Finding influence: examining the role of influence in public relations practice

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Abstract

Purpose – To examine how public relations practitioners define influence and where they find influence.

Design/methodology/approach – Depth interviews with 162 public relations practitioners.

Findings – Public relations professionals defined influence in terms of shaping decisions, having access, and being heard. They said they were most influential in crisis situations and when preparing communication messages or plans. They are least influential in strategic decision making, when they are perceived as technicians, and in interactions with senior executives. The most common influence tactic used by these professionals was rational influence.

Practical implications – The authors suggest eight tenets regarding influence for public relations practitioners.

Originality/value – Practitioners have long noted the need for increased influence across the organization. But, there is little scholarship that examines just how public relations practitioners should increase their influence and ascent to organizational decision making circles.

Keywords Public relations, Influence

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Public relations scholarship is rife with calls to find a way for practitioners to ascend to organizational decision making circles (i.e. the dominant coalition), but there is precious little scholarship that suggests just how practitioners should prepare for such an ascent. Membership in the dominant coalition is not a right, but an invitation that is earned every day. Public relations practitioners, to become members of decision-making bodies, must wield influence. In addition, once they are members of such groups, they must use influence tactics and strategies to help shape organizational decisions, actions, and ideologies. Clearly, influence is an antecedent to ethical and effective public relations practice.

But how do practitioners define influence? Under what circumstances do they have influence? What influence tactics and resources do they use inside organizations when power relations come into play in crucial decision-making moments? This study draws from interviews with two samples of public relations professionals (combined N = 162) to explore these issues.
Though many professionals and academics agree that influence is important in practice, few studies have explored the influence tactics used by professionals. Results of this study suggest that professionals most often define influence as having an impact on organizational strategy and decisions, most often find influence in the crucible of crisis, and use a wide variety of influence tactics but rely primarily on data and rational arguments. The paper concludes with brief discussion of eight proposed tenets regarding public relations and influence that may be useful to practitioners, students, and scholars who are interested in professional influence and social legitimacy.

Literature
A long standing stream of public relations research has dealt with roles of public relations practitioners. Pasadeos et al. (1999) found in a bibliometric study of public relations scholarship that public relations roles research was the “largest category of most cited works” (Pasadeos et al., 1999, p. 39). In the 1970s Broom and colleagues began studying public relations roles and developing metrics to quantify those roles (Broom and Dozier, 1986; Broom and Smith, 1979).

Five roles initially arose from the work of Broom and Smith (1979) – the expert prescriber (tells the organization or client what to do), technical services provider (develops materials or programming as defined by the client or organization), communication process facilitator (serves as intermediary between publics and organization), problem-solving process facilitator (diagnoses situations and designs solutions), and acceptant legitimizer (delivers ideas or messages on behalf of the organization or client). Additional work by Broom and Dozier (1986) on the Broom and Smith typologies resulted in compressing the five role categories into two – manager and technician.

Dozier and Gottesman (1982), Dozier (1992) found that public relations managers “are more likely to be strongly committed to their organization” (Broom and Dozier, 1986, p. 350) Public relations managers earn more than technicians, are more often men, have more formal education, and are more frequently involved in organizational decision making. In short, managers generally appear to have more influence than do technicians.

Grunig et al. found that CEOs generally expect top communicators to be media relations experts, hiring them primarily for their technical expertise. “But then they learn that technical expertise is insufficient when a crisis or major internal upheaval requires more strategic communication skills. When top communicators have managerial as well as technical knowledge, . . . they can meet such a challenge. When they have only technical expertise, they cannot” (Grunig et al., 2002).

While managers wield more influence than technicians, holding a managerial post in public relations does not guarantee influence.

