival of Lights event has been on the annual agenda for 32 years now and particularly in the Washington D.C. office there have been no changes in the strategic outreach to the public. The events our office organizes are great opportunities for getting to know cultural attachés, the administrative personnel of ambassadors. As far as interdependence is concerned, we can contact them when we are in need of something but that is not our main motive. There have been numerous times when the Embassy asks a favor of us and they contact us, so it is not unheard for them to call. Putting people together who both have needs and match those needs, people with talents and skills who can influence decision making for trade and commerce as well as reshaping their countries they represent. It is bringing

people together with similar interest who can be helpful and beneficial to each other.

Although one ambassador may leave and a new one commence, the staff of the former may be aware of the importance of an existing closer tie, and can therefore legitimize the importance of these events to the new ambassador. In terms of being *proactive*, the respondents found it to be exceptionally important to attend briefings put on by these new diplomats. One interviewee stated:

We found out when the ambassador would be speaking and we would go into those meetings, where they give an opportunity to ask questions or mingle before or after the event to start a conversation or a dialogue.

However, participant responses emphasized that personal relationships or friendships with opinion leaders translate differently in a foreign environment. Cultural sensitivity was a commonly mentioned factor in addressing the challenges of the personal influence model:

There is a fear that we may bring something into their culture they don't really want and the other is demonstrating a real cultural sensitivity and appreciation for them. This is a very, very international organization. We are in over 170 plus countries and have materials translated into well over 100 languages, so when we issue communications to our church members, they go to every corner of the globe. So we have to be very culturally sensitive. The way we accomplish that is mostly working with church members and church leaders in the local community or area.

Although, the [LDS] Church is a global organization with a presence in over 170 nations, its headquarters is based in the Salt Lake valley, for which it is frequently criticized as being predominantly American in influence and culture. The LDS Church is therefore careful to emphasize that if someone visits the [LDS] Church in Africa, the leaders of the [LDS] Church there are Africans; similarly in Russia, they are Russians; if you go to Japan they're Japanese. Because of the international nature of the [LDS] Church, its organization does not need to undergo any type of enculturation processes, because the local leaders of the organization assume most leadership responsibilities; therefore, it is not a challenge for them to fit into the culture, they are and have been fundamentally part of it. Said one of the participants:

There is an incredible level of familiarity with other cultures around the world, because most of these leaders have lived in various foreign cultures at one time or another, either as missionaries, businessmen or as church leaders. There is, however, a consistent and central communication that flows out of Salt Lake to the local [LDS] Church leaders in foreign areas. For the most part they speak with one voice. What they say in Utica, NY or Buenos Aires or in Tokyo are going to be very consistent with what's been said in Salt Lake City. The people who work in public affairs in those areas receive the same instructions, judgments and decisions based on the same principles.

Based on the respondents' observation, as practitioners build these key relationships, the objective in most cases is to build relationships between whoever the opinion leader is and the local church representative, the representative being one who stays there



permanently and who may be prominent in the profession. The relationship can therefore be better comprehended culturally as well as maintained long-term.

As commonly referenced in the interviews, participants felt that cultural sensitivity is not only manifested in rigorously cultural concerns but also in social attitudes as well. For instance, the transition condition typically depends on the willingness of the practitioner to pick up or start over the initiation and development of a relationship with a newly appointed high profile officer. The challenge is in fact manifested in the secular nature of societies and the social pressures and prejudices varying by culture and nation. Said one participant:

Many of the European ambassadors are secular, and feel that God is not needed.

In some secular countries it is very hard to knock on doors and get any type of response. Therefore, whenever we receive an invitation to go to the national day celebration of one of the European countries, I just jump on the chance. They are just so reserved, they hold back, and it's not that we are not trusted but the [LDS] Church is out of the mainstream, so it's a difficult wall to climb.

As a solution to these cultural challenges, respondents in the interviews commonly suggested the preparation of publications entitled Culture Grams, which are valuable sets of descriptions of different countries, their customs and traditions. Participants also noted that cultural differences should not get in the way, but practitioners along with high profile individuals should embrace the culture of others.

Sometimes we just have to be willing to take a deep breath and say we are all different. Cross-cultural differences can also challenge the adaptation of friendships and personal relationships. It is a big issue and mainly to do with the

time factor. Just with a recent appointment, the ambassador was kept calling and delaying, and it almost felt like, this approach was part of his culture, and he treated it accordingly rather than a priority meeting. Time is very fluid for some cultures and countries.

In conclusion, a final set of cultural differences was identified by the participants, namely, *cultural traditions, inherent nature of societal norms and expectations*. For example, in Africa's national culture, the LDS Church representatives are seen as inaccessibly well groomed, often appearing in business clothing, with suits and ties that alienate [LDS] Church representatives from the native inhabitants of a more habitual, ritual and conventional culture.

