Received 23 May 2012
Revised 20 December 2012
Accepted 25 February 2013

The role of stewardship in leadership

Applying the contingency theory of leadership to relationship cultivation practices of public relations practitioners

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Abstract

Purpose – Using the contingency theory's classification of leaders, the purpose of this paper is to examine how the categories of public relations leaders incorporate relationship building tactics into their public relations programming and explore how this categorization of leaders corresponds with existing public relations role theory.

Design/methodology/approach – A survey ($n = 539$) of public relations practitioners in the USA was carried out using established scales for the contingency theory of leadership and public relations role theory.

Findings – The contingency theory of leadership accurately describes the leadership styles enacted by the industry. An individual's use of stewardship strategies during public relations programming was successfully able to predict leadership orientation.

Originality/value – The results strengthen the argument posed the contingency theory of accommodation in public relations that environmental factors have strong implications on industry practices. One's leadership traits are not sufficient by themselves in determining who will succeed in managing and leading different professional scenarios.

Keywords Leadership, Career development, Public relations, Stewardship

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Leadership has been proven to be a difficult concept for scholars to define. Although academics and industry leaders intuitively know what leadership means, it has different meanings for different people. Attempts to define leadership reveal the subtle differences for each theoretical perspective. In the past 50 years, more than 65 theories have been proposed to describe leadership and quality leadership (Fleishman *et al.*, 1991).

To conceptualize leadership, several dimensions have been measured over the years, including power distribution (Cogliser and Schriesheim, 2000), goal achievement (Piccolo and Colquitt, 2006), skills and personality traits (Judge *et al.*, 2002), and situation specifics (Vroom and Jago, 2007). Despite the many leadership definitions and classification systems, several components have emerged as being central to the concept. Northouse (2004) summarized these leadership theories and concluded that "leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (p. 3).

This research was funded by the Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations in accordance to a leadership grant received in 2008.

Journal of Communication Management
Vol. 17 No. 4, 2013
pp. 324-340

1363-254X
DOI 10.1108/JCOM-05-2012-0041

Although the study of leadership is relatively new to public relations scholars, the concept has been widely discussed by the industry's associations around the world. Aside from the professional development and leadership workshops hosted by the Public Relations Society of America, the Canadian Public Relations Society, and the Korea Public Relations Society, industry associations have regularly conducted programs and research on understanding and improving public relations leadership. For example, the Hispanic Public Relations Association was created to foster leadership development among Latino practitioners, and the Chartered Institute for Public Relations in the UK launched a "Diversity Matters" campaign to increase the numbers of diverse populations into industry leadership positions.

Associations, ranging from PRSA to the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa, elect individuals at local, regional, and national levels to provide professional and leadership development opportunities. This engagement allows practitioners to focus on strategic relationship cultivation for themselves and their organizations. The focus on relationship building creates patterns of individual behaviors and professional standards, which can prove beneficial in providing leadership for crises and organizational efforts.

But, this strategic leadership is not the only type of leadership in the public relations industry. Leadership is also recognized through public relations excellence, which is most often noted through awards, such as the International Association of Business Communicators' Gold Quill Awards or the Golden World Award from the International Public Relations Association. Awards represent exemplary professional development in skills, creativity, and resourcefulness. The leaders of award-winning campaigns are prime examples of public relations tactical leadership.

Because of the different characteristics of leadership, the concept has been difficult to define within the context of the public relations industry. Combined with the division of managerial and tactical leaders, the various specializations (e.g. corporate communications, fundraising, and lobbying) and organizational goals (e.g. crisis management, reputation management) create a murky environment to create a clear definition of what constitutes leadership and how it impacts the practice. However, Fiedler (1964) proposed a new theory of leadership, which is applicable to public relations, that provides some clarity to how leadership is carried out in organizations. The contingency theory of leadership illustrates how managers and technicians thrive in leadership positions in specific contexts by measuring their orientation to relationship building.

The contingency theory of leadership has proven to be one of the most valid and reliable measures of an individual's leadership potential. The purpose of this study is to examine the accuracy of the contingency theory in describing public relations leaders. Using the contingency theory's classification of leaders, this study examines how the categories of public relations leaders incorporate relationship building tactics into their public relations programming and explores how this categorization of leaders corresponds with specific stewardship strategies.

