



Cape Peninsula
University of Technology

**AN ASSESSMENT OF THE ROLE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS SPECIALISTS IN
STRATEGIC DECISION MAKING AND ENTERPRISE STRATEGY FORMULATION
IN LARGE CORPORATIONS**

by

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Signed

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation discusses the institutionalisation of public relations at executive level in large organisations and has been applied to a selection of the top 100 companies listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) in South Africa. Based on an examination of current literature on public relations as a strategic management function, the study determines what the requirements are for practising public relations as a strategic management function in large organisations and what the potential contributions of senior public relations practitioners towards strategic decision making and strategy formulation in large organisations are. Current and recent literature provides a conceptual framework based on the premises that organisations have much to gain by involving senior practitioners when top management are making decisions and formulating strategies. The conceptual framework covered the evolution of public relations, excellence theory, the dominant coalition, the relational approach, the reflective paradigm, roles theory, the strategic role of public relations, and public relations' role in strategic decision making.

The primary objective of the research was to determine to what extent senior public relations practitioners are involved in strategy formulation and decision making in large organisations. A qualitative research methodology was adopted, and in-depth interviews were conducted with ten senior public relations practitioners employed in top 100 companies listed on the JSE to gather qualitative data. The data was coded and analysed according to the conceptual framework.

The findings shed light on the current practice of public relations among ten public relations practitioners employed in top 100 companies listed on the JSE. The findings of the research indicate that the sampled public relations practitioners do contribute to strategic decision making and enterprise strategy formulation in a selection of the top 100 companies listed on the JSE in South Africa, to a large extent. The theoretical constructs do not simply exist in theory; they are implemented in practice within the sample of large organisations. The findings also give an indication of the barriers the ten participating senior public relations practitioners face that prevent their making a strategic contribution to their organisations, and recommendations are offered to overcome these barriers. The researcher concluded that academics and practitioners need to work together to further promote and institutionalise the public relations industry in large organisations in order to overcome the barriers that militate against public relations practitioners making strategic contributions to their organisations.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

A review of current, recent and older literature on public relations and corporate communication reveals that the profession has evolved considerably since the days when it was viewed and practised as a technical function, to emerge as a full-fledged managerial function.

According to Grunig (2006:154), communication scientists in the 1960s were focused only on the effect of media and messages on their audience's attitudes and behaviour. The organisations that he studied were more likely to provide information than seek information, and very unlikely to listen to or engage in dialogue with their publics (Grunig, 2006:155).

There has been a clear shift in the practice of public relations from sending information to stakeholders to rather obtaining information from these stakeholders to inform top-level strategy formulation and decision making. This shift is evident in the large number of scholars (e.g. Dozier & Broom, 1995, Holmström, 2002; Rensburg & De Beer, 2003; Steyn, 2007; Steyn & Niemann, 2010; Gregory & Willis, 2013; Neill, 2015; Vercic & Zerfass, 2016; Wilson, 2016) who recognise the strategic role that senior public relations practitioners can play in top-level organisational decision making and organisational strategy formulation. In the strategic role, public relations practitioners influence an organisation's leaders to address reputational risks and align organisational goals and strategies to stakeholder values and norms to serve both the organisation and public interests (Steyn, 2007:139).

Modern-day scholars agree on the potential benefits of allowing input from senior public relations practitioners at the level of top management. Hon and Grunig (1999:8), for example, argue that organisations usually make better decisions when they listen to and collaborate with their stakeholders before they make the final decision, rather than trying to persuade the stakeholders to accept the result of the decision. Therefore, by involving public relations specialists in the process, an organisation can obtain valuable insights into its strategic stakeholders and how decisions and new strategies adopted by the organisation may affect these stakeholder groups.

Public relations practitioners can therefore assist top management to understand how certain decisions can have adverse consequences on a stakeholder group. The practitioners can consequently influence and encourage management to make a different decision that will achieve a mutual benefit for both the organisation and the stakeholder group (Hon & Grunig, 1999:10). When this is accomplished, public relations experts are part of the dominant coalition of an organisation, as proposed by modern-day scholars (e.g. Grunig & Grunig, 2000; Berger,

2005; Kanihan et al., 2013) as the ideal position from which to practise public relations and corporate communication.

It is the reflective nature of public relations and communication practice that makes it suitable – if not essential – for participation in the dominant coalition of the organisation. According to Steyn and Niemann (2010:120), when applied to public relations, the reflective paradigm refers to assessing the organisation in relation to other social systems. Steyn (2002c:15) proposes that the senior communication specialist is the ideal candidate to contribute intelligence regarding all stakeholder groups rather than only one group, as would be the case in marketing (customers) or public affairs (government officials). The public relations or communication strategist who works from a reflective paradigm is therefore better equipped to suggest the most appropriate actions concerning stakeholders and societal issue groups, in order to guide the organisation towards social and environmental responsibility and a positive reputation.

1.2 Problem Statement

From the literature referred to in Section 1.1, it can be deduced that there is a theoretical argument for public relations specialists to have a seat at the executive table when enterprise strategy is formulated and organisational decisions are made. Public relations specialists are able to provide the kind of input about stakeholders that the organisation needs to anticipate and adapt to the stakeholders' responses to the organisation's behaviour. This ability to adapt has become essential for any organisation to survive in an ever-changing environment.

However, Steyn and Niemann (2010:107) argue that the benefits of allowing public relations practitioners to contribute to organisational strategy formulation are still not fully understood. There are still managers who believe that management or executive decision makers are better suited to make decisions that are in the best interests of the organisation. Grunig (2006:172) concurs in observing that the next challenge for communication scholars is to study how public relations can be institutionalised more broadly as a bridging activity so that public relations as a strategic management function becomes standard operating practice in organisations and that people view public relations in this fashion.

In 2015, Kiesenbauer and Zerfass noted that public relations is still a nascent field and far from being institutionalised. Their research suggests that communication management is less advanced in practice than what is suggested by theory (Kiesenbauer & Zerfass, 2015:432). Valentini and Sriramesh (2014:3) confirm this finding by pointing out that there is little empirical evidence, beyond that of developed nations such as the United States of America, the United Kingdom and Germany, on the extent to which public relations is practised strategically and

whether it contributes to the strategic management of organisations. In South Africa, it is also not known to what extent South African organisations currently embrace the multiple benefits of involving public relations or communication practitioners in strategic managerial processes. This was confirmed by a recent search of the National Research Foundation (NRF) database of current and completed research on the topic.

As the title of this dissertation suggests, the research focuses on the practice of public relations in a selection of the top 100 companies listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) in South Africa. This list is based on an index of publicly listed companies in terms of their market capitalisation. The index is freely available on the JSE's official website (Johannesburg Stock Exchange, 2018).

It is also not known to what extent the top 100 JSE-listed companies in South Africa involve senior public relations practitioners in strategic managerial processes, and if these practitioners contribute to and influence top-level strategy formulation and decision making. The researcher offers a contribution to fill this knowledge gap.

1.3 Research Questions

The main question the researcher aims answer through her research is:

Does the public relations function contribute to decision making and strategy formulation in a selection of the top 100 companies listed on the JSE in South Africa?

In order to answer the overall research question, the following sub-questions were identified:

Sub-question 1: What are the requirements for practising public relations as a strategic management function in large organisations?

Sub-question 2: What are the potential contributions of senior public relations practitioners towards strategic decision making and strategy formulation in large organisations?

Sub-question 3: To what extent is public relations practised as a strategic management function and does it contribute towards strategic decision making and enterprise strategy formulation in the selected top 100 JSE-listed companies?

Sub-question 4: Which barriers may prevent senior public relations practitioners in the selected top 100 JSE-listed companies from providing input for strategic decision making and enterprise strategy formulation?

Sub-questions 5: What can be done to overcome the above-mentioned barriers?

The research aim and objectives of the study are derived from the above-mentioned research question and sub-questions and are set out below.

1.3.1 Research objectives

The overall aim of the study is:

To determine whether the public relations function contributes to strategic decision making and enterprise strategy formulation in a selection of the top 100 companies listed on the JSE in South Africa.

The researcher's attempts to achieve the research aim through the following objectives:

Objective 1: To determine what the requirements are for practising public relations as a strategic management function in large organisations.

Objective 2: To identify the potential contributions of senior public relations practitioners towards strategic decision making and strategy formulation in large organisations.

Objective 3: To determine to what extent public relations is practised as a strategic management function and how it contributes to strategic decision making and enterprise strategy formulation in the selected top 100 JSE-listed companies.

Objective 4: To identify possible barriers that may prevent senior public relations practitioners in the selected top 100 JSE-listed companies from providing input for strategic decision making and enterprise strategy formulation

Objective 5: To offer recommendations to overcome the identified barriers.

1.4 Definition of Terms

This study is completed from the perspective of public relations, a sub-discipline of the broader field of corporate communication. The terms and concepts explained in Table 1 below are central to the study and reflect the basic theoretical approach that underpins both the secondary and primary research.