## **Discussion**

Falconi, White, Lorenzon and Johnson (2009) defined the role of personal influence based on three fundamental thoughts: first, personal influence is an individual influence based on attributes and status; secondly, personal influence is about relationship management and focused on how successful practitioners are at relational activities; and finally, this is a model of cultural dimensions. He further suggested that public relations is primarily about relationship building, but good public relations is about building relationships with people who may have a significant influence on the reputation of the organization. Furthermore, Toth (2007) emphasized that personal influence is actually individual influence in the public relations process, and that public relations is essentially interpersonal communication, where its power lies in status, trustworthiness and credibility of an individual.

My research objective was to answer the research questions specified in the literature review section. Based on current scholarly research, most researchers claim that this model is mainly applied and practiced in the Asian markets. My study provides an example of effective practice of the personal influence model in a western society, particularly within the U.S., in an organization that is not limited by national borders or social structures and that applies this model globally in its public affairs approach. The study also answers questions about the ethics of the personal influence model. It shows an organization where employees practice this approach without the consideration of organizational reputation, or representing themselves under cover.

The research questions were rooted in finding the legitimate and effective use of the personal influence model in Asian societies, but were taken a couple of steps further to examine whether this model could be or already is a legitimate and ethical practice in professional public relations in western societies. The personal influence model is indeed applicable to public relations practices outside of Asia. The study results concluded that the LDS Church, a global non-profit organization, has been able to build strong, reliable and trustworthy ties with influential leaders across the globe that made a significant favorable impact on organizational recognition, acceptance and reputation. The personal influence model is not only legitimately applied, ethically and effectively in the U.S. within the LDS Church for decades, but since the organization operates cross-culturally, the premise of practicing personal relations can be seen as not limited to Asia but can effectively operate in the global field of public relations.

The study further found that this model can be practiced ethically; even more ethically, in some cases, than traditional western models of public relations, as it requires the constant personal involvement, character and integrity of practitioners and a close and regular association with key publics. In this case, stakeholders viewed LDS practitioners as personal friends and developed a mutual expectation of strict standards of ethical conduct. The LDS practitioners unanimously concluded that each practitioner who represents the organizational mission strives to develop and nourish these high profile relations with highest regard and care, with a genuine interest and absolute involvement of the person throughout the friendship. The study showed that most of these relationships become very close friendships and long-term associations that have a significant impact on favorability toward the organization. In the practices of the LDS

public and international affairs, one of the key attributes of succeeding in relationship building efforts with influentials is that organizational ethics and personal integrity are perfectly aligned, and therefore practitioners and the organization are transparent in their efforts to build trust with their key publics.

The key components of this study were found significant to the extent that interpersonal relationships between LDS public affairs practitioners and key decision makers, with the application of personal influence or one-on-one associations, along with regular personalized interactions of parties, have the tendency to impact the broader perceptions of the organization. The findings further demonstrate that such attitudes opened numerous doors for establishing personally relevant and significant friendships with highly influential people. These key persons not only develop a respect and appreciation for individual practitioners of the [LDS] Church, but as a consequence of the personal influence model, they also come to hold the operation and mission of the organization in high regard.

Through qualitative constant comparison as formulated by Glaser and Strauss (1967), and with the use of grounded theory research, this study explored the procedures of a causal relationship between organizational awareness and perceived reputation through the implementation of the personal influence model. This study satisfied the criteria for evaluating qualitative studies. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested, qualitative research design tests trustworthiness and determine the effectiveness of a study through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. This research revealed the truthful patterns of interactions of public affairs practitioners. The credibility of this research was supported by the consistent pattern in interpretations of

what respondents meant, and such interpretations were heavily supported with verbatim statements.

This study further complied with the requirements of transferability as the research did strive to maintain the theoretical approach and parameters of the data. As Marshall and Rossman (2006) pointed out, transferability is one of the weaknesses of qualitative methods, but they also suggested that the main responsibility rests with the researcher who is conducting follow up research.

This study provided a context for future confirmability criterion for qualitative research, which suggests that results of the study must reflect others' confirmation of the study rather than reflecting the biases of the researcher. At the moment, the results of the study reflect one organization by one researcher. Other future researchers are encouraged to replicate this study in other organizations and other context to generate additional data that would lead to a similar conclusion.

With the data gathering and analysis processes, seven key emerging categories were identified from interviews with ten LDS public affairs professionals. The key components of the study were laid out systematically, grouped, and analyzed with supporting verbatim quotes. Through emerging theories of personal influence, the study found that personal influence has several essential components in terms of the outcome, or the amplified positive reputation of the organization. Therefore, upon the following conditions, the emerging theories of personal influence are realized and convey understanding.