Literature review

Proposed by Cancel *et al.* (1997), the contingency theory of public relations provided an alternative perspective to the normative approach to the field as outlined by the excellence theory. Rather than proposing that the two-way symmetrical approach to public relations was the ideal approach for practitioners, the contingency theory advocated that as the situations and environmental factors changed so should the practice of public relations. Thus, practitioners were more concerned with what behaviors and messaging strategies would have the most impact at the time given the current conditions of the campaign. As a result of the qualitative interviews (Cancel *et al.*, 1999) and surveys of public relations industry leaders (Reber and Cameron, 2003), the contingency theory of public relations has been refined to focus on five key dimensions that affect the practice of public relations: external threats, external public characteristics, organizational characteristics, public relations department characteristics, and dominant coalition characteristics. While varying levels of support have been found for these environmental factors, contingency continues to describe public relations successes as one being susceptible to current situations (Cameron *et al.*, 2008). Situational variables also are a key component in identifying an individual's leadership style in the contingency theory of leadership.

Contingency theory of leadership

Predating the contingency theory of public relations by more than 20 years, the contingency theory of leadership tries to match individuals to appropriate situations based on the individual's leadership style (Fiedler and Chemers, 1974). Fiedler developed the theory by studying leaders in different contexts by assessing leadership styles, where people worked, and how effective they were (Fiedler 1964, 1967). After analyzing the styles of hundreds of good and bad leaders, he made empirically grounded generalizations about which styles were most successful in particular settings.

Within contingency theory, leadership styles are described as task-motivated or relationship motivated. Task-motivated leaders are concerned primarily with reaching a goal whereas relationship-oriented leaders are concerned with developing lasting relationships with individuals or organizations (Yun *et al.*, 2006). One's orientation is measured through Fiedler's "least preferred coworker" (LPC) scale, which is described more thoroughly in the method section. Contingency theory uses an individual's orientation to predict in which type of situation he or she will be an effective leader. It is important to note that contingency theory stresses that leaders will not be effective in all situations. If an individual's orientation is a good match for the situation, then it is likely that he/she will b good at the job. If one's style does not match the situation, then it is likely that they will most likely fail (Kriger and Seng, 2005).

Contingency theory suggests that leader-member relations, task structure, and position power characterize the various leadership situations. Leader-member relations refers to the group atmosphere and the degree of confidence and loyalty that followers feel for the leader (Crosson *et al.*, 2008). Task structure refers to the degree to which the requirements of a task are clear and spelled out while position power refers to the amount of authority a leader has to reward or punish followers (Bradshaw, 2009).

As shown in Table IV, these three variables create eight distinct situations where the theory posits that individuals of certain LPC scores will thrive. Individuals who are relationship-motivated (high LPC score) will be effective in situations where there is some degree of certainty but things are neither under their control nor out of their control.

Contingency theory has several strengths. Given the growing amount of practitioner-oriented literature on "how to be a successful leader," contingency theory that has been supported by considerable evidence that it offers a valid, reliable approach to explaining effective leadership (e.g. Peters *et al.*, 1985; Strube and Garcia, 1981). The theory has forced scholars to recognize that the context of situations impact a leader's effectiveness. Before the contingency theory, leadership studies primarily applied a cookie-cutter approach to understanding leadership by examining an individual's traits and skills (Vroom and Jago, 2007). However, this approach did not adequately describe leadership. Data from contingency theory studies have demonstrated the impact of the situation and have allowed scholars to predict the probability of leadership effectiveness for a given individual in a given situation (Taormina, 2008). But, of utmost importance to the study of leadership, contingency theory argues that leaders should not be expected to lead in every situation and that organizations should try to place leaders in optimal situations (Finkelstein *et al.*, 2008).

Contingency theory has been criticized most often because it fails to explain fully why individuals with certain leadership styles are more effective in specific situation types (Fry and Kriger, 2009). Fiedler (1993) has attempted to explain that task-oriented leaders are successful in extreme situations because they feel more certain in contexts where they have a lot of control over specific tasks and they feel comfortable exerting themselves strongly. On the other hand, relationship-oriented leaders are not effective in extreme situations because when they have a lot of control, they often overact; in situations where they have little control, they tend to focus on relationships so much that they fail to accomplish the task. But, when moderate situations are present, they are effective because they are allowed to focus on relationship issues where a task-oriented leader would feel frustrated because of the lack of certainty. Critics have often found this explanation inadequate (Avolio *et al.*, 2009).