Table 1: Definitions

Term/ Concept	Definition	Source
Public relations	"Public relations is a distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and co-operation between an organisation and its publics; involves the management of problems or issues; helps management to keep informed on and responsive to public opinion; defines and emphasizes the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; helps management keep abreast of and effectively utilize change, serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends; and uses research and sound and ethical communication techniques as its principal tools."	Harlow (1976:36)

	<p>Common terms used in most definitions of public relations include: deliberate, planned, performance, public interest, two-way communication, and strategic management function, and reflect the dominant functional/normative public relations paradigm of Grunig's 'Excellence' framework. Multiple constructed definitions of public relations exist in theory. Many define public relations in terms of an organisational function or part of strategic management, while others define it as a descriptive collection of communication techniques. To critical scholars, public relations is viewed as manipulation and propaganda.</p> <p>Some define public relations in terms of an activity that is part of societal dynamics, playing a role as cultural intermediary, while others view public relations as a normative ideal of how public relations ought to be practised ethically.</p> <p>Public relations constitutes an everchanging field and practice that means many things to many people.</p>	Thurlow et al. (2018:3)
Strategic communication	<p>Strategic communication is the purposeful use of communication by an organisation to fulfil its mission.</p> <p>"PR scholars and practitioners often use the term 'strategic communication' to define the jurisdiction of public relations, even though it also relates to marketing and management."</p>	Hallahan et al. (2007:3) Toledano (2018:133)
Excellence theory	"The major premise of the excellence theory is that communication has value in an organisation because it helps to build good long-term relationships with strategic publics... Excellent public relations and an excellent context for public relations increase the value assigned to the function by the dominant coalition."	Grunig & Grunig (2000:314-317)
Reflective paradigm	<p>"The reflective paradigm is a theoretical model developed to understand the conditions of existence for late modern organisations and the function of public relations" (Holmström, 2002:1).</p> <p>According to Holmström (2002:3), the reflective paradigm is based on two analytical assumptions: that social systems are capable of reflection; and that an evolution towards a poly-contextual form of the co-ordination of society which activates learning processes towards reflection is a general feature of social processes.</p> <p>"The reflective paradigm is empirically expressed in a movement towards broader orientations, towards polycontextual perspectives, towards mutual considerations... In this way, we see the cooperation between the different specialised dynamics of society ensured, but at the same time the autonomy and specific dynamics strengthened. We see a broader value orientation from the perspective of the basic rationalities" (Holmström, 2002:17).</p>	Holmström (2002:1) Holmström (2002:3) Holmström (2002:17)
Reflective strategist	According to Steyn (2009:528), the reflective strategist acts as a coordinating mechanism between the organisation and its environment, providing management with an outside (societal) perspective. This outside perspective assists them to reflect on the organisation's position in the bigger context, with the intention of balancing organisational goals with the wellbeing of society.	Steyn (2009: 528)
Strategy	An indication of the organisation's position for the future, deciding what should be done instead of how it should be done.	Drucker (cited in Steyn, 2002c:2)
Enterprise strategy	"The broadest level of strategy where the political legitimacy of the organisation is addressed. It describes the level of strategic thinking necessary for organisations to be fully responsive in the complex and dynamic social environment" (Steyn, 2002c:9).	Steyn (2002c:9)
Strategic decision making	The decisions that drive the direction of a company.	Kanihan et al. (2013:141)
Strategic stakeholders	The groups that are vital to the organisation and specific threats and opportunities it faces.	Clarkson (cited in Steyn 2002c:13)
Institutionalisation	"How practices and activities come to be standard and generally accepted in organisations" Yi (in Grunig, 2006:171).	Yi (cited in Grunig 2006:171)

	Wakefield et al. (2013:207) characterise institutionalisation as the state or environment where widely accepted fundamentals of an industry endure even in the midst of change. Institutionalisation offers the perpetuation of basic values, norms and processes that are widely accepted or prescribed within a domain (Wakefield, 2013:209). They believe that the concept of institutionalisation should be important to public relations as it can assist in legitimisation of the function in organisations (2013:208).	Wakefield et al. (2013:207-209)
Dominant coalition	"A coalition of individuals, including top management, who shape organizational behavior" Cybert & March (in Berger, 2005:6).	Cyert & March (cited in Berger, 2005:6)
Triple bottom line	According to Steyn and Niemann (2010:113), the three pillars of the Triple Bottom Line are people, planet, and profit. These three pillars are closely related to the social responsibility principles and social responsive processes underpinned by good corporate governance practices, such as social, environmental and economic sustainability.	Steyn and Niemann (2010:113)
Quadruple bottom line	A more recent approach to the triple bottom line is the quadruple bottom line. The quadruple bottom line can be defined as "the organizational capacity to embed and incorporate a set of definitive policies and programs to address economic, social, environmental and governance aspects of sustainability, whereas governance is defined through fiscal responsibility and resilience, community engagement for efficient service delivery, transparency and accountability".	Alibašić (2017:41)

In the field of public relations, the two terms 'public relations' and 'corporate communication' are widely used and accepted to refer to the activities related to public relations. According to Groenewald (1998:58), the term 'corporate communication' is increasingly used in practice to describe the management function that is still referred to as public relations in the body of knowledge. For this reason, many authors use the terms interchangeably. Corporate communication is seen as a wider discipline that incorporates other forms of communication that organisations engage in, such as marketing and advertising.

In this study, the researcher uses the term 'public relations'.

1.5 Conceptual Framework

The context of this research is the strategic contribution of public relations to strategy formulation and decision making in driving the direction of a business. The literature review focuses on modern concepts, perspectives and the theory of public relations as a strategic management function to explore how practitioners can add value to their organisations by their involvement and contribution to top-level strategy formulation and decision making. In doing so, the literature study provided a theoretical framework which enabled the researcher to achieve the first two research objectives:

Objective 1: To determine the requirements for practising public relations as a strategic management function in organisations.

Objective 2: To identify potential contributions of senior public relations practitioners towards strategic decision making and enterprise strategy formulation in organisations.

The literature review focuses on the evolution of public relations, excellence theory, the dominant coalition, the relational approach, the reflective paradigm, roles theory, the strategic role of public relations and public relations' role in strategic decision making.

Reviewing the historical development of public relations enables the researcher to comprehend how the industry has evolved over the years and how it is approached and practised in the new millennium. Excellence theory provides a theoretical lens to determine the requirements for best practice in strategic public relations in order to assist an organisation in achieving excellence. The literature on the dominant coalition is important to this study as it focuses on the group of individuals who have the most influence on organisational decision making and enterprise strategy formulation. If public relations practitioners are part of this coalition in their respective organisations, they are in a better position to influence strategic managerial processes.

Linking to the evolution of public relations, relationships have become an important concept for the study and practice of public relations. The increased focus on relationships has resulted in a paradigm shift in the public relations field and has led to the conceptualisation of the reflective paradigm. This new paradigm indicates the need for public relations practitioners to participate and be involved in strategy formulation and decision making to reflect stakeholders' views and opinions at an executive level.

Roles theory is relevant to this study as it explicates the exact role of the reflective strategist. Literature on the role of public relations in strategic decision making and enterprise strategy formulation sheds light on the benefits of involving practitioners in these processes.

1.6 Research Methodology and Research Methods

The primary research is aimed at achieving the rest of the objectives formulated for this study:

Objective 3: To determine whether public relations is practised as a strategic management function and whether public relations is considered and involved to contribute towards strategic decision making and strategy formulation in the selected top 100 JS-listed companies.

Objective 4: To identify possible barriers that may prevent senior public relations practitioners in the selected top 100 JSE-listed companies from providing input for strategic decision making and strategy formulation.

Objective 5: To offer recommendations to overcome the identified barriers.

While the literature review aimed to achieve Objectives 1 and 2, it also played an important role in addressing Objectives 3 and 4, as the theoretical framework enabled the researcher to draw recommendations from the literature and compare whether they are implemented in practice. The researcher used the literature to develop the framework for the qualitative study.

The researcher implemented qualitative research to gather the data for data analysis purposes to achieve Research Objectives 3, 4 and 5. The researcher followed a purposive sampling strategy to recruit participants for the study. All participants are similar in their line of work; employed as a senior representative of the public relations function in one of the top 100 JSE-listed organisations. The researcher obtained a list of the top JSE-listed organisations and searched on the respective websites of these organisations to identify potential interviewees and compile a list of their names and email addresses. The researcher sent an email invitation to 54 potential interviewees to invite them to an interview and received a response from 12 individuals, of whom 10 were interviewed for data analysis purposes.

The researcher referred to the theoretical framework to develop a set of interview questions that address the issues highlighted in the literature review. To collect relevant data, the researcher conducted semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with ten voluntary practitioners who gave the researcher insights into understanding whether the public relations function contributes to decision making and strategy formulation in a selection of the top 100 companies listed on the JSE. The researcher used a qualitative data-analysis method of qualitative content analysis to interpret and analyse the data. The researcher grouped the text into categories aligning with the theoretical framework to identify patterns, construct meaning and generate the findings of the research. This qualitative approach allowed the researcher to understand to what extent public relations is practised as a strategic management function and whether the interview respondents contribute towards strategic decision making and enterprise strategy formulation in the selected top 100 JSE-listed companies, and what barriers prevent these senior public relations practitioners from providing input for strategic decision making and enterprise strategy formulation.

The rationale for the inclusion of the top 100 JSE-listed companies in this study is that it allowed the researcher to solicit input from public relations managers working at the largest corporations in the country, and who deal with several stakeholders simultaneously.

1.7 Delineation of the Study

The research aimed to determine to what extent public relations has been institutionalised within a sample of top 100 JSE-listed companies. The sample was limited to ten practitioners employed within one of the top 100 JSE-listed companies, and therefore does not represent South Africa at large.

The ten respondents are solely public relations practitioners employed within one of the top 100 JSE-listed companies, with titles like Head of Corporate Communication, Director of Communication, Head of Group Media Relations, Head of Corporate Affairs, Senior Manager of PR and Communication, Director of Public Relations, or similar.

The researcher did not aim to interview public relations specialists from all 100 organisations, but only the respondents who agreed to be interviewed on the topic after being invited to participate via email. The results of the empirical research are based on the perspectives and opinions of the ten public relations practitioners who are employed within the top 100 JSE-listed companies and who agreed to participate in the study.

1.8 Significance of the Study

This study sheds light on the current state of public relations practice in a sample of JSE-listed organisations in South Africa by assessing whether the ten senior public relations practitioners employed by these organisations are involved in strategy formulation and decision-making processes at an executive level. By understanding whether these practitioners' strategic input is considered when top management develop strategies and make decisions, the findings of this study could contribute to the institutionalisation of the profession at executive level in order for more companies to benefit from the strategic input that public relations specialists can provide.

These findings aid South African organisations by offering an improved understanding of how public relations practitioners can and should contribute to organisational effectiveness and add value to a business's quadruple bottom line. The findings benefit public relations practitioners through offering an understanding of the type of input a sample of senior practitioners currently provides to top management in assisting with strategy formulation and organisational decision making, compared with what the literature suggests they should provide. In addition, the findings present a view of the barriers that the interviewed senior public relations practitioners face that prevent them from making a strategic contribution to their organisation, as well as recommendations to overcome these barriers.

1.9 Division of Chapters

This study is divided into five chapters.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter provides an introduction and background to the study by outlining the research problem, research objectives and research questions. The chapter gives an overview of the theoretical framework and research methodology employed in the research, the delineation and significance of the study.