Berger (2005) suggests the idea of a single dominant coalition is oversimplified. He argues that there is not a single dominant coalition, but sometimes a multitude of decision-making coalitions, depending on the parameters of the decision. Furthermore, he notes, membership in such coalitions is not permanent – it is fluid, changing as situation and needs change. Thus, practitioners must engage in power relations in order to exert influence.
Individual and collective power sources (or influence resources) in organizations have been categorized for decades. French and Raven (1960) laid a foundation for thinking about power in organizations. They identified five power sources — authoritative or legitimate power, coercive power, reward power, expert power, and referent power. Authoritative or legitimate power comes from reporting position in the organizational hierarchy. Coercive power is based on ability to mete out punishments. Reward power is based on the authority to distribute organizational rewards and resources. Expert power is based on specialized knowledge or aptitude. Referent power has its basis in personal charisma or attractiveness. Bachrach and Lawler (1980) added a sixth base of power to this typology, information power, which is based on access to important information, or controls over important information.

Kanter (1977) included being visible and taking risks as power resources. She also noted that relational resources are key to wielding influence. Relational resources include mentors, sponsors, networks, coalitions, and relationships with, or access to, those in power. Public relations researchers also have underscored the importance of relational resources to practitioners, particularly when they possess limited formal or authoritative power (Grunig, 1992b; Hatch, 1997; Holtzhausen and Voto, 2002).

Power and influence are closely related terms. Power is often described as a capacity, or something possessed, that allows one to get things done or get others to do what you want them to do (Barbalet, 1985; Cobb, 1984; Greiner and Schein, 1988; Grunig, 1992b; Hay and Hartel, 2000; Lauzen and Dozier, 1992). In an essay on power and resistance, Barbalet expressed this broad conception of social power:

Ordinarily … “power” is understood as the expression of capacity to initiate … . In the broadest terms power has to do with getting things done, or getting others to do them. If it means anything, social power is the generative force through which social relations and institutions are directed (Barbalet, 1985, p. 538).

If power is the capacity or potential to get things done, then influence is the use, expression, or realization of power (Hinkin and Schriesheim, 1990; Mintzberg, 1983; Salancik and Pfeffer, 1977). Influence is the process through which power is actually used or realized (Pfeffer, 1992). Influence is the use of power to get things done, or to accomplish something, for some purpose in organizations (Kanter, 1977; Mintzberg, 1983). For the purpose of this exploration, we define influence as the ability to get things done by affecting the perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, opinions, decisions, statements, and behaviors of others.

Kipnis et al. identified specific influence tactics in a survey of 165 part-time graduate business students. They found that the most common influence tactic was explaining the rationale for the request (17 percent of respondents), followed by a direct request (10 percent), or an exchange such as a compromise or calling in favors (8 percent). Less forthright and positive tactics also were relatively common. Clandestine tactics such as manipulating information or cajoling the influence target accounted for 8 percent of responses. Personal negative actions such as slowing the job, expressing anger, or threatening accounted for 8 percent of responses (Kipnis et al., 1980).

A factor analysis of the 58 items by Kipnis et al. yielded eight influence dimensions. Those dimensions are ingratiation, rationality, assertiveness, sanctions, exchange, upward appeal, blocking, and coalitions. Kipnis et al. found rationality tactics most prevalent when attempting to influence superiors. Assertiveness and sanctions, as
influence tactics, were reserved primarily for influencing subordinates. Ingratiation, exchange, and upward appeals were used significantly more to influence subordinates and co-workers than they were to influence superiors. Blocking and coalitions were the least commonly used of the influence dimensions (Kipnis et al., 1980, p. 449).

Falbe and Yukl (1992) extended work by Kipnis and Schmidt (1985) in categorizing the Kipnis et al. (1980) dimensions as hard, soft, or rational. Hard tactics include pressure and legitimating as well as some forms of coalitions, according to Falbe and Yukl (1992, p. 644). They identified ingratiating, consultation, inspirational appeals, and personal appeals as soft tactics (Falbe and Yukl, 1992, p. 644). They found that rational persuasion was most common followed by hard tactics, but consultation and inspirational appeals (soft tactics) were most effective in gaining compliance or commitment to a position (Falbe and Yukl, 1992, p. 649). Pressure tactics were most commonly associated with an outcome of resistance (Falbe and Yukl, 1992, p. 647). But hard tactics, coupled with rational persuasion, can effectively gain compliance.