A second criticism of contingency theory involves the measurement of the LPC score because its measurement does not seem valid on the surface (Miller *et al.*, 2004). However, the repeated tests have shown that it is a highly reliable and valid index. LPC is a measure of an individual's motivational hierarchy. Individuals who are highly tasks motivated see their LPC in a negative light because that person gets in the way of their own task accomplishment. Individuals who are relationship oriented, on the other hand, see their LPC in more positive terms because their primary need motivation is to get along with people and only their secondary needs focus around task accomplishment (Leskiw and Singh, 2007). In short, the LPC scale measures a respondent's style by assessing the degree to which the respondent sees another person as getting in the way of personal accomplishment.

Despite these criticisms, Fiedler's contingency theory of leadership has proven to be a valid and reliable measure of an individual's leadership effectiveness. To test this theoretical perspective in the public relations setting, the study's first research question explores what type of leaders the industry has:

RQ1. Are public relations practitioners more task-oriented or relationship-oriented based on their LPC scores, and do demographic and organizational variables influence one's orientation?

Contingency theory espouses that everyone has leadership potential (Packard, 2009). However, leadership skills are not always recognized when internal politics, organizational culture, and assigned tasks are factored into the leadership equation (Vigoda-Gadot, 2007). Given an organization's hierarchy, mid-level managers and ground-level employees often have task leadership skills but fail to recognize them because they are not a part of upper management (Fiedler, 2006). Individuals that are not aware of their potential fail to grow professionally. Studying senior public relations practitioners, Meng and Heyman (2009) found that one's self-perception of leadership was a key indicator of his or her ability to bring a team together and provide a vision for the organization. Therefore, a second research question was created to compare an individual's perceived leadership with the contingency theory classification:

> *RQ2.* Do public relations practitioners perceive themselves to be leaders despite their different professional orientations?

Stewardship and the contingency theory

Though it took nearly 15 years for public relations scholars to investigate the role of relationship management since Ferguson (1984) first introduced the topic, the industry and academics have supported the emergence of this theoretical paradigm to explain public relations programming. Bruning and Ledingham (1998) explained that the relationship between an organization and its stakeholders is important because "the actions of either can impact the economic, social, cultural, or political well-being of the other" (p. 62). It has been proposed that studying the interactions, transactions, and exchanges between an organization and its publics would provide an understanding of the relationship (Broom *et al.*, 2000). Kelly (2001) advocated that public relations practitioners should incorporate stewardship into all public relations efforts to ensure long-term organizational successes. The four stewardship strategies have been found by other scholars to have significant impacts on the organization-public relationship (Waters, 2009; Worley and Little, 2002).

Reciprocity. On an applied level, reciprocity simply means that organizations demonstrate gratitude toward their supportive stakeholders. Two underlying dimensions of reciprocity are acknowledgement of publics and sincere expressions of appreciation on behalf of the organization. Grunig and White (1992) viewed reciprocity as being the basis for social responsibility. When publics adopt positive attitudes and behavior that support organizations, organizations have an obligation to reciprocate that support. Through this behavior, organizations can maintain social balance with their publics.

Responsibility. When organizations engage in behaviors that impact those outside the organization, then it has an obligation to its stakeholders to act in a socially responsible manner. This component of stewardship is very similar to the "keeping promises" strategy proposed by Hung (2002). This element of responsibility centers on an organization's commitment to its publics for what it has said it would do.

Reporting. Organizations need to keep their publics informed about developments on issues for which support was sought as well as providing basic information on organizational efforts that impact communities. Accountability is demonstrated by providing open, accurate information to their publics. Providing information about organizational successes and failures demonstrates an organization's strong commitment to building long-lasting relationships with key stakeholders (Golob and Bartlett, 2007).

Relationship nurturing. As scholarship documents the impact of relationship cultivation, practitioners' abilities to nurture those relationships becomes more important for long-term success. To truly reach this level, organizations must recognize the importance of supportive publics and keep them in mind when any decisions are made. Though Kelly (2001) does not outline specific behaviors associated with relationship nurturing, organizations must consider different avenues of engaging key stakeholders as current involvement with an organization has been shown to be a powerful predictor of future behavioral intention (Bortree and Waters, 2010).