Chapter 2: Literature review and theoretical perspective

This chapter discuss the literature that is relevant to the topic of the study to conceptualise a theoretical framework. The relevant literature includes the evolution of public relations, excellence theory, the dominant coalition, the relational approach, the reflective paradigm, roles theory, the strategic role of public relations and public relations' involvement in strategic decision making. The theoretical framework was used to develop the interview questions for data gathering purposes and to analyse the data collected during the interviews.

Chapter 3: Research methodology

This chapter outlines the research methodology and the research approach the research used for this study. The researcher justifies her choice of employing qualitative research methods and discusses the sampling strategy, conceptualisation of the interview questions, data-collection method, ethical considerations and data analysis method.

Chapter 4: Discussion of the findings and conclusions

This chapter presents the data analysis and discusses the findings that emerged from the data collected through semi-structured interviews with ten participating practitioners and offers conclusions. The findings are aligned with the research objectives.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and recommendations

This chapter concludes the study, evaluates the major findings of the research, and makes recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

2.1 Introduction

The chapter provides a conceptual framework for the research. This is done by means of a literature review of recent and older scholarly publications relevant to this study. The context of this research is the strategic contribution of public relations to strategy formulation and decision making in driving the direction of a business. The literature review focuses on modern concepts, perspectives and the theory of public relations as a strategic management function to explore how practitioners can add value to their organisations through involvement in and contribution to top-level strategy formulation and decision making. In doing so, the literature review provides a theoretical framework to provide the context to achieve the first two research objectives:

Objective 1: To determine what the requirements are for practising public relations as a strategic management function in large organisations.

Objective 2: To identify the potential contributions of senior public relations practitioners towards strategic decision making and strategy formulation in large organisations.

The literature review focuses on the evolution of public relations, excellence theory, the dominant coalition, the relational approach, the reflective paradigm, roles theory, the strategic role of public relations, and public relations' role in strategic decision making.

Reviewing the historical development of public relations enables the researcher to comprehend how the industry evolved over the years and how public relations is approached and practised in the new millennium. Excellence theory provides a theoretical lens to determine what the requirement is to achieve excellence in public relations (Grunig, 1992). The literature on the dominant coalition is important for this study as it focuses on the group of individuals who have the most influence on organisational decision making and strategy formulation. If public relations practitioners are part of this coalition in their respective organisations, they are in a better position to influence strategic managerial processes (Berger, 2005).

Linking to the evolution of public relations, relationships have become an important concept for the study and practice of public relations (Bruning & Ledingham, 1998). The increased focus on relationships has resulted in a paradigm shift in the public relations field and has led to the conceptualisation of the reflective paradigm (Holmström, 2002). This new paradigm indicates the need for public relations practitioners to participate and be involved in strategy formulation and decision making to represent the relevant stakeholders' views and opinions at an executive level (Van Ruler & Vercic, 2005).

Roles theory is relevant to this study as it explicates the exact role of the reflective strategist (Steyn, 2009). Literature on the strategic role of public relations (Holmström, 2002; Steyn, 2002a; Brønn & Brønn, 2003; Ni, 2006; Marsh, 2010; Invernizzi & Romenti, 2011; Kim et al., 2013) sheds light on the benefits of involving practitioners in the decision-making and strategy formulation processes.

2.2 The Evolution of Public Relations

The evolution of public relations saw a paradigm shift from simply feeding information to stakeholders through one-way communication, towards two-way models of communication to consider feedback from stakeholders. Business organisations started to realise that to remain competitive, it was vital to start taking stakeholders into consideration and soliciting their feedback on business practices. This was an important step in the evolution of public relations as it led to the acceptance that the public relations function plays a vital strategic role and that it should be represented at an executive level.

Brody (1992:349) states that traditionally, corporate communication and public relations were regarded as mass communication. In 1984, Jim Grunig conceptualised that the public relations models theory describes four different types of communication practice that have evolved throughout history. Historically, one-way approaches to communication involved the dissemination of information from organisations to stakeholders that was not based on research or strategic planning. The two-way asymmetrical model was the first two-way model acknowledging the role of seeking information. Thereafter a new model based on benefiting both the organisation and its stakeholders was developed, namely the two-way symmetrical model (Steyn, 2002b:20).

Grunig's four models of public relations, and especially the two-way symmetrical model, have however been criticised over the years. Laskin (2012:357) contends that the lack of flexibility in the way the models were conceptualised makes two-way symmetrical communication often unattainable and portrays the current practice of public relations as residing within some of the inferior models. According to Laskin (2009:46), the models fail to recognise important concepts in public relations scholarship such as roles theory and the relationship-building aspect of public relations. The models of public relations constitute a normative theory rather than a positive description of the industry – the way in which public relations practitioners would like to do public relations but cannot in real life (Laskin, 2009:45). Steyn (2002b:16) believes that the two-way symmetrical model is a more moral and ethical approach to public relations and corporate communication compared with the other models.

It can be argued that while Grunig's two-way symmetrical communication model is not comprehensive, it is a good representation of how organisations should communicate with their stakeholders and that practitioners should strive to build good long-term relationships with their stakeholders in the form of a two-way symmetrical communication flow.

Van Ruler (2015:189) describes Grunig's two-way model as controlled one-way communication as the model neglects the dynamic nature of the communication process itself. Van Ruler believes that the context of modern public relations is a lot more complex than what a notion of two-way communication implies. Organisations continuously construct and reconstruct public opinions and public moods through communication. Therefore, both the organisation and its publics must address and adapt to this ongoing co-development and construction of meaning; hence the need for flexible planning methods in communication.

2.2.1 Changing role of the organisation

In addition to the traditional product- and market-focused variables found in the economic and technological environment, organisations must also deal effectively with the social, political and legal dynamics of their environment. In order to obtain legitimacy and social acceptance, organisations must be responsive to individuals and groups that they once viewed as powerless and unable to make claims against them (Steyn, 2002c:6). Themes formerly classified outside the boundaries of business – such as environment, human rights, social responsibility, and animal welfare – are now seen as being inside the business and relevant in economic terms, therefore comprising core issues on the corporate agenda (Holmström, 2002:14).

The role of the organisation is undergoing dramatic changes as stakeholder groups develop and modify their perceptions of the place and responsibility of organisations within society. This includes elements like environmental effects, influences on different cultures, and the effects of globalisation, while stakeholders demand ethical behaviour and increase calls for sustainable development. Brønn and Brønn believe that a firm's communication personnel have the primary responsibility of taking a leading role in developing strategies for organisations to work effectively and addressing these organisational challenges and shifting sets of stakeholders (Brønn & Brønn, 2003:291-292).

Owing to the digitisation of society, the public sphere is now enlarged to a limitless space where everyday people spread conversations. Communication should no longer be viewed as an exchange between two or more actors, but should rather be defined as a multi-way

diachronic process of constant construction of meaning where one cannot foresee who will be involved, in what way and what the consequences will be (Van Ruler, 2015:187).

2.2.2 The need for including the societal view into public relations models

Van Ruler and Vercic (2005:240) state that the traditional models are positioned at the behavioural level and only useful for daily practice and not applicable as a concept for generating a communication policy of an organisation. This is because in their opinion, in all the models, the societal level is completely neglected. This causes a fundamental misunderstanding of the legitimacy problems of organisations, which can be regarded as the key problem for organisations and society in the near future.

Adding to the problem with the traditional positioning of the public relations field, is its association with mass media. Heath (2006:95) states that this leads to a sense that media relations and the press release define the practice. The industry needs a new paradigm that acknowledges that all organisations engage in and have a need for public relations. The future of the discipline may rest with focusing attention on the better good of society, instead of the communicator or the organisation (Heath, 2006:95).

For organisations to be relevant in today's business environment, communication theory and research must focus on how communication contributes to an organisation's purpose for being (Hallahan et al., 2007:11). The industry experienced the turn of communication. It is now considered indispensable to communicate organisational activities properly both inside and outside the organisation. It is also essential to not only pay attention to ongoing changes among key stakeholders, but to also act on these changes (Invernizzi & Romenti, 2011:20).

When considering basic management principles, an organisation needs to survive or expand and therefore needs markets for its ideas, services and products, in addition to supportive groups in its environment. It is however important to consider how individuals can relate to organisations other than merely being customers. A societal perspective is therefore necessary for long-term survival and can offer a more profound view of communication management (Van Ruler & Vercic, 2005:253).

The literature on the evolution of public relations indicates that a new dimension of public relations was needed to adapt to the business environment of the new millennium. There has been a shift from merely talking to stakeholders to having conversations with stakeholders, in order to attain mutual beneficial relationships. Lurati (in Lurati & Eppler, 2006:76-77) explains that organisations traditionally decide what to do and where to go based on the availability of

certain resources. However, in today's business environment, organisations are required to make decisions that also consider the public's expectations.

The field of public relations has undergone continuous differentiation, expansion and upgrading in recent decades. Communication is not seen as an end in itself anymore, but is accepted as a tool for positioning and legitimising business in society (Kiesenbauer & Zerfass, 2015:422).

The internet and social media have empowered citizens in a manner unparalleled in history. With the click of a mouse, critics can trigger a rapidly developing attack on large international corporations. Public trust in business is flagging owing to continuing battles between business and government, high unemployment rates, and a series of corporate crises across the world (Broom & Sha, 2013:368).

The societal role of public relations looks at the contribution of the practice to the bottom line (Grunig & White, 1992:51). According to Grunig and Ehling (1992:85):

It helps the organization to enact an environment that includes the stakeholders most likely to constrain or enhance the ability of the organization to carry out its mission – to meet its goals ... The better the organization manages its interdependencies, the more likely it is to succeed in meeting its goals.

Van Ruler and Vercic (2005:239) argue that the most important problem in public relations currently is the societal legitimation of organisation. According to Invernizzi and Romenti (2011:25), the new dimension of public relations consists of participating in making decisions that concern the operation of the company, which are rooted in the gradual awareness of the importance that the communication component has on any corporate decision. Communication is therefore fully part of the decision-making process and complements the contents and quality of the results of the decisions. Communication therefore takes central and strategic importance when it is no longer limited to merely communication image and is more associated with managerial methods, products services and quality (Invernizzi. & Romenti, 2011:25).