Rational tactics have been found to be the most commonly used tactics when attempting upward influence (Yukl and Tracey, 1992). Farmer et al. (1997) also noted that the ability to communicate face-to-face with superiors was a predictor of influence tactic choice. They found that rational tactics were more frequently used when subordinates were unable to meet face-to-face with the target of their influence tactic, their superior (Farmer et al., 1997, p. 35).

Waldron combed the existing research on influence attempts to identify trends in findings. He found that goals of the influence attempt affect the type of tactic chosen by the influencer. If an influencer is attempting to achieve personal goals, soft tactics are more likely to be used. If organizational goals are the objective, then hard tactics are the likely choice. Waldron (1999) notes that “upward influence might be not just an exercise in ‘getting one’s way’ but also a process of exploring new ideas and questioning assumptions in dialogue with leaders and peers (Senge, 1990; Waldron, 1999, p. 286).”

The literature leads to the following research questions and hypothesis:

RQ1. How do public relations practitioners define influence?

RQ2. When are public relations practitioners most influential?

RQ3. When are public relations practitioners least influential?

H1. Rational influence will be the most common tactic cited by practitioners.

Method

The goal of this research is to provide some depth to what has often been a stream of influence research dependent on surveys of university students. Our goal was to reach practicing public relations professionals and talk with them in depth regarding their experiences, successes, and failures in using influence tactics.

To achieve this goal, we sampled two groups of professionals. The first group consisted of a purposive sample of senior public relations executives. This research, funded by Heyman Associates, a leading PR executive search firm based in New York, had as its goal to assess factors relating to success and influence in public relations. A group of public relations professors and graduate students conducted 30 minute telephone interviews with select professionals. William Heyman, CEO and President of
the Heyman agency, invited 207 of the most senior leaders in the field to participate in
the study. Ninety-seven of the 207 (47.5 percent) invited executives participated in the
interviews. Depth interviews were selected as the ideal methodology because as
Lindlof (1995) wrote: “Interviews are especially well suited to helping the researcher
understand a social actor’s own perspective.” The goal of this research was to
understand the public relations practitioner’s perspective on the role of influence in
their daily practice.

This sample included 39 female and 58 male professionals who averaged more than
23 years of experience in the field. Virtually, all of them were the most senior
communication officers in their organizations. The majority were employed by
corporations (60), but other organizations included were PR agencies (16), non-profit
organizations (9), education (6), and professional service firms (6).

The second data set consists of a more varied pool of public relations respondents.
A convenience/snowball sample was developed by a group of public relations
researchers. The researchers first relied on personal contacts (convenience sample),
then they asked interview respondents to identify practitioners who might be
interested in participating in the study (snowball sample). There were 65 respondents
(28 women and 37 men) in this second study. The participants averaged about 21 years
of professional experience in corporate (23), agency (16), non-profit (9), education (8),
social movement (5), and government (4) settings. Fifteen of the participants were non
Americans working in seven countries. Interviews for this study were semi-structured,
following a protocol of open-ended questions. The interviews were conducted by
phone, averaged 48 minutes, and were tape-recorded so that they could be transcribed
and carefully analyzed by the researchers.

In both samples respondents were asked about the nature of constraints on their
influence, which influence resources they found to be most valuable, and in which
situations they were most and least influential. Participants in the second sample were
also asked to define influence. Interviews were transcribed and then transcripts were
qualitatively evaluated. The analysis of texts was done through an adaptation of the
constant comparative method for inductive data analysis (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).
The constant comparative method requires researchers to note each statement made by
the practitioners. The researchers noted themes and insights as transcripts were read
and re-read and through this process unitized meaning from the transcripts. Responses
to the semi-structured questions fell quite naturally into categories or units, and simple
frequency tables are used to present this information.

Findings

RQ1. How do public relations practitioners define influence?