The first element lies in the mission driven, religious nature of the organization. The second key component lies in the outreach attitude of building relationships, not with

an agenda-based mindset, but with the genuine motives of Christian obligation to benefit others. In terms of the credibility of the public relations profession, it is plausible that the most essential element to succeed is personal networking. Practitioners strive to build friendships with foreign ambassadors based on genuine motives enhanced by personality traits, attributes, without a specific political or business agenda.

Through the course of data interpretation, the main theoretical formulations identified the magnitude of increasing organizational public awareness through the building of key relationships with influential decision makers. The nature of this relationship building is characterized by initial face-to-face introductions, one-on-one interactions, and finally, personalized, dependent and trustworthy friendships. Practitioners professed their operations to be a striving to establish friendships through a genuine, neighborly attitude of caring without expectations in return.

Although, some practitioners may profess not entering relationships with an agenda of sought benefits, most may still call upon the intervention of influential leaders without hesitation and consider the level of their personal relationship as a source for a potential friend in need. Zajac and Olsen (1993) called these relationships as the *bank of goodwill* in which personal friendships allow favor exchanges with a long term hope of receiving assistance in times of need (p. 133).

Such service without expectations in return was also challenged by Hung (2007) in scholarly literature. She studied relationship cultivation strategies in different types of relationships and studied the various perspectives of cultivating personal relationships in the public relations field. She defined the nature of such relationships as *covenantal* or *win-win* relationships, because it allows practitioners to call upon the *bank of goodwill* of

another in times of need. Hung (2007) defined covenantal relationships mean that both participants commit to a common good by their open exchanges and the norm of reciprocity. She further added that in covenantal relationships individuals always provide others with an opportunity to “ask for insight, to provide criticism” (p. 456). Hung also pointed out that on the scale of relationship dimensions in the category of *concern for self-interest* are exploitive, manipulative and contractual, one sided relationships, while the category of *concern for others’ interest* includes a win-win zone with exchange, *covenantal* and *communal* relationships.

Plowman (1995) defined three symmetrical strategies in relationships, *cooperating*, through which, the parties bring together their interests and strive to reach mutually beneficial relationships. Being *unconditionally constructive* is the second category that considers whatever that is best for the relationship even if it requires unconditional sacrifices of position. Finally, in *win-win* or *no deal* relationship strategies the two parties find a beneficial solution through agreement on a deal that serves the benefit of both.

Studies found that practitioners are often unwilling to share their personal networks for professional purposes, because of the uncertainty of the outcome of these ‘handed around’ networks. Each LDS public affairs practitioner pointed out that when they build new relationships, their thought process never focuses on how they are benefiting from this relationship, nor how it benefited their organization; rather, their main motivation was how they can prove their genuine interest in others’ cause and offer assistance for the benefit of other countries in need.



Next, in order to form such an attitude, practitioners must develop characteristics of integrity, credibility and genuine interest in the wellbeing of others; practitioners must be individuals who are grounded in core values, are natural friend makers, have the skills, talents and abilities to bring the personal touch into newly initiated friendships, and the consistency requisite to nurture such friendships. The findings identified that these practitioners as individuals become a window through which the organization is seen, and a face by which organizational values and goals are recognized, identified and acknowledged. When this happens, personal influence can then be seen as an ethical model of public relations, in contrast with some of the U.S. criticisms that it is unethical. In fact, it could be argued that because personal influence revolves around genuine relationships, it can be more ethical than simple dissemination of information.

Finally, the findings also have shown that personal relationships, that is, the direct influence of a practitioner on leaders of prominent status, does in fact have a positive impact on how the organization is viewed by broader audiences, and can indeed support the function of the organization.

In today's world it is not enough to use the standard marketing tricks, such as mass mediated messages, to get the attention of stakeholders, especially influential government leaders and prominent leaders. Because of recent rapid technological developments, nowadays people realize that the control of the flow of information is much more challenging in an information rich society; the flow of information is in the hands of individuals now, especially through the Internet. Therefore, future public relations practices must focus more than ever on influencing individuals through positive, authentic relationships, as opposed to mass markets.

Practitioners must cultivate interpersonal skills today more than ever before. The most important attribute of a practitioner is the ability to build powerful personal connections. Consequently, personal influence as opinion leadership may also, to a large extent, depend on social proximity, how approachable influential leaders are, and what type of network relationships candidates bring to the table.

### *Limitations*

This research was limited to the study of one particular organization instead of the inclusion of several other non-profit or corporate organizations. Some researchers might have preferred to look at more functionally similar organizations in order to reach conclusions with more widely generalizable results. Also, as Rhee (2001) pointed out, depending on the nature of the organization, the impact, motives, and outcome of the personal influence approach may differ, and therefore the religious nature of the organization may present additional restraints beyond, for example, corporations or other mainstream institutions. Lastly, my study may contain a slight inherent bias because of the personally developed framework of the research. This skewed view might have impacted my ability to be completely objective.