2.3 Excellence Theory

Excellence theory is important for this research, as this is a major theory which explains the conditions that make excellence in public relations possible. The excellence study of 1992 provides a solid theory as well as empirical evidence of how the public relations function should be organised to maximise its value (Grunig, 2006:159). The theory also argues that excellent

public relations departments plan and choose communication systems to minimise conflict and maximise cooperation between an organisation and its strategic publics (Grunig, 1992:18).

Public relations departments should be organised in a way that makes it possible to identify strategic publics as part of the strategic management process. Research from excellence theory indicates that involving public relations in strategic management is a critical characteristic of excellent public relations (Grunig, 2006:160).

Kim et al. (2013:198) state that since the completion of the excellence study, scholars in this field have continued to conduct similar research to assist public relations practitioners to participate in strategic processes. They believe that the excellence theory describes and prescribes the role of public relations in strategic management. The theory therefore explains how the public relations function should be structured to provide the greatest value to organisations, publics and society.

The most excellent public relations departments participate fully in strategic management by scanning the social, political, and institutional environment of the organisation to bring an outside perspective to strategic decision making (Grunig, 2006:162). Through empowering the public relations function, the public are empowered to have a voice in organisational decision making (Grunig, 2006:165). Strategic public relations management is a strategic function when the PR function is empowered and involved before strategic decisions are made (Grunig et al., cited in Steyn 2007:139).

Heath (2006:96) explains that people respond to one another to create, manage and meet varying expectations. Society has multiple layers and conflicting interests, from local to global perspectives. The fundamentals of effective communication and excellent communication management underpin the discussion of how public relations can help make society more functional (Heath, 2006:98). In order to make society more functional, organisational managers must demonstrate characteristics that foster legitimacy and display willingness to consider and instrumentally advance others' interests, be collaborative in decision making, proactive and responsive to others' opinion and needs, and work to meet or exceed the requirements of relationship management. This includes being a good corporate citizen, as organisations that are seen as worthy contributors to a functioning society will be empowered to function more effectively (Heath, 2006:100).

If public relations practitioners assist management to understand how certain decisions may have adverse consequences for stakeholders, management are thereby influenced to make a different decision. Excellence theory therefore identifies the importance of a strategic role for

public relations and the importance of relationships. Ineffective organisations cannot achieve their goals when their stakeholders do not support these actions. Stakeholders typically oppose management efforts to achieve what the stakeholders condemn to be illegitimate goals. Poor relationships can therefore cost the organisation money as a result of litigation, regulation, negative publicity, strikes, boycotts, loss of sales and public opposition (Kim et al., 2013:200).

Research done by Yeo and Sriramesh (2009:424) found that the top in-house public relations practitioners in Singapore cannot be said to be playing a predominantly strategic role in their respective organisations. They believe that reporting to the CEO is not a sufficient indicator of whether public relations contributes meaningfully to an organisation, if that reporting is not accompanied by active strategic work that involves a higher degree of participation in the boardroom on issues that go beyond just media publicity. Their research found that the senior practitioners interviewed for their study lacked the expertise to play a managerial role (Yeo & Sriramesh, 2009:424).

2.3.1 Excellence will stem from applying theory to practice

However, Tyma (2008:193) explains that excellence comes from practice, growth and praxis. He believes if excellence is to be achieved within public relations praxis, the roles of practitioners not only should be normalised, but also critically flexible to address differences that exist vs a theoretically-informed praxis (Tyma, 2008:198).

In reality, the excellence theory, by discovering what makes excellent public relations practice with regard to politics, demonstrates the shortcomings created or not recognised by the dominant coalition ... Through this critique, political and cultural differences are recognized not as roadblocks but educational opportunities for all groups involved ... For two-way symmetrical communication to work on behalf of all groups, all discourses must be engaged ethically, equally, and without prejudgment. This governing principle, as engaged through the "excellence theory," allows for those voices that may be positioned at the margins, or "othered" in some way, the opportunity to speak if the group so chooses. The "excellence theory" does not *give* voice to the voiceless because, in the truest sense of critical theory and the two-way symmetrical perspective, this power is not for the dominant coalition to give. The excellence theory *does* create a space for voice (Tyma, 2008:200-201).

Tyma (2008:202) therefore believes that the next step in the industry is to start demonstrating the effectiveness of the excellence theory as a system of knowing. It is up to the public relations theorists, researchers and practitioners to employ the excellence theory to create emancipatory spaces for otherwise silenced voices, within the practice of public relations, while ethically serving their organisation to their best abilities (Tyma, 2008:203).

2.3.2 Summary of the excellence theory

To conclude what an excellent PR department entails and does, the researcher provides a summary of the literature below.

A public relations department is excellent if/when the following criteria are met:

- The department has a direct reporting line to the CEO.
- It is empowered through representation in the dominant coalition or has access to powerful individuals within the organisation.
- It is involved in strategic management.
- It identifies strategic publics as part of the strategic management process.
- It plans and chooses communication systems to minimise conflict and maximise cooperation between an organisation and its strategic publics.
- It scans the social, political, and institutional environment of the organisation to bring an outside perspective to strategic decision making.
- It is involved before strategic decisions are made and influences management decisions to align with key stakeholders' values and norms.

2.4 The Dominant Coalition

It is important to acknowledge that there are numerous factors that allow and empower individuals to influence decision-making processes within an organisation. One important factor is whether the individual is part of the dominant coalition or not, and therefore the theory on the dominant coalition is relevant to this research.

The dominant coalition was first theorised by Cyert and March (cited in Berger, 2005:6) as a coalition of individuals, including top management, who shaped organisational behaviours. The ideology of shared power highlights the values of interaction, dialogue, cooperation and relationships rather than power (Berger, 2005:16). Members of the dominant coalition draw power from a variety of sources, including authority, coercion, charisma, expertise, information, etc., to influence decisions (Berger, 2005:7).

2.4.1 The need for senior public relations practitioners to be part of the dominant coalition

Kanihan et al. (2013:141) state that both theory and practice indicate the need for communication managers to belong to the dominant coalition for them to be most effective within an organisation. The more the dominant coalition values a communication manager, the more seriously it considers communication concerns (Kanihan et al., 2013:142). Steyn (2002c: 15) proposes that senior communication practitioners are the ideal candidates to contribute

intelligence not only on one stakeholder such as marketing (customers) or public affairs (the government), but on most of the organisation's stakeholders. Grunig (2006:160) notes that public relations must be empowered through representation in the dominant coalition or by having access to powerful or influential members of the organisation.

Dozier and Broom (1995:9) state that through facilitating communication between the dominant coalition and its key stakeholders, the public relations practitioner becomes involved in decision making by acting as a go-between or boundary spanner. This makes the practitioner a valued counsel to senior-level decision making. They believe that a common concern among practitioners is that they are excluded from decision making and therefore unable to counsel the dominant coalition to avoid public relations mistakes and are instead only brought in after the stakeholders have made their concerns heard, and the practitioner has to repair the damage or cover it up.

According to Yeo and Sriramesh (2009:424), more efforts are needed to educate senior managers and the dominant coalition about the true contribution that public relations can make to organisations.

2.4.2 Autonomous involvement in the dominant coalition

Bowen (2006:331) contends autonomy in public relations is vital to how much practitioners can contribute to strategic management. For public relations practitioners to contribute to strategic management, it is required that the public relations specialist be part of the dominant coalition. Autonomy can involve freedom from encroachment, reporting directly to the CEO, having input in strategic management and planning, and being able to make decisions without having them ratified through levels of bureaucracy. Bowen (2006:331) states that if the structure of the communication or public relations department includes autonomy for the function, the function can contribute at its maximum level. Inclusion in the dominant coalition is therefore desired because the top public relations practitioner will then be able to play a crucial role in strategic planning and organisational policy.

Public relations practitioners are therefore best suited to act as ethical advisors when top management discusses strategic plans and decisions, as they are best positioned to understand the ethical values of organisation's stakeholders (Bowen, 2006:335). Theory suggests that the senior public relations practitioner should have the power and authority to openly counsel the dominant coalition regarding ethical courses of action. These practitioners can view decisions or strategy options from all perspectives and bring those insights to the table, thereby representing varying views during the decision-making process. If those

perspectives are not considered, issues can be misunderstood, and decisions will not be made with the goal of maintaining relationships as the end-goal. To make well-considered decisions, it is vital that senior public relations practitioners are part of the organisational leadership (Bowen, 2006:336). Bowen's 2006 research found conceptually and empirically, that autonomy is necessary for public relations to contribute to strategic management (Bowen, 2006:346).

2.5 The Relational Approach

Concomitant with the evolution of the profession, practitioners should now focus on what is best for the organisation's relationship with stakeholder groups through determining which strategies and decisions will have adverse or positive effects on certain stakeholder groups (Hon & Grunig, 1999:10). The theory discussed on the evolution of public relations indicated that there has been a paradigm shift in public relations practice from simply communicating to stakeholders, to a profession that has to build and maintain relationships with strategic stakeholders that are mutually beneficial for the organisation to operate effectively (Invernizzi & Romenti, 2011:20). Theory on the relational approach therefore is important for this research.

2.5.1 Balancing the interests of both the organisation and its stakeholders

Ledingham and Bruning (1998) suggest that organisational involvement and support of the community in which the business operates can engender loyalty towards an organisation among key stakeholders when the key stakeholders are aware of that involvement and support. The organisation should therefore focus on the relationships with their key stakeholders and communicate the involvement of those activities or programmes that build the organisation–public relationship to members of their key publics (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998:63).

Stakeholder theory contributes to how public relations practitioners would uncover who the relevant participants are in the communication process, that is, how to determine who the important stakeholders are. As stakeholders represent different points of view with respect to different issues, this is where the danger of misunderstanding and miscommunication becomes apparent (Brønn & Brønn, 2003:292-293). Brønn and Brønn (2003:295) state:

The ability to communicate with others who share similar mental models and understandings of the world is easier than communicating with someone who does not share a common conceptual structure ... A primary task of corporate communicators with respect to organisational stakeholders is to work actively to attempt to uncover and understand the stakeholders' mental models.

The emphasis of public relations is no longer on manipulating public opinion with communication messages for the organisation's gain, but rather on combining communication messages and organisational behaviour to initiate, build, nurture, and maintain mutually beneficial relationships between the organisation and its stakeholders (Steyn, 2002d:1).