As the relationship management focus grows within the public relations industry, it is becoming increasingly important for practitioners to understand and to incorporate relationship cultivation strategies into their routine behaviors. The third research question seeks to determine if there are significant differences among the contingency theory categories with regards to how often they use the four stewardship strategies:

RQ3. Do the three types of contingency theory leaders incorporate stewardship into their work at different proportions?

While the previous three research questions provide an opportunity to examine the descriptive power of the contingency theory in a public relations context, it is important to evaluate its predictive powers as well to determine the theory's impact. The final research question tests how well one's contingency theory score is predicted by the four stewardship strategies. Given that stewardship focuses on relationship cultivation, the theory should be able to use one's incorporation of stewardship activities to determine whether the individual is task oriented, relationship oriented, or independent:

RQ4. Can the level of stewardship incorporated into a public relations practitioner's daily routine be used to predict his/her contingency theory of leadership category?

Method

Researchers sought to obtain permission from the Public Relations Society of America to conduct a random sampling of its membership for this project. However, the organization denied permission to survey its national membership. In its denial, the Association said that the researchers could contact individual chapters and ask if they wanted to participate. The leadership of 20 chapters were contacted, and 11 of them agreed to participate in this project. To increase the number of practitioners and to provide a more holistic view of the public relations industry, 15 additional state and local public relations organizations were contacted and asked to participate in the study. Nine of these organizations participated in the study. Pen-and-paper surveys were mailed to the members of these public relations organizations. Of the 1,635 surveys mailed, 539 useable surveys were returned for a response rate of 32.9 percent.

The survey for this study used existing scales to collect data for the study's research questions. Leadership was measured using Fiedler and Chemers (1984) LPC measure, which asks participants to evaluate the coworker with whom they work least well using 18 semantic differential items. These items are measured from one to eight and collapsed into three categories (high, medium, and low) based on a summed total. Low LPC scores have been found to be correlated with individuals who excel in task-oriented situations while individuals with high LPC scores have been found to thrive in relationship-oriented situations. Medium LPC scores have been found to be independent in regards to being task or relationship-oriented in nature. The participants' self-perceptions of their own leadership were determined by asking participants' to evaluate their own leadership skills using a nine-point Likert scale. This same scale was used to determine how often the practitioners incorporated the four stewardship strategies into their daily programming; the stewardship scales were modified from a fundraising-focused study (Waters, 2009) so that they could be applied across all organizations.

Cronbach's α values were calculated for the four stewardship strategies. All items were found to be reliable as the stewardship strategies ranged from a low of $\alpha = 0.79$ for relationship nurturing to a high of $\alpha = 0.86$ for reporting. (Carmines and Zeller, 1979).

Results

The participants in this study represented a broad range of public relations experience. Reflecting the documented feminization of the field, 63.3 percent of the participants were women ($n = 341$) compared to 198 men (36.7 percent). Caucasians comprised the vast majority of the participants (78 percent), followed by Hispanic/Latinos (9 percent), African-Americans (6 percent), and Asians (4 percent). Nearly 3 percent self-selected other as their racial background. Slightly more than half of the sample (56.8 percent) of the sample were members of Public Relations Society of America while the remaining 43.2 percent are members of various state and local public relations societies. On average, the practitioners had an average 12.6 years (SD = 5.67) of experience in public relations, ranging from a low of just under two years to a high of 28 years of experience. Overwhelmingly, the practitioners lacked APR certification from PRSA as only 144 practitioners ($n = 26.7$ percent) had achieved that designation; 395 practitioners ($n = 73.3$ percent) had not earned the certification.

The first research question sought to determine what situations public relations practitioners are most likely to be equipped to lead based on their evaluation of their LPC using contingency theory. A simple frequency evaluation shows that practitioners are most likely to be either relationship oriented (44 percent) or task oriented (33.4 percent). Only 22.6 percent of the respondents were evaluated to be independent – neither relationship nor task-focused. χ^2-statistics were calculated to interpret the power of the contingency theory in public relations settings. Nearly half of the relationship-oriented practitioners (49.1 percent) had earned their APR certification, and statistically they were more likely to have earned this designation when compared to independent (30.4 percent) and task-oriented (6.67 percent) practitioners ($\chi^2 = 70.03$, df = 2, $p < 0.001$). Males were more evenly distributed across the relationship-oriented (32.8 percent), task-oriented (34.8 percent), and independent practitioner categories (32.3 percent) compared to the distribution of females across the same categories (16.7, 32.6, and 50.7 percent, respectively). This distribution was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 24.22$, df = 2, $p < 0.001$). Task-oriented leaders had significant work experience ($m = 7.14$, SD = 1.89) though it was considerably less than relationship-oriented leaders ($m = 12.82$, SD = 2.49) and independent practitioners ($m = 22.31$, SD = 2.41). Bonferroni's tests confirmed that all differences were statistically significant between these three groups ($F(2, 536) = 1{,}256.93$, $p < 0.001$).