When we asked the sample of 65 practitioners how they defined influence in public
relations practice, their answers were diverse. We recorded all responses to this query,
which brought 93 responses from the 65 practitioners (Table I). One practitioner told us
that influence is “the power to persuade and convince others to get things done,
without necessarily having the authority to do it.” Another said, “Being influential
means that your arguments are listened to, your voice is sought out, and you are paid
attention to.”
Having a direct impact on decision making was another definition of influence. One practitioner told us, “PR has influence when it is built into the decision-making process, not as an afterthought or as a reaction to a situation, but at the beginning.” Another noted, “To really have influence inside the organization you have to be involved in actually developing the strategies and objectives and figuring out how communication can play a role in reaching those objectives.”

When asked how they define influence in public relations, some practitioners provided two or three definitions. The highest percentage of responses (34.4 percent) defined influence as “shaping decisions or actions” within an organization. This definition was split nearly equally between female and male practitioners. Just over one in ten responses defined influence as the “ability to persuade” (11.8 percent) or having access to decision makers (11.8 percent). “Being heard” was cited by 8.6 percent of respondents. More women, on a proportional basis, defined influence as the ability to be heard. While both anecdotal and empirical evidence often points to a need for public relations practitioners to be regular members of the dominant coalition, only 6.4 percent of our sample defined influence specifically as “having a seat at the table.” About five percent (5.3 percent) defined influence simply as “power.”

Professionals readily acknowledge that influence is essential to meaningful public relations practice and having influence leads to other positive outcomes. One practitioner simply said, “Without the appropriate influence, I wouldn’t be able to get away with reprimanding management.”

Some noted that defining influence as having a seat at the decision making table was simplistic. “Influence is a little more than just having a seat at the table,” one professional told us:

A lot of people get a seat at the table as an honorific, but it really doesn’t mean a helluva lot because no one listens to them. At the last company I was with, the corporate counsel had a seat at the table but he didn’t have a lot of influence. His number two man had more influence than he did. So it really amounts to the degree of involvement in the decision-making process.

As noted previously, the highest percentage of responses related to influence as making contributions to organizational strategy and decisions. One practitioner explained:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definition of influence</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>Total mentions ( percent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shaping decisions/actions</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to persuade</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to decision makers</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being heard</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having a seat at the table</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to get things done</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpreting external publics</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivering results</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to shape messages</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>99.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table I.
Influence is one’s ability to impact strategic plans of the company – its overall direction, objectives, goals, and so forth. It’s also being asked to the table during the development of those plans rather than entering the process to pick up the pieces later.

Expanding the role of public relations beyond tactical work to strategic work is how some of our interviewees defined influence:

Influence is that we have a role that goes beyond what communications departments do in many organizations, which is often times the communications program comes in after the strategy is already conceived and is seen as the vehicle that just puts out press releases or organizes press announcements. To really have influence inside the organization, you have to be involved in actually developing the strategies and objectives and figuring out how communication can play a role in reaching those objectives.

RQ2. When are public relations practitioners most influential?

Most of the respondents in our study said that public relations was most influential when an organization is faced with a crisis. This aligns logically with historic complaints from public relations practitioners that they feel like the organization’s fire department – called in reactively when trouble has occurred rather than being able to work proactively to avoid trouble. Twenty-eight out of 65 respondents (43.1 percent) said that crisis situations were where they found they had the most influence (Table II).

Categories related to communication specialties made up the next most-cited influence tactics. Of the professionals in our sample 20 percent (13) said they were most influential when they were preparing communication messages and plans. This may reflect or extend the long-established role of public relations practitioners as tacticians. The next categories suggest more purely the role of communications tactician. Six practitioners said they were most influential when working in media relations; five said they were most influential when working in employee communications.