In a 2005 study, Hung assumed that when an organisation realises the interdependence with its publics, it will compete or collaborate with the publics to acquire the resources needed for its survival. "As a result, this kind of realisation will influence the type of interactions the organisation intends to have with its publics, whether it is to reach a win-win or win-lose outcome" (Hung, 2005:396).

The value of communication is determined by the quality of mutually beneficial relations that such communication helps to establish with key publics (Dozier & Broom, 1995:23).

2.5.2 The Importance of organisation–public relationships

Bruning and Ledingham (1998:199) believe that by conceptualising public relations in terms of the organisation–public relationship, the theory places relationships at the core of the study and practice of public relations. They state that the organisation–public relationship indicators of trust, openness, involvement, investment and commitment impact the ways in which organisation–public relationships are initiated, developed and maintained as they ultimately can engender loyalty toward the organisation among key stakeholders (Bruning & Ledingham, 1998:200). Their 1998 research argued that the relationship between an organisation and its key stakeholders plays a role in customer satisfaction. This is because a positive relationship between the organisation and its stakeholders will influence the perception of satisfaction with the organisation (Bruning & Ledingham, 1998:201). As consumers develop expectations with regard to the product, service, image and pricing of the organisation, they also form expectations of the organisation when it comes to its relationship building behaviours (Bruning & Ledingham, 1998:204-205).

The interdependence between an organisation and its environment creates the need for public relations (Kim et al., 2013:203). If an organisation communicates effectively with its stakeholders before decisions are made, issues and crises may never occur and good relationships should be secured (Kim et al., 2013:204).

When organisations are perceived to care about their stakeholders and strive to achieve reciprocal relationships, they will build a reputation for being concerned about their stakeholders and therefore encounter less opposition and more support from their publics over

the long term (Hung, 2005:397-398). Bruning and Ledingham (1998:205) noted that organisations that seek to build relationships with key stakeholders will find that through building mutually beneficial relationships, the organisation can respond to the needs of both the organisation and its stakeholders.

2.6 Reflective Paradigm

The reflective paradigm implies that the company attempts to see itself from the outside and identify itself within the larger social context. In the act of reflection, an organisation attempts mutual understanding with stakeholders out of respect for differences. This self-restriction of organisations out of consideration for other relevant systems in turn secures their own existence and development in the long term (Holmström, 2002:14). The reflective paradigm is pertinent to this research as it explicates how organisations should communicate with, and view themselves within, the new business paradigm. This reflective paradigm can be considered as the modern paradigm for public relations and guide practitioners on how to view their organisation within a broader societal context.

2.6.1 The rise of reflective processes in public relations

The public relations field saw reflection grow as a specific social communication pattern in the late twentieth century; it describes an evolutionary pattern in societies as a form of co-ordination towards self-regulation. Reflective organisations have the challenge of taking an open and understanding position towards perspectives that differ from their own without losing their identity (Holmström, 2002:8). A reflective communicator will seek to find a balance between inquiry and advocacy. Too much advocacy will result in one-way communication with little room for feedback. The balancing act involves dimensions of telling, generating, asking and observing (Brønn & Brønn, 2003:300).

According to Marsh (2010:361), communication is at the core of the reflective process. Marsh considered precepts derived from Isocrates' trans-political efforts for the reflective mindset as:

- Clarification, to leadership, of the difference between attack and admonition
- Encouraging and institutionalising varying opinions
- Viewing the organisation from the outside
- Reliance on research of a diverse society in flux to involve observation, dialogue and institutionalised procedures

Van Ruler and Vercic (2005:262) explain that managers use a variety of strategies to get things done, even if or when there are conflicting interests that must be resolved. Sometimes these strategies include manipulation or persuasion of their stakeholders. Owing to public legitimacy,

managers are now constrained to manipulate stakeholders, as increased public counteraction makes it necessary for businesses to survive. This broadened business paradigm requires a larger degree of self-control by management.

2.6.2 Organisational context and making sense of the organisation's environment

Invernizzi and Romenti (2011:15) state that the fact that public relations has a boundary spanning role, gives these specialists a privileged position for observing and interpreting the context in which the organisation operates. This is considered a central theme in strategic management studies to guarantee long-term survival for organisations. This type of research on organisational context therefore permits the public relations practitioner to offer a strategic contribution to the decision-making process within their organisation, by feeding information about the external environment to top management.

Invernizzi and Romenti, (2011:16) also link the reflective paradigm to the role of sense-making. This role can be applied from inside to outside the organisation to pin-point communicative aspects of decision making in advance, based on the strategic options and objectives the organisation has at its disposal. The public relations practitioner understands the attitudes and behaviours of the organisation's stakeholders and can thereby predict the resulting impact the decision will have on the quality of the relationships and the value of the corporate reputation. Sense-making from outside to inside the organisation is also essential in this process as it enables the practitioner to understand the impact and consequences of issues on the decision-making, production and managerial processes.

They state that the sense-making role implies that short-sighted management attitudes, dedicated to defending their own areas of interest, should be abandoned and the focus should rather be directed at energies that encourage open-mindedness on the part of the organisation in relation to its environment, welcoming external stimuli and valuing the wealth of opinions, positions and experiences which collectively constitute the organisational context (Invernizzi & Romenti, 2011:17).

2.6.3 The role of reflection in public relations

Van Ruler and Vercic (2005:266) believe that management needs a reflective view of its communication to sustain a licence to operate. In the reflective approach, communication management concerns itself with maximising, optimising or satisfying the process of meaning creation using different methods, to solve managerial problems by co-producing public legitimation. Thus, management should reflectively understand and learn from positions advocated by both their critics and supporters (Heath, 2006:102).

In the reflective approach, the organisation does not only communicate with strategic stakeholders, but also analyses, reflects, and integrates the characteristics of the public sphere dynamics. Organisations cannot control the public sphere, but they can attempt to adapt to its demands.

2.7 Roles Theory

Roles theory is significant to this study in providing a theoretical overview of specific roles that public relations specialists should be playing in organisations, aligning with the evolution of the profession.

As the public relations industry evolved over the years, the role of the practitioner evolved with it. Research into public relations practitioner roles represents one of the dominant themes within the public relations literature over the past two decades (Moss & Green, 2001:118). The manager and technician roles have been the most debated roles in the theory over the years, with the technician role being interpreted as simply implementing public relations activities and disseminating messages, and the manager's role as planning and drafting the activities and messages.

2.7.1 The traditional manager and technician roles

As a technician, the individual makes many tactical decisions about producing and distributing communication. Technicians do so less independently of the strategic decision making by the dominant coalition (Dozier & Broom, 1995:23). In 1979, Dozier and Broom conceptualised the manager and technician roles as the two most useful and parsimonious generalisations of the roles played by public relations practitioners (Broom & Dozier, 1986:41). In their 1986 research, they hypothesised that increased levels of involvement of organisational decision making for practitioners would significantly correlate with increases on their manager role indices (Broom & Dozier, 1986:43).

Dozier and Broom (1995:5) explain that as a management function, public relations must participate in the governance of the organisation. Such participation involves expert prescription, making policy decisions about the organisation's public relations programmes, and making decisions, together with the dominant coalition, about public relations issues. They believe that the public relations specialist should act as the eyes, ears and mouthpiece of the organisation. Subsequently, Dozier and Broom found that the senior adviser role tends to overlap with the manager role with regard to several activities, such as identifying communication problems and informing management of stakeholders' opinions. Moss and Green (2001:122) also agree that if practitioners want a seat at the executive table, they also

need to demonstrate their capability in planning and managing budgets, supervising others and evaluating research.

2.7.2 The strategic role of public relations

The strategic role of public relations as conceptualised by Steyn explains how public relations can contribute towards the development of an organisation's enterprise strategy. Steyn (2009:528) measured the role of the PR strategist among South African chief executive officers (CEOs) according to the CEOs' expectations and perceptions of performance. In 2009, Steyn relabelled this role as the 'reflective strategist':

By spanning the organisation boundary, gathering information by means of environmental scanning, transmitting this information to management, and providing it as input to the strategy formulation process, the reflective strategist enlightens management on societal/stakeholder values, norms, and expectations for socially and environmentally responsible behaviour (Steyn, 2009:528).

The reflective strategist acts as an advocate for key stakeholders by conveying their views to management to create awareness of the impact of the company's behaviour, organisational policies, and strategies on key stakeholders and interest groups. The reflective strategist should influence management to adapt their strategies to stakeholder values, norms, and expectations to balance the quest for achieving non-financial organisational goals (Steyn, 2009:529).

Brønn and Brønn (2003:300-301) concur that the role of the boundary spanner is what gives corporate communication managers the ability to gather internal and external organisational information and use the data to contribute to the decision-making process. This leads to increased learning on both sides of the organisation which will enhance the quality of interactions in the long run. "The challenge for organisational communicators is to elevate and institutionalise the organisational learning dialogue skills into the daily activity pattern of the organisation" (Brønn & Brønn, 2003:301).

Communication management can be explained as a principle of maximising, optimising or satisfying the process of meaning creation, in order to solve managerial problems (Van Ruler & Vercic, 2005:243). The transmission of information is not enough when we examine the concept of communication management, as the change of connotative meaning within society has become a very important element (Van Ruler & Vercic, 2005:245). Regarded from a public point of view, communication management is about maximising, optimising, or satisfying the process of meaning creation using informational, persuasive, relational, and discursive interventions to solve managerial problems by co-producing societal and public legitimation.

The role of the communication management specialist is to advise and coach the members of the organisation in this process (Van Ruler & Vercic, 2005:263-264).

2.7.3 Classifying the strategic roles of public relations

Van Ruler and Vercic (2005:265) list four characteristics regarded as inclusive communication management by European scholars: counselling, coaching, conceptualising, and executing. Van Ruler and Vercic describe counselling as the analysis of changing values, norms and issues in society and the discussion of these with the members of the organisation to adjust the point of view in respect of the organisation's values, norms and issues. This role is aimed at the development of the organisational vision, mission, corporate story and strategy.