To answer the second research question, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine if the contingency theory of leadership's classifications corresponded to an individual's own self-perceptions of leadership. Individuals who were evaluated to be a task-oriented practitioner were least likely to perceive themselves to be a leader ($m = 5.89$, SD = 1.02) while relationship-oriented practitioners were most likely to consider themselves to be a leader ($m = 8.08$, SD = 1.06). Independent practitioners fell in the middle of the two groups ($m = 7.06$, SD = 0.98). These differences were statistically significant ($F(2, 536) = 177.41$, $p < 0.001$). Similarly, public relations practitioners with APR certification ($m = 7.37$, SD = 1.17) considered themselves to be leaders more than non-certified practitioners ($m = 6.73$, SD = 1.30). This difference was also statistically significant ($F(1, 537) = 26.59$, $p < 0.001$). Gender did not have an influence on whether the practitioners considered themselves to be leaders ($F(1, 537) = 0.86$, $p = 0.35$) as males ($m = 6.96$, SD = 1.30) and females ($m = 6.86$, SD = 1.29) had similar self-perceptions.

The third research question sought to determine whether public relations practitioners in the different contingency theory groupings incorporated stewardship into their work activities in similar proportions. As Table I shows, there were significant differences between the three practitioner classifications and the four stewardship strategies. Bonferroni's tests were conducted to determine statistical significance between the contingency theory groupings. Of the four stewardship strategies, task-oriented practitioners were most likely to be involved in actions of reciprocity, such as demonstrating gratitude and recognizing stakeholders publicly, more often than relationship-oriented practitioners (md = 0.37, $p < 0.01$) and independent practitioners (md = 0.47, $p < 0.001$). Task-oriented practitioners were more likely to be involved in reporting duties than relationship-oriented practitioners (md = 0.31, $p < 0.05$); however, there was no statistical difference between task-oriented and independent practitioners. Both relationship-oriented (md = 0.56, $p < 0.001$) and independent practitioners (md = 54, $p < 0.001$) were more likely to use responsibility strategies than their task-oriented counterparts. Finally, the relationship nurturing strategy was used statistically more often by relationship-oriented practitioners than task-oriented (md = 0.96, $p < 0.001$) and independent practitioners (md = 0.33, $p < 0.05$).

The fourth research question sought to determine if the practitioners' incorporation of the four stewardship strategies into their own daily public relations work could predict which practitioners were most likely to be classified as a relationship-oriented practitioner. Discriminant analysis was used to see if contingency categorization could be predicted by using the stewardship strategies as the independent variables and the participants' contingency theory groupings as the dependent variable.

As Table II shows, the most important variable that led to group prediction was relationship nurturing. The function's Wilks' λ value means that 76 percent of the variance is not explained by the group differences. When examining the interaction of the stewardship strategies, reporting and relationship nurturing were the ones that differentiated between the three groups the most. However, all were used to create the model to predict an individual's leadership orientation:

$$\text{Discriminant function score} = -0.84 - 0.40\,(\text{reciprocity}) + 0.38\,(\text{responsibility}) - 0.52\,(\text{reporting}) + 0.72\,(\text{relationship nurturing})$$

The canonical correlation of the discriminant function, $R = 0.47$, means that there is a moderate correlation between the independent variables together and the discriminant function score. The Wilks' λ of the function was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 141.45$, df = 8, $p < 0.001$). The group centroids for the three contingency

Stewardship strategy	Task-oriented group mean (SD) $n = 180$	Independent group mean (SD) $n = 122$	Relationship-oriented group mean (SD) $n = 237$	MS	$F(2, 536)$	p-value
Reciprocity	7.33 (0.95)	6.86 (1.10)	6.98 (1.09)	9.59	8.65	0.000
Responsibility	6.48 (1.26)	7.03 (1.00)	7.04 (1.29)	18.51	12.39	0.000
Reporting	7.17 (1.10)	7.10 (0.97)	6.86 (1.14)	5.33	4.48	0.012
Relationship nurturing	6.05 (1.20)	6.68 (1.16)	7.01 (1.07)	47.54	39.70	0.000

Table I. One-way ANOVA on the incorporation of stewardship strategies by the three contingency theory of leadership categories groupings of this function are −0.72, 0.16, and 0.47, respectively, indicate that the function is fairly discriminating between the groupings.