### *Future Research*

Based on these limitations my recommendations for future research include the addition of several other organizations to the scope of this research and in-depth investigation as to how personal influence could work in other non-profit or even corporate environments. I would also suggest that additional studies could be conducted in other cultures around the world.

Lastly, this research focused primarily on the ethical examination of the personal influence model, which was added as a fifth component to the fundamental models of public relations. In order to receive a broader view of the ethical use of personal influence, a comparison between the ethical applications of the other four models in relation to personal influence is recommended.

## **Conclusion**

It has been an educational and eye-opening experience to conduct this somewhat pioneering study. The study has addressed the possibilities and constraints of the personal influence model of public relations and it has examined its potential applications across cultures, and addressed its ethical considerations. The research has also attempted to learn what pulls influential world leaders to an organization (in this case the LDS Church), and to better understand how public affairs professionals select and approach influential leaders in order to form friendships with them.

Public affairs in the LDS Church consists mainly of professionals and volunteer workers who strive to approach key decision makers with power and respectful positions in high profile circles within politics or international affairs. These professionals' utmost desire is to make friends with influential publics. Religious topics of any kind are typically not welcomed in such circles and do not generate success in approaching these men and women of prominence. Since religion and politics are, generally speaking, sensitive topics in such circles, they are rarely discussed and never initiated by public affairs practitioners of the LDS Church.

In order to successfully apply the personal influence model within these circles, the most important criterion is never to proselyte, promote, or otherwise manipulate. In the case of the LDS Church, there is a very fine line to walk when considering building relationships for a religious organization without advocating beliefs or making others feel that the organization's approach to establishing friendships is based on a single motive, that is, to invite these friends to join the organization.

As discussed earlier, one-on-one associations between practitioners and influential leaders gradually develop into personal friendships, involving a disposition toward recognition and mutual benefits. This was described by LDS practitioners not as short-term expectations but a long-term hope in the goodwill of key publics when a favor becomes necessary. As Hung (2007) and Plowman (1995) suggested, these relationships are characterized as win-win relationships, or covenantal relationships centered on the volunteer exchange of favors based on the common good and concern for others.

The two most effective approaches to relationship building in the implementation of the personal influence model, as demonstrated in LDS public affairs, lie in the conveying of personal dimensions in social networking and the commitment to build key relationships with genuine care and not with a preconceived organizational agenda. As discussed in the introduction section many relationships begin with casual acquaintances but as practitioners focus their attention on the person instead of the agenda, trust develops in the hearts of these worldwide leaders who may have been unfamiliar or perhaps even skeptical about the operations of the LDS Church.

One of the compelling findings of my study, in relation to the attributes and applied outcome of the personal influence model, was that the power of personal influence primarily lies not in the practitioner's social position but more importantly in the individual's character, emotional disposition, and personal identity as one-on-one relationships are initiated, developed and cultivated. As these personal friendships deepen, so do the public respect and recognition towards the organization become increasingly solidified.

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## **Appendix I.**

### Interview Questions

*\*Confidentiality: The interviews with subjects in their entire length and content were recorded, transcribed and treated confidentially, and only those directly involved with the research had access to them. Subjects were volunteers and were not coerced into participation nor penalized for non-participation. Subjects were not at any risk in regards to their comments. The names of subjects were not attached to their comments. The research is disclosed only upon subjects' prior approval. (In interview questions The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is referred to as the 'organization'.)*

#### 1) Person Specific

- a) What brought you to work in the public and international affairs capacity in the organization?
- b) What is it about public affairs that first attracted you to work in the field?
- c) How would you define public relations practice today?

#### 2) Organization Specific

- a) How are personal relationships built on a regular/traditional basis between this organization and key publics/decision makers?
- b) How did this approach (2a) historically develop within this organization?
- c) Did relationships with key leaders through one-on-one communication sustain the organization's interests over the years and if so, how?
- d) Can you give me specific examples how this approach (2b) impacts public perception, especially with high profile leaders?

#### 3) Relationship Specific

- a) How would you define the core elements of establishing personal relationships?
- b) What makes a relationship between an organization and its stakeholders long-term, mutually beneficial and flourishing?
- c) Is there a certain type of characteristic that a public relations professional must possess or gradually develop in order to succeed in building flourishing and personal relationships with key decision makers?
- d) How is this approach (3a) applicable to public affairs practices of this specific organization?

#### 4) Relationship & Outcome Specific

- a) Is personal influence and public perception interrelated?
- b) How are the fruits of mutually beneficial personal relationships with influential leaders influence the perception of the organization in local and global environments?
- c) What are some of the challenges of the personal influence model and what would you suggest as solution to the problem?
- d) Where do you see the advantages and disadvantages of applying the personal influence model in the worldwide public relations practice?