They explain coaching as educating the members of the organisation to behave competently in order to respond to societal demands. The role of conceptualising, according to Van Ruler and Vercic, is to develop plans to communicate and maintain relationships with stakeholders to gain public trust. This role is aimed at addressing commercial and other internal and external stakeholders, as well as the wider public opinion. Lastly, Van Ruler and Vercic explain the role of execution as preparing the means of communication for the organisation and its members, to assist the organisation in formulating its communication. This role is aimed at executing the communication plans.

2.8 The Strategic Role of Public Relations

It is important that the researcher comprehend the strategic role that is theoretically constructed for public relations to play in corporations to allow the researcher to compare the theoretical construct with practical experiences. Current theories of public relations highlight the responsibility of communication managers to influence organisational decision making through monitoring issues, stakeholders, and opinion building. This will enable the communication specialist to support organisational strategies by building relationships with, and conveying messages to, relevant stakeholders to influence their mindsets and behaviour (Vercic & Zerfass, 2016:275-276). The current requirement that top management has of the communication function is considered to be the provision of communication intelligence to top management and the board before top-level strategies are developed (De Beer et al., 2013:321).

Public relations' contribution to an organisation's strategy formulation process therefore lies in its inputs into, and participation in, the formulation of enterprise and functional strategy (Steyn, 2002c:20). Raupp and Hoffjann (2012:157) note that while decision-making theory focuses on the integration of communication management into corporate decision making, the influence

of communication management through information and translation services on corporate decision making is inevitable. If public relations makes organisations more effective by building long-term relationships with strategic stakeholders, it is only logical to deduce that public relations should participate in the organisation's strategic planning (Grunig & Repper, 1992:117).

Arcos (2016:269) claims that communication is a growing, important dimension of the environment that requires attention from organisations of all kinds. Communication is now a component of the overall corporate strategy that needs analysis and insights for planning and implementing programmes, as well as an instrument for preventing conflicts that might affect the organisation and its stakeholders.

2.8.1 The new role of public relations

Brønn and Brønn (2003:295) explain that the new role of the corporate communication function entails a reflective stakeholder approach. In this sense, they define the role of the communication specialist as helping organisations to determine their worldview. As different stakeholder groups have different values, beliefs and perceptions, this leads to different interpretations of events and actions. The organisation therefore needs a reflection of the stakeholder's true beliefs to address the stakeholder sufficiently. The less accurate the perception of the stakeholder's beliefs, the more ineffective the communication will be (Brønn & Brønn, 2003:297-298).

Nichols (2006:40) cites the founder of Riverford Organic, a vegetable box firm, Guy Watson:

Our business model starts with trust; because people trust us they are willing to believe in us and buy our produce ... This trust enables us to generate profit ... The more we gain trust, and the harder we work to live up to the beliefs our customers have in us, the more profit we generate ... This profit ... enables us to invest in doing the right thing.

There is enough evidence to suggest that strategy development should be more participatory in order to be effective, as there are many things that are unpredictable in organisations due to constructed societal meanings. Therefore, the broader and more participatory the interactions, the richer the strategic conversation will be (Nichols, 2006:40). Nichols suggests that strategy is a relational and conscious inquiry into the organisation's relationships with clients, profits and the environment via a participative ethos to access the wider organisational capability to inquire and learn from them, to aid the strategic process. "The development of the discipline of being a reflective strategist warrants serious attention from all who work in this field" (Nichols, 2006:42).

2.8.2 The benefits of involving the public relations department at a strategic level

Lurati (in Lurati & Eppler, 2006:76) states that when communication functions at the strategic level, the public relations department deals with the sustainability of corporate decisions in terms of communication. In other words – whether strategic decisions are in line with stakeholders' expectations. According to him, the strategic domain of corporate communication is the least known and least practised.

Public relations contributes to strategy development when it serves as a source of intelligence regarding an organisation's social environment. Ni (2006:276) states there is a paucity of research on the relationship between public relations and strategy implementation. Not all organisations are able to build quality relationships with important publics. Ni's 2006 research revealed that public relations practitioners can give a number of examples of how relationships enable the organisation to take advantage of specific opportunities, such as strategic decisions, product reputation, retention of talent, and momentum gained in a fast-changing business market (Ni, 2006:278). This study directly linked relationships management research to organisational goals (Ni, 2006:280).

In their 2008 research, Bruning et al. found that effective relationship building can be associated with important organisational outcomes. They suggest that organisations will benefit when public relationship practitioners develop initiatives that are based on input, interaction and participation from key stakeholders. Ultimately, a deliberate and mutually beneficial approach to relationship management can assist in aligning the organisation's goals with public interests (Bruning et al., 2008:29).

Zerfass (2010:959) found that the alignment of communication with corporate goals and the creation of transparency in corporate communication are the most important motives for the practice of communication controlling. Forty-seven percent of his respondents cite the connection between business strategy and communication as the principal challenge the public relations industry currently faces.

The most important indicators that can be cited as proof of how the role of communication within organisational structures of large companies is growing are: the growth in the number of corporate communication departments; the inclusion of a communication manager in the dominant coalition; and an increase in specialised activities carried out by the public relations practitioner. Public relations can attain its fullest value when specialists are systematically involved in decision making rather than being limited to communicating the decisions taken by other organisational functions (Invernizzi & Romenti, 2011:13).

2.9 Public Relations' Involvement in Strategic Decision Making

A review of the literature on strategic decision making allowed the researcher to identify how public relations practitioners should be involved in the decision-making process to add value to the process.

Each strategic decision is not just connected to previous decisions but is oriented to specific rationalities and thereby mimics the organisation and its structures. Raupp and Hoffjann (2012:150) define decision making from the interpretative view, taking into account prerequisites that lead to decisions. Decisions are therefore the product of individual or collective sense making of the organisation in relation to its environment. As the rationality of the result of a decision cannot be predicted, senior management are left with the procedural rationality of their decision making (Simon, cited in Raupp & Hoffjann, 2012:150).

2.9.1 The need for including public relations specialists in decision-making processes

Decision-making theory necessitates that communication management be included in corporate decisions because the internal and external practicality of self-descriptions (organisationally produced outputs) is not the only key selection criterion, as both directions should never be considered separately (Raupp & Hoffjann, 2012:153). If public relations practitioners are to help organisations adapt to changes in the environment, these individuals must participate in the management decision-making process and not simply implement the decisions made by others (Dozier, 1992:342).

In 1995, Dozier and Broom (1995:24) found that symmetrical strategies presume that public relations practitioners participate in management decision making as expert advisers, communication facilitators and problem solvers. Without the power to influence management decisions, the management function of public relations cannot be performed. Instead, the important strategic function is reduced to fulfilling the role of the technician where the role is essentially reduced to the technical task of producing communication to implement decisions made by others inside the organisation.

Invernizzi and Romenti (2011:18) state that the strategic contribution of the activities that build beneficial relationships with stakeholders is particularly important in the initial phase of the decision-making process. The decision-making process should be rooted in an ongoing interchange between the organisation and its environment and this interchange is where the public relations specialist can play a key role of activist and facilitator. Through analysing and interpreting the organisational context, the public relations specialist can guide top

management towards the most suitable choice and select the most suitable language, technique and messages to communicate the decision to stakeholders.

When strategic communication is seen as an infrastructural role to sustain and support an organisation, the role of communication does not exercise influence on the content of the decision itself, but just on the way the decision is carried out (Invernizzi & Romenti, 2011:19). When organisations view communication as a constitutive role, the function feeds the decisional process and influences it through reflective activities. According to Invernizzi and Romenti (2011:20), organisations that use the constitutive approach to communication see their decisions culminating as more sustainable.

Meyer and Leonard (2014:376) explain that the 2010 Stockholm Accords state that practitioners are expected to be more closely involved with the strategic business issues of sustainability and governance. The revised expectations of corporate communication's contribution flow from the recognition of the changes of the macro business environment.

Arcos (2016:264) suggests that strategy formulation requires analytical input into the company environment and its stakeholders, specifically the communication component of business strategies. He argues that adaption of the organisation's strategies and plans to a dynamic and evolving context requires an intelligence function that anticipates and interprets any developments and drivers of change, and informs management decisions and actions strategically. He further contends that it is vital for businesses to be future oriented and not focused on what is happening currently, but to anticipate the external environment of the business, how decisions and developments in the market will impact the future of the organisation and what the drivers are that affect a given situation (Arcos, 2016:266).

2.9.2 The benefits of involving public relations specialists in decision-making processes

What distinguishes a communication manager from other managers when they sit down at the boardroom table, according to Van Ruler and Vercic (2005:264), is that the communication managers will evince special concern for broader societal issues and approaches to organisational problems. This includes the implications of organisational behaviour towards and in the public sphere and towards stakeholder groups.

Public relations benefits organisations by helping them make decisions, develop policies and behave in ways that are accepted and sought by stakeholders; this in turn increases the organisation's revenue, reduces costs and reduces risks. To truly manage a reputation, Kim et al. (2013:202) therefore believe that public relations professionals must participate in making

management decisions and manage an organisation's behaviour. By participating in these strategic activities, public relations practitioners are in a position to identify stakeholders who will be affected by organisational decisions and how the stakeholders will react. However, Kim et al. (2013:206) also state that a reputation cannot be managed directly, but rather influenced when public relations practitioners participate in the strategic processes of an organisation and thereby affect the behaviour of top management.

The strategic dimension of communication manifests itself through participation in decision-making processes from inception. The presence of the most senior public relations specialist in the executive committee has its justification in the fact that the decision must be evaluated from the standpoints of necessary resources and financial impact, necessary requirements, and impact on human resources as well as the necessary communication resources and communication impact which those decisions require and imply (Invernizzi & Romenti, 2011:20).

2.9.3 Current involvement of public relations specialists in decision-making processes

Brønn and Brønn (2003:302) state that despite its purported importance, there is little information on how to integrate communication with strategy development. In their opinion, research has proved that communication is frequently relegated to a secondary function in many organisations and people without proper training or skills have access to strategic decision making. They conclude that the objective of the communication process should be to learn about the issues under consideration by all relevant stakeholders. "The role of the corporate communicator becomes far more important in this process, rather than simply being the mouthpiece for the firm. He or she becomes a communication facilitator working to establish the basis for understanding among stakeholders" (Brønn & Brønn, 2003:302).