Given the statistical significance, the model can be tested to see if it can properly predict group membership. As Table III shows, the model was very accurate in predicting group membership for individuals who were task-oriented, and it had moderate levels of success with classifying independent and relationship-oriented practitioners as it correctly predicted 223 of 539 cases (41.4 percent).

To determine if this hit rate was statistically significant, the *t*-value was calculated and found to be significant ($t = -1.85$, $df = 537$, $p < 0.05$). Therefore, the fourth research question found that leadership orientation can be predicted by measuring stewardship utilization.

Discussion

Public relations practitioners are most often oriented to be leaders in situations that focus on organizational relationship issues. Those oriented to carry out public relations programming are the second largest group of public relations practitioners although they only slightly outnumber practitioners with a neutral orientation. When the contingency theory of leadership is compared with public relations scholarship, the results demonstrate that the two fields are reasonably compatible with one another. Just as the contingency theory of public relations has repeatedly shown that public relations practitioners adapt their campaigns and programming based on environmental factors, the contingency theory of leadership reveals that the varied situations a public relations practitioner may encounter call on different approaches to leadership depending on whether it is a relationship or task-focused situation.

Further, reflecting the industry's growing acceptance on the importance of long-term relationships with stakeholders, all three types of leadership-oriented practitioners reported that they frequently incorporated stewardship into their public relations efforts. Relationship-oriented practitioners expressed that they were more

Table II. Discriminant analysis of incorporation of Stewardship strategies into daily work activities

	B	B	Wilks' λ	$F(2, 536)$
Constant	−0.84			
Reciprocity	−0.41	−0.42	0.80	21.87***
Responsibility	0.38	0.46	0.79	18.85***
Reporting	−0.52	−0.56	0.81	27.20***
Relationship nurturing	0.72	0.78	0.86	39.69***

Notes: $R = 0.47$, Wilks' λ of function $= 0.76$, $\chi^2 = 141.45$, $df = 8$, centroids $= -0.72$, 0.16, and 0.47, ***$p < 0.001$

Table III. Classification matrix of discriminant analysis function

		Predicted	
Actual	Task-oriented	Independent	Relationship-oriented
Task-oriented	114	33	33
Independent	42	63	132
Relationship-oriented	39	37	46

Notes: $\chi^2 = 102.67$, $df = 4$, $p < 0.001$

likely to engage in relationship cultivation behaviors that involve organizational changes as opposed to task-oriented leaders who were more likely to use reciprocity and reporting stewardship strategies.

Although the contingency theory of public relations, the contingency theory of leadership, and relationship cultivation mesh well conceptually, it is necessary to revisit Table IV and explore the different situations to explore their relevance to public relations efforts. According to contingency theory, relationship-oriented practitioners (high LPC scores) thrive in conditions when turmoil is present between an organization and its stakeholders. Regardless of the power (e.g. providing rewards or punishment) and the task structure (e.g. degree to which instructions are clear), these practitioners focus on how a situation can be improved by focusing on the desired "win-win" zone in decisions that impact organizations and stakeholders. Whether the situation involves crisis management, negotiation of human resources issues, or the donation of a multi-million dollar charitable gift, the focus for these practitioners rests in ensuring a long-term relationship after the current situation. As such, these practitioners are involved with acting as the voice of outside stakeholders when decisions are made internally. They push organizations to be a good citizen and engage in responsible behaviors. Rather than simply reporting organizational efforts and thanking stakeholders for involvement, these practitioners carefully work to grow these relationships and ensure that organizations think about the impact of behaviors on the community before making final decisions on efforts that impact those outside the organization.