Practitioners were asked to describe a situation in which they helped influence the organization’s decision. They were then asked to explain the influence tactics they employed. The illustrations frequently provided testimony to public relations’ influence in times of crisis. A corporate practitioner with 35 years’ experience told how he used assertiveness as an influence tactic in an SEC investigation. He said:

I was the point person in media relations on the issue. During the final days of the investigation, a number of leaks started coming out of the SEC about the findings. One

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Crisis situations</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparing communication messages, plans</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media relations programs</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee communications programs</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working with smaller clients</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When trusted (by the client)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When performance record backs up advice</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table II. Situations where PR is most influential – influence study (N = 65)
journalist called me and asked for a company statement on the investigation. I was in the chairman’s office with our lawyers, and we had a nasty fight over what to do. The lawyers wanted to stonewall until the report was issued. I argued that we needed to issue a statement, and I actually drafted one while we were arguing. . . . In the end I was ordered to stonewall by the lawyers. I refused to do that and left by saying that I was going to prepare the release and issue it. Five minutes after I got back to my office, the chairman called. He was hot, but he backed my position and told me to get the statement up to him ASAP. I think I was influential simply because I didn’t back down.

Another practitioner with 40 years’ experience explained how he used logical as well as emotional arguments to influence his CEO to reverse a decision regarding the siting of a new headquarters building:

It was announced we were tearing down [a beloved historic midtown building] to build a new headquarters building. And having the influence to help change that decision when the president had already signed the contract. And being able to convince the president that was a decision that would haunt us forever. Our real estate people had made the deal to buy that property after the owners tore down the building, but the word got out that we were going to tear it down. The public was outraged. . . . So I had to get the company to admit it made a mistake and change its contract in which we built behind the [historic building]. It was basically lobbying the president to understand what the public impact of that decision was going to be. That it would not go away with tearing down the [historic building], that it would haunt us for years to come. We look at our audiences on a straight line – customers, media, et cetera, et cetera. We forget how they interact with each other. And trying to get the president to understand that it wasn’t just the media that would be mad at us, but regulators could use it as an excuse to get at us, politicians could use it as an excuse to get at us. That’s hard for accountants to understand. But over a period of time, being persuasive enough, it finally occurred to him that this would be a long-standing problem.

RQ3. When are public relations practitioners least influential?

When asked about situations in which public relations lacked influence, more than one in four (18, or 27.7 percent) respondents said they had less influence in situations where strategic decision making was involved. Twenty percent (13) said they lacked influence when they were perceived as technicians; female professionals named this situation somewhat more often than male professionals. Eleven (16.9 percent) said that they lacked influence when interacting with senior executives (Table III):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strategic decision making</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived as technicians</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactions with senior executives</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocating social responsibility programs</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involved late in decision making</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dealing with large clients</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budget discussions</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table III. Situations where PR is least influential – influence study (N = 65)
One public relations practitioner working in a large non-profit organization lamented: We don’t have access. We’re not at the right meetings at the right time. People still view PR here as very much that the program developers develop the programs, and they make all the plans, and do all of these things, and then they bring PR in at the end and say “Okay, now we want you to publicize this.” We’re brought so late into the process that often the programs are already developed in a way that actually puts up roadblocks to effective PR.

H1. Rational influence will be the most common tactic cited by practitioners.

Based on previous findings, we hypothesized that rational influence would be the most common tactic cited by practitioners. In the Influence Study of 65 practitioners, 30.8 percent of the influence tactics mentioned were coded into the rational category. Tactics in the rational category included using data as a persuasive argument (10.9 percent), using rational arguments (7.5 percent), citing experience and/or expertise (7.5 percent), and illustrating outcomes through best practices case studies (2.3 percent) (Table IV).

In the Success Study, which included interviews with 97 practitioners, almost two-thirds of the sample (63.9 percent) mentioned “rational arguments” as the most useful among influence tactics. The next most cited influence tactics were “coalitions” and “past experience” each being mentioned by 13.4 percent of the sample (Table V).