In their 2013 research, Wakefield et al. (2013:211) aimed to determine to what extent public relations institutionalisation occurs and whether it is at a strategic or technical level. They found that efforts to institutionalise public relations seem to be subject to the whims, value systems and overall understanding of public relations by organisational leaders. They concluded that the public relations field may be growing in legitimacy because of the increasingly dynamic environment that affects organisations, but the industry still has a long way to go before being infused by institutionalisation of values and standards (Wakefield et al., 2013:222-223). In addition, Valentini and Sriramesh's (2014:12) research found that public relations specialists continue to be saddled with routine operations like media relations, community relations and employee relations. They also conclude that the majority of public relations practitioners do not have a seat at the decision-making table within organisations in Italy.

Public relations is most likely to contribute to organisational effectiveness when senior public relations practitioners constitute the dominant coalition where they can shape the organisation's goals in order to determine which external stakeholders are the most strategic (Grunig & Ehling, 1992:86).

2.10 Concluding the Literature Review

The aim of the literature review was to determine what the requirements are for practising public relations as a strategic management function in large organisations and what the potential contributions of senior public relations practitioners towards strategic decision making and strategy formulation in large organisations are. To answer the research question, the researcher covered literature on the evolution of public relations, excellence theory, the dominant coalition, the relational approach, the reflective paradigm, roles theory, the strategic role of public relations, and public relations' role in strategic decision making.

Based on the literature discussed in this chapter, the researcher concludes that the **requirements** for practising public relations as a strategic management function are:

- Having a direct line of reporting and/or easy access to the CEO of the organisation.
- Having the power and authority to openly counsel the dominant coalition regarding ethical courses of action.
- Being part of the organisation's dominant coalition in order to have access to the powerful individuals within the organisation. This is to ensure that the public relations specialist:
 - is involved in the initial stages of decision-making processes and is able to provide communication intelligence before decisions are made, rather than being limited to communicating the decisions that are taken by other organisational functions;
 - influences organisational strategy formulation; and
 - influences organisational decision making through monitoring issues, stakeholders and public opinion.
- Focusing on supporting organisational strategies by building relationships with, and conveying messages to, relevant stakeholders to influence their mindsets and behaviour, instead of focusing on manipulating the public's opinion with communication messages.
- Balancing the interests of both the organisation and its stakeholders through the management of organisation–public relationships.

- Taking an open and understanding position towards perspectives that differ from the organisation's executives.
- Through the act of reflection, attempting mutual understanding with stakeholders.
- Being involved in strategic work that involves issues that go beyond media publicity. Public relations should not only involve communication with strategic stakeholders, but also comprise analysis, reflection and integration of the public sphere dynamics into the organisational context for decision making and strategy formulation.
- Fully participating in strategic management by gathering intelligence on not only one stakeholder such as customers or the media, but most (or all) of the organisation's stakeholders to bring an outside perspective to the organisational strategy and decision making.
- Acting as an advocate for key stakeholders by conveying their views to management to create awareness of the impact of the company's behaviour, organisational policies, and strategies on key stakeholders and interest groups.
- Being a source of intelligence regarding an organisation's external environments.
- Assuming the role of the boundary spanner in order to act as the eyes, ears and mouthpiece of the organisation to become the voice of the voiceless within the organisation.

Based on the literature discussed in this chapter, the researcher concludes that the **potential contributions** of senior public relations practitioners towards strategy formulation and decision making in large organisations include:

- Facilitating insight into how stakeholder groups may react to organisational behaviour and how certain decisions may have adverse consequences for certain stakeholders.
- Bringing an outside perspective and providing a voice for stakeholders during strategic discussions.
- Providing intelligence on which strategies and decisions will have adverse or positive effects on certain stakeholder groups.
- Participating in management decision making as an expert adviser, communication facilitator, activist and problem-solving facilitator.
- Giving assistance in the societal legitimation of the organisation through building and nurturing relationships with stakeholders, as this engenders loyalty towards the organisation among its stakeholders, and adopting the organisation's strategies and plan to a dynamic and evolving social context.
- Striking a balance between the interests of both the organisation and its stakeholders by focusing on relationships with stakeholders.

- Avoiding crises by securing good relationships and effectively communicating with stakeholders before decisions are made by determining whether decisions are in line with stakeholders' expectations.
- Providing intelligence on how to adapt strategies to align with stakeholder values, norms, and expectations to balance the quest for achieving non-financial organisational goals.
- Solving managerial problems through maximising, optimizing or satisfying the process of meaning creation.
- Maximising, optimising, or satisfying the process of meaning creation using informational, persuasive, relational, and discursive interventions to solve managerial problems by coproducing societal and public legitimation.
- Providing assistance with the development of the organisational vision, mission, corporate story and strategy to align with the changing values, norms and issues in society.
- Coaching and educating the members of the organisation to behave competently in order to respond to societal demands.
- Adapting the organisation's strategies and plans to a dynamic and evolving context by anticipating and interpreting any developments.
- Aligning communication goals with the business's corporate goals, ensuring transparency in corporate communication.
- Anticipating the external environment of the business, how decisions and developments in the market will impact the future of the organisation and what the drivers are that affect a given situation.
- Viewing decisions or strategy options from all perspectives and having a broader concern for societal issues, to bring those insights to the executive table and represent varying views during the decision-making process.
- Providing intelligence relevant to the organisation, to guide top management towards the most suitable choice and select the most suitable language, technique and messages to communicate the decision to stakeholders, with fostering mutually beneficial relationships as the goal.

The above list of requirements for practising public relations as a strategic management function in large organisations, answers Research Question 1 of this study. This list provides senior public relations practitioners with a perspective on how they can contribute strategically to their organisations. The list also indicates to senior members of organisations how public relations specialists should be empowered to play a strategic role in their organisations.

The list of potential contributions identifies the potential contributions towards strategic decision making and strategy formulation that senior public relations practitioners can offer their organisations, and answers Research Question 2 of the study. Large organisations in South Africa can benefit from these contributions when senior public relations practitioners are able to play a strategic role in their organisations and are part of the organisation's dominant coalition.

In Chapter 4, the researcher compares the findings of the literature review with the primary research, to assess to what extent the interviewed senior public relations practitioners in ten large corporations in South Africa are involved in strategy formulation and decision-making processes, and determine what barriers may be preventing senior public relations practitioners in the selected top 100 JSE-listed companies from making a strategic contribution. The researcher suggests ways to overcome these barriers.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In Chapter 2 of this study, the researcher reviewed an extensive array of literature to develop a conceptual framework. This secondary research forms the basis of the primary research reported in Chapter 4. The literature review and conceptual framework achieved Research Objective 1 and 2 by presenting what the requirements are for practising public relations as a strategic management function and what the potential contributions of senior public relations practitioners to strategy formulation and decision making in large organisations are.

This chapter elaborates on the research methodology the researcher adopted to conduct the primary research with the aim of answering Research Question 3, 4 and 5. The researcher outlines the role of the secondary research in developing qualitative questions for in-depth interviews with participating respondents, in order to compare the theoretical constructs with feedback from the respondents to understand whether their experience in practice aligns with the findings of Chapter 2. This section further describes the sampling and data analysis methods used to obtain the findings discussed in Chapter 4.

3.1 Research Approach, Design and Methodology

This chapter describes the research strategy and methodology the researcher applied for this study. The purpose of the literature review and theoretical perspective was to analyse current knowledge to determine what the requirements are for practising public relations as a strategic management function and the potential contributions of senior public relations practitioners towards strategic decision making and strategy formulation in large organisations. The next step of the study was to collect and analyse data to achieve the following research objectives.

Objective 3: To determine to what extent public relations is practised as a strategic management function and how it contributes to strategic decision making and enterprise strategy formulation in the selected top 100 JSE-listed companies.

Objective 4: To identify possible barriers that may prevent senior public relations practitioners in the selected top 100 JSE-listed companies from providing input for strategic decision making and enterprise strategy formulation

Objective 5: To offer recommendations to overcome the identified barriers.

3.1.1 Research domain

Researchers use various research methodologies to describe, explore and understand social phenomena, which can generally be subdivided into quantitative and qualitative research methodology (Tuli, 2010:98). According to Tuli (2010:106), quantitative methodology is

concerned with attempts to quantify social phenomena and collect and analyse numerical data and focus on the links among a small number of attributes across many subjects. Tuli (2010:106) explains that qualitative methodology is more concerned with understanding the meaning of social phenomena and focuses on the links among a larger number of attributes across a few subjects. Tuli (2010:101) notes that quantitative studies intend to describe, predict and verify empirical research and usually represent findings numerically through statistics. On the other hand, qualitative research aims to explore, interpret, discover and understand social realities and findings are usually reported descriptively using words (Tuli 2010:101).

In order to achieve Research Objectives 3, 4 and 5, the researcher had to explore, interpret and understand the perspectives of a small number of senior public relations practitioners employed in large organisations and compare the perspectives with the prescribed data as set out through the achievement of Research Objectives 1 and 2. The researcher therefore approached this research from the interpretivist paradigm, using inductive empirical research and adopting qualitative research methods to answer the research questions. The strength of qualitative research is its ability to provide complex textual descriptions of how people experience a given issue; such descriptions can provide insight into the 'human' aspect of the issue (Mack et al., 2005:1). One great benefit of interpretivist research is the richness and depth of explorations and descriptions it yields (Nieuwenhuis, 2016:62).

Interpretivism is known as the school of thought that highlights the importance of interpretation and observation as a means to understand the social world (Ormston et al., 2003:11). The aim of interpretivist research is to give a perspective of a situation and analyse the situation to provide insight into the way in which a particular group of individuals make sense of their situation (Nieuwenhuis, 2016:62). The aim of the interpretive approach in qualitative research is to explore the meaning and significance of a relevant experience to a given participant, to determine what it is like for him or her (Ormston et al., 2003:18). Jansen (2016:23) characterises interpretivism as the meaning individuals assign to their experiences.

The researcher adopted a qualitative research methodology for this study in order to generate an understanding of the complex reality that makes up the selected public relations practitioners' participation and involvement in strategy formulation and decision making that drive the business direction of their organisations. The researcher argued that a qualitative research paradigm would provide an understanding to determine to what extent the public relations function contributes to decision making and strategy formulation in a selection of the top 100 companies listed on the JSE in South Africa.