Task-oriented leaders thrive in positive and negative environments that involve organizations and stakeholders because they focus on short-term successes. They are not focused on long-term relationship growth and management. These practitioners examine the situation at hand and turn to the instructions given to carry out an effort. If a situation between an organization and its publics is negative (e.g. a crisis), then the task-oriented practitioner will turn to the crisis communication plan and follow specific instructions for managing the crisis (e.g. appointing a spokesperson, holding news conferences). In positive times, the same individual will turn to working knowledge of the industry or practitioner workshops to follow specific instructions for campaign implementation and evaluation. This individual's orientation is narrowly focused on tasks rather than on relationships. In regards to Category 8 in Table IV, Fiedler (2006) says that task-oriented leaders thrive in poor environments with little power and sparse instructions, because these individuals fall back on their past experiences and meticulously follow what worked for them in the past in similar situations – again, thinking narrowly on tasks. These situations often involve recognizing stakeholders involved in situations and keeping them informed of on-going organizational efforts; coincidentally, these are the two stewardship strategies most often utilized by these practitioners.

Good leader-member relations				Poor leader-member relations			
High task structure		Low task structure		High task structure		Low task structure	
Strong position power	Weak position power	Strong position power	Weak position power	Strong position power	Weak position power	Strong position power	Weak position power
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Low LPCs and middle LPCs				High LPCs			Low LPCs

Table IV. Visual representation of the contingency theory of leadership

Independent practitioners, as labeled by contingency theory, are not independent in the sense that they are external to the organization. It is imperative to remember that the independent label means that they have qualities of both relationship and task-oriented leaders, but one does not dominate the other. This orientation is often viewed as a senior strategist in an organization (Fiedler, 1993), which corresponds with this study's findings that independent practitioners have the most years of experience in the industry. In defending the contingency theory, Fiedler (2006) argued that independent practitioners rarely thrive in situations with poor environments between an organization and its audiences because they lack the strong relationship-orientation needed to resolve the often strong tensions that exist between the two groups. Instead, they are most often successful in offering advice in situations where a combined task and relationship focus are helpful. For public relations, these skills are most often desired in boundary spanning and environmental scanning situations that allow prominent individuals to venture out into the community to not only represent the organization but also to listen to concerns. Given these situations, it is not surprisingly that independent practitioners most often use reporting (e.g. talking to stakeholders about organizational efforts) and responsibility (e.g. reminding leadership about the impact of organization efforts on the community).

Implications for practice

Theoretically, the contingency perspective of leadership accurately predicts and describes public relations. However, further analysis reveals some perhaps troubling implications for the future of the industry. Studies have shown that the strongest leaders have solid perceptions of themselves being leaders (e.g. Meng and Heyman, 2009). However, this study found that task-oriented leaders rarely considered themselves as leaders with a mean score slightly greater than the scale's neutral point. Although these individuals play a significant role in the creation, implementation, and evaluation of public relations programming, they fail to see their leadership potential.

Leadership studies have routinely found that one's ability to lead grows as they progress professionally (Elkins and Keller, 2003); however, studies also reiterate the importance of having a strong personal foundation on which to build those leadership skills (Thomas, 2009). The public relations industry must do more to encourage the professional development of its practitioners and provide positive messages that they are industry leaders even if they primarily engage in tactical behaviors. As contingency theory suggests, leaders are not solely the senior management of an organization. Leaders are at every layer of an organization. Identifying public relations leaders at lower levels of an organization early on and fostering their personal and professional development will result in stronger leadership not only for the organization (Sloan *et al.*, 2003), but also for the industry as it jostles with other internal departments for its place in an organization (Egeberg, 2003).

To develop future industry leaders, PRSA, IABC, and the many state and local organizations must ensure that its professional development workshops are easily accessible for junior practitioners. Organizations have begun expanding their programs by developing webinars that allow for participation from around the globe; however, cost remains prohibitive for many younger practitioners. Based on the participants in this survey, younger practitioners are less likely to be members of PRSA than senior practitioners ($F(1, 437) = 186.14$, $p < 0.001$). PRSA needs to evaluate the cost of membership and its programmatic offerings to encourage more practitioners to join the organization.