Practitioners explained why they believe rational arguments are so important and effective. They phrased their explanations in terms of constructing an argument to influence a particular audience. Respondents mentioned how important message framing is when attempting to influence an influence target. One practitioner told about the importance of using rationality to affect executives’ decisions:

You use reason, experience, best practices, put in a framework of a business solution, not a communication solution. One of the fatal flaws that public relations executives will do is make the mistake of coming up with a communication solution when, in fact, an executive committee is seeking a management solution. Communications [should be] a strategic business solution.

A practitioner working in a church denominational environment outlined his challenges in terms of influencing the decision makers in his workplace, “One thing that’s very important for church people is to give them a theological reason for doing something. They’ll just accuse you of getting your nose into politics if you can’t give them a theological background.”

In combining findings from the two studies, rational arguments as an influence tactic accounted for 34.6 percent of tactic mentions by respondents. Table VI provides a list of influence tactics identified by these two samples. While rational arguments ranked by far the highest, less logic-based tactics including coalition building (18.8 percent) and applying pressure (10.4 percent) were frequently cited as effective and sanctioned tactics.

In summary, findings show that practitioners most often define influence as having an impact on organizational strategy and decisions, most often find influence in the crucible of crisis, and most often use rational arguments as their source of influence.
Discussion

Our findings affirm a number of previous studies of power and influence in organizations, but provide insights into influence tactics used by PR professionals, as well as the situations in which practitioners believe they are most and least influential.

Definitions of influence by these mostly high-level public relations professionals affirm the value of being a manager versus being a technician (Broom and Dozier, 1986). By substantial margins, respondents linked influence to strategic and decision-making roles. This reaffirms findings by Grunig et al. (2002) that managers have greater influence.
But our findings suggest that position doesn’t necessarily translate into influence, as Berger (2005) has suggested. Relatively few of our respondents argued that a seat at the decision-making table was the primary indicator of having influence. Other important factors in this regard may include relationships, access to decision makers, political skill and will, past performance record, and so forth. Indeed, identifying the many diverse sources of influence in public relations, including those that may be underutilized or underdeveloped, may be an important step in increasing the overall influence and social legitimacy of the profession.

Rationality was noted as the most common influence resource, affirming earlier findings (Kipnis et al., 1980; Yukl and Tracey, 1992; Farmer et al., 1997). Expert and coercive power (French and Raven, 1960) and information power (Bachrach and Lawler, 1980) were all in evidence. The suggestion that hard tactics (Falbe and Yukl, 1992; Waldron, 1999) are more commonly used to achieve organizational objectives, was reinforced as our respondents identified coalitions and pressure as useful influence tactics within their organizations. Though these findings are consistent with those of previous studies, we wonder if extensive reliance on rational influence approaches has caused professionals to fail to develop other potentially valuable approaches, including consultation, legitimation, and emotional appeals.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tactic</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percentage of sample</th>
<th>Percentage of mentions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rational arguments</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>63.9</td>
<td>39.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coalitions</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past experience</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultation w/others</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning/strategic</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal appeals</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressure</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional/inspirational appeals</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legitimating</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persuasion</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real-life examples</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership opportunities</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepting change</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>99.3</td>
<td>99.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table V. Influence tactics – PR success study (N = 97)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sanctioned tactic categories</th>
<th>Number of mentions (N = 372)</th>
<th>Percentage of mentions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Rational arguments</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Coalitions</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Pressure</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Inspirational appeals</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Personal appeal</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Consultation</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Legitimating</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table VI. Role of influence in public relations practice

But our findings suggest that position doesn’t necessarily translate into influence, as Berger (2005) has suggested. Relatively few of our respondents argued that a seat at the decision-making table was the primary indicator of having influence. Other important factors in this regard may include relationships, access to decision makers, political skill and will, past performance record, and so forth. Indeed, identifying the many diverse sources of influence in public relations, including those that may be underutilized or underdeveloped, may be an important step in increasing the overall influence and social legitimacy of the profession.

Rationality was noted as the most common influence resource, affirming earlier findings (Kipnis et al., 1980; Yukl and Tracey, 1992; Farmer et al., 1997). Expert and coercive power (French and Raven, 1960) and information power (Bachrach and Lawler, 1980) were all in evidence. The suggestion that hard tactics (Falbe and Yukl, 1992; Waldron, 1999) are more commonly used to achieve organizational objectives, was reinforced as our respondents identified coalitions and pressure as useful influence tactics within their organizations. Though these findings are consistent with those of previous studies, we wonder if extensive reliance on rational influence approaches has caused professionals to fail to develop other potentially valuable approaches, including consultation, legitimation, and emotional appeals.
Beyond building on previous findings, our research informs both practice and pedagogy. The following proposed tenets may be instructive to public relations practitioners and students and provide directions for future research on influence in the profession.

- To have influence in public relations is to have a role in shaping organizational decisions and actions.

Practitioners believe they are most influential when they play an active role in organizational planning and decision making. Such influence arises out of respect for the problem-solving skills of PR and past experience by management of the positive and ongoing contribution of the public relations professional.

- To have influence in public relations is to have access to and the attention of senior management.

Public relations practitioners say that influence is not defined exclusively by structural position in the organization, but also by access and attention, among other factors. Practitioners should build their influence by cultivating relationships with senior management, maintaining attention of management through organizational contributions, and enhancing their political intelligence and skills. To be seen as influential, practitioners must exhibit their strategic and decision-making prowess and their political will.

- To have influence in public relations is to effectively practice the art of persuasion.

Public relations practitioners should frame messages in terms that appeal to their internal audiences such as chief executives, just as they work to frame messages in persuasive terms for external publics. Treat management as a public, when crafting persuasive arguments.

- Public relations practitioners are most influential when organizations face crises.

Public relations practitioners find influence when organizations look to them for leadership out of institutional crises. While practitioners historically lament this fire-fighter role, it can serve as a catalyst to the desired access to and attention of management. It also provides a means to illustrate strategic value to the organization. If PR professionals can convey the value of proactive rather than reactive public relations, they thereby lead to a more strategic role for the practitioner.

- Public relations practitioners are most influential in framing institutional messages.

Public relations practitioners find influence, logically, when they are constructing communications. Just as crises should be used as a catalyst to increased long-term influence, so should message strategy. Providing evidence of understanding the business or industry, while constructing organizational messages, can give rise to becoming a valued strategist in the organization beyond basic messaging.

- Public relations practitioners lack influence in strategic decision making.
Practitioners acknowledge that they continue to struggle with influence in situations where visioning and strategy come into play. They must take advantage of opportunities when influence is present to earn respect and ongoing rights to participate in organizational decision making. In addition, our findings suggest that practitioners can benefit from developing a more diverse and comprehensive portfolio of personal, structural, relational, informational, and systemic influence resources.

- Public relations practitioners lack influence when they are seen as technicians. This affirms a long-term situation. While there are practitioners who prefer to work in the technical aspects of message production and delivery, for the profession to make progress as a strategic discipline a managerial role must be developed. Senior management must be made aware that public relations is more than press releases, so education of management comes into play, and the full range of influence tactics and strategies should be considered in this regard.

- Public relations practitioners’ most effective influence tactics, when attempting to influence the management of their organization, are: rationality, coalition building, pressure, experience, and inspirational appeals.

Practitioners believe they are most effective when using rational or hard influence tactics. These are sanctioned tactics by most organizations and should be developed and used by public relations practitioners. Though they rely on rational tactics, practitioners should also consider other less frequently used tactics, as well as packages of tactics, which have been little explored.

Limitations of the research
These findings are not generalizable in the statistical sense. However, the number of interviews with both senior and junior professionals in corporate, agency, and non-profit practice, provides a substantial window through which to view and better understand the role of influence in public relations practice.

Future research could include case studies of situations in which public relations practitioners are particularly influential or participant observation research to note influence trends in a particular setting. Additional future research also could use qualitative data gained in this study to construct practitioner surveys that begin to produce more generalizable results.

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