Implications to theory
The contingency theory of leadership proved to be a strong predictor of task-oriented leaders in the public relations industry; however, it was not as clear for those practitioners with an independent and relationship orientation. Fiedler has criticized many for failing to describe why individuals of certain orientations thrive under specific situations. By adding the dimensions of stewardship into the discussion, clearer pictures begin to emerge. Public relations literature, specifically the contingency theory of public relations, has not discussed specific relationship cultivation strategies in relation to the division of labor within an organization, but the contingency theory of leadership demonstrates how the four stewardship strategies naturally fall into managerial and tactical categories. As with most practices and professions, senior practitioners in public relations (i.e. those most likely to be independent or relationship-oriented leaders) were more likely to engage in advanced stewardship strategies (e.g. responsibility and relationship nurturing) while younger practitioners most often used tactically oriented stewardship (e.g. reciprocity and reporting). In other words, senior practitioners were more focussed on relationship cultivation and management while younger practitioners concentrated their efforts on demonstrating stewardship through tactical elements, such as annual reports and direct mailings, to provide information important to the relationship but did not participate in relationship-encouraging conversations and exchanges.

The exploration of stewardship not only suggests public relations researchers should explore the relationship between an individual's organization role and the litany of cultivation strategies suggested by public relations scholars. However, more important for this study's theoretical framework, this insight may help further explicate Fiedler's (1993) "black box," which has been criticized for not providing enough distinctions between the leadership styles and situations, specifically for individuals with low and midrange LPC scores since they primarily are associated with the same situations in Table IV (Fry and Kriger, 2009). Although the philosophy of social science favors parsimonious theories, the clarification added by distinctive stewardship strategies helped provide additional details to interpret the various situations outlined by the contingency theory. The findings of this study indicate that the inclusion of a fourth variable – perhaps one that distinguishes between types of tasks (not just degree of task instruction) – could satisfy contingency theory critics.

Conclusion
Public relations scholars have taken many different paths to understand and define leadership in the industry. Aldoory (1998) found that personalities were a significant influence for female practitioners when they encountered different workplace situations with colleagues. Public relations leaders are more likely to use a leadership style that strives for organizational motivation to achieve goals rather than one that uses a system of rewards and punishments to achieve goals (Werder and Holtzhausen, 2009; Aldoory and Toth, 2004). Choi and Choi (2007) found that public relations leaders routinely enacted six distinct behaviors to gain organizational respect and favor. Reflecting some of the first leadership studies on trait leadership, Berger *et al.* (2007) identified individual traits that lead to an individual's success in gaining influence in an organization. These studies, however, fail to take the impact of situations into leadership performance.

Just as the contingency theory of public relations challenged the notion of a normative approach to public relations excellence by saying that environmental variables must be considered, the contingency theory of leadership says that all practitioners have the potential to be an industry leader. Regardless of age and experience, practitioners do not need to be in the organization's dominant coalition to be leaders. They simply need to recognize how their skills and experiences are useful to organizations in a variety of situations.

Limitations

Despite the larger sample size, it is important to note the study's limitations. First, this study is only generalizable to the PRSA chapters and state/local public relations organizations that participated in the study. The PRSA Research Board declined to allow a survey of the entire national PRSA membership, and the researchers wanted to honor the wishes of PRSA's leadership. Therefore, while the contingency theory of leadership appears to describe and predict public relations behavior well, this is not a sample that can be generalized to the entire industry. Also, because association membership was required to be included in this study, there are many public relations practitioners not included for a variety of personal reasons (e.g. membership costs, relevance). It is important to note that many leaders, either from tactical agencies or the strategic organization side, are not members of associations as well. In fact, many who are involved in stakeholder relationships may not even consider themselves to be public relations practitioners. Non-association practitioners need to be studied to further expand the field's understanding of public relations leadership.

Future research

Given the support and encouragement of the Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations, this study provides many possibilities for future explorations of what public relations leadership means. On a simplistic level, surveys of an entire association membership – whether PRSA, IABC, or others around the globe – would improve our understanding in the confines of one specific association. However, this study's analysis of PRSA and non-PRSA members opens the door to more careful examination of what leadership means in the various organizations, especially given the leadership orientation, role enactment, and stewardship incorporation differences between the two groups. More analysis should also be done comparing work experience and the leadership orientation, traits, and skills of various demographic groups. Although not the original intention of this study, simple explorations of this nature were presented with this study to encourage future research ideas. Finally, contingency theory represents just one of the 65 theoretical perspectives on leadership. Comparisons with other theoretical perspectives will provide additional insights into the impact of leadership on public relations efforts in various specializations.

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