As behaviour is constituted by social conventions, interpretation is required because the facts do not speak for themselves. Ormston et al. (2003:11) explain that there are different ways of knowing about the world, other than direct observation. Perception can also relate to human interpretation of what our senses tell us. As such, knowledge is based on understanding, the result of reflecting on what happens and not just the result of having had a particular experience. In qualitative research, researchers have placed emphasis and value on the human interpretation of the social world and the significance of both the investigator and the participant's interpretations and understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Ormston et al., 2003:11).

It is for these reasons that the researcher chose to engage with a sample of voluntary interview respondents in order to construct meaning and interpret their experiences, opinions and perceptions as they relate to strategy development, decision making and barriers they face within their respective organisations. Further reasoning for using qualitative semi-structured interviews was the objective that the study sought to achieve and how the data would provide comprehensive insight to determine whether public relations functions contribute to decision making and strategy formulation in the sample of top 100 companies listed on the JSE in South Africa.

The role of theory in interpretivist studies is also important. The goal during the start of the research process is to gather as much information as possible about the subjects' lives. Towards the end of the analysis the findings of the research will be evaluated against the context of other theories or existing knowledge (Ormston et al., 2003:22). For this study, the role of theory was important in providing the researcher with a theoretical framework to inform the primary research. The theoretical framework proved to be valuable when the researcher explored how the excellence theory, dominant coalition, relational approach, reflective paradigm, roles theory, strategic role of public relations, and public relations' involvement in decision making are currently implemented in the daily practice of ten senior public relations practitioners employed at top 100 companies listed on the JSE.

3.2 Research Strategy and Methodology

The researcher implemented the qualitative research method of semi-structured interviews with a sample of ten voluntary respondents to gather relevant data.

3.2.1 Research method for gathering primary data

According to Mack et al. (2005:30), in-depth interviews are useful for learning about the perspectives of individuals. "They are an effective qualitative method for getting people to talk

about their personal feelings, opinions, and experiences.” Semi-structured interviews are flexible, in the way that the interviewer generally starts with a pre-planned questionnaire but pursues a conversational style of interview. While the interview will start with predefined questions, the interviewer is ready to follow any interesting tangents that may develop from the discussion (O’Leary, 2004:164).

One-on-one interviews are an interaction between the interviewer and one single interviewee. This type of interview gives the interviewer control over the process and the interviewee the freedom to express his or her thoughts. To collect relevant data, the researcher chose to conduct semi-structured one-on-one interviews with ten consenting practitioners to obtain insight from them that indicates to what extent they are involved and provide input into organisational decision making and strategy formulation. This method of data gathering was appropriate for this study as the researcher wanted to collect in-depth opinions, examples, and experiences from the respondents.

The researcher preferred to conduct most of the interviews in a face-to-face setting. However, as she is based in Cape Town, face-to-face interviews were only possible with four interviewees who were also based in Cape Town. Therefore, she resorted to telephonic interviews with the six interviewees who were based in other parts of South Africa. Conducting interviews via telephone was not a major limitation for the researcher and the researcher facilitated the conversation to flow in the same way it did when respondents were interviewed face to face. While the researcher was not able to note non-verbal cues during the telephonic interviews, she was more interested in the content of the answers and was able to gather profound and in-depth content during the both the face-to-face and telephonic conversations.

Mack et al. (2005:34) state that qualitative interviews last between one and two hours on average. They also suggest that interviews should be recorded. The researcher therefore requested ninety-minute sessions with the volunteers to ensure sufficient time allocated to cover all the interview themes.

According to Legard et al. (2003:141), a second key feature of interviews is that they have to be interactive.

The researcher will ask an initial question in such a way as to encourage the interviewee to talk freely when answering the question. The next intervention by the interviewer will be determined by the interviewee’s answer. Thirdly, the researcher uses a range of probes to achieve depth of answer in terms of penetration, exploration and explanation.

The researcher adopted a conversational style of interview to allow the respondents to provide as much information and insight as possible. The researcher also used probes to gain as much in-depth feedback from interviewees as possible. Probes are responsive, follow-up questions designed to elicit more information, description or explanation (Legard et al., 2003:148). The researcher approached the interviewees openly and honestly and guaranteed anonymity to probe an interactive discussion, requesting examples and reasoning for certain answers. By following this directive, the researcher was able to explore fully all aspects of the interviewees' answers, including reasons, feelings, opinions, values, beliefs, etc., in a qualitative manner. All ten interviewees were very receptive to this approach and provided insightful data.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted at a venue selected by the respondent. The researcher visited three respondents at their organisations where the interview took place in a boardroom. One face-to-face interview was conducted at the Cape Town International Airport as the researcher was able to meet with the respondent before the respondent had to board a flight back to Johannesburg. The six telephonic interviews were conducted at a date and time selected by the respondent, when the researcher would phone the respondent on a landline or cell phone to conduct the interview. The duration of the interviews ranged from 40 to 70 minutes.

All ten interviews were recorded on a cell phone voice recorder and afterwards sent to a transcriber sourced through Cape Peninsula University of Technology's networks to transcribe the discussion for data analysis purposes. The transcriber signed a non-disclosure contract with the researcher to ensure that the data, the respondents' names and their place of employment remain confidential.

The researcher aimed to remain objective during the course of all the interviews with the participants, to ensure a credible and valid data-gathering process.

3.2.2 Sampling strategy

The researcher pursued a purposive sampling strategy to target potential participants. This is used as a deliberate strategy to select people who are alike in some relevant detail (Dawson, 2002:51). This sampling technique was used as the researcher aimed to have a sample of respondents relevant to the research questions.

For this research, the selected sample is similar in their line of work in one of the top 100 JSE-listed companies. According to Kanihan et al. (2013:145), organisational researchers often draw samples from corporate lists. Accordingly, the researcher sampled a list of the top 100

JSE-listed organisations (biggest in terms of market capitalisation) in order to contact the senior staff members who lead the public relations function of each of the top 100 JSE-listed companies. The researcher kept in mind that in this industry, various terms are used in the designations of staff heading the public relations function. Consequently, the researcher searched each of the top 100 JSE-listed companies' individual corporate websites to identify potential interviewees as persons with titles such as head of corporate communication, director of communication, head of group media relations, senior manager of PR and communication, director of public relations, etc. The names and email addresses of these individuals were obtained from these websites.

The researcher used that information to send emails to the targeted individuals to request voluntary interview participation on the topic. While the researcher was unable to obtain all 100 potential researchers' details, she sent 57 emails to request qualifying individuals to volunteer for an interview on 7 April 2019. The content of the email explained the purpose of the research and that participation in interviews was completely voluntary. The researcher did not envisage a response from all 57 individuals but expected a satisfactory sample to respond to the email. As the number of responses to such emails is generally very low (Maree & Pietersen, 2016:176), the researcher expected a response from 10–15 individuals as potential interview candidates for data-analysis purposes. Once the researcher received a response from the potential interviewees agreeing voluntarily to an interview, suitable dates, times and venues for the interviews that accommodated the interviewees were arranged.

From the first group of emails that were disseminated on 7 April 2019, the researcher set up five interviews that were scheduled between April and June 2019. The researcher received declines from five individuals with reasons including not having an in-house PR department, policies that don't allow employees to participate in research, and referring the researcher to external consultants or agencies.

On 27 April 2019, three weeks following the dissemination of the first email, the researcher sent follow-up emails to the individuals who had not responded. From that follow-up the researcher received confirmation of participation from a further two individuals. The researcher sent one last follow-up email on 8 August 2019 to the remainder of the potential interview candidates and received a response from five individuals. The researcher confirmed participation from another three individuals and was not successful in her endeavours to confirm interviews with the other two individuals due to their work schedules. This totalled a final number of ten interviews for data-analysis purposes. The last three interviews were conducted in August and September 2019.

The rationale for the inclusion of the top 100 JSE-listed companies in this study is that it allowed the researcher to solicit input from public relations managers working at the largest corporations in the country, and who deal with a number of stakeholders simultaneously. These practitioners are most likely to have a wealth of knowledge and many years of experience, increasing the likelihood that they can provide valuable contributions to the study to answer the research questions.

3.2.3 Overview of the interview respondents

As the respondents' identities and employers remain anonymous, the researcher distinguishes between the respondents by referring to them as pseudonyms she allocated to each individual as indicated in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Overview of interview respondents

Pseudonym	Title	Operating industry	Operating type
Respondent A	Head of Marketing and Communication	Real Estate Investment Trust	Multi-national organisation
Respondent B	Corporate Affairs Manager	Manufacturing	Multi-national organisation
Respondent C	Divisional Executive of Communication	Financial services	National organisation
Respondent D	Executive Director for Corporate Affairs	Investment services	National organisation
Respondent E	Executive Head: Public Affairs	Mining	Multi-national organisation
Respondent F	Communication Manager	Investment services	National organisation
Respondent G	Manager, Group Communication	Processing	National
Respondent H	Executive, Corporate Affairs	Telecom services	Multi-national organisation
Respondent I	Head: Group Communication	Financial services	Multi-national organisation
Respondent J	Head of Marketing and Communication	Real Estate Investment Trust	National

It was interesting to note that six of the respondents have the word 'communication' in their official titles and none have the phrase 'public relations' in their titles. The remaining four respondents have the phrase 'affairs' in their title, comprising 'corporate affairs' and 'public affairs'.

3.2.4 Constructing the interview questions

The literature review and conceptual framework achieved Research Objectives 1 and 2 of the study and the answers to Research Questions 1 and 2 were critical in constructing the list of interview questions for the primary research. The researcher used the theoretical construct developed as part of the conclusion of Chapter 2 to develop a list of open-ended questions to gather information about the practitioners' experiences to achieve Research Questions 3, 4 and 5.

The researcher's aim was to achieve Research Objectives 3, 4 and 5 by conducting in-depth interviews with senior practitioners. The interview questions were constructed in a way that allowed the researcher to ascertain to what extent each practitioner assumed that he or she practises public relations as a strategic management function and contributes towards strategic decision making and enterprise strategy formulation in his or her company. It also allowed the researcher to identify possible barriers that prevent these senior public relations practitioners from providing input for strategic decision making and enterprise strategy formulation, and how to overcome these barriers.

To determine how the public relations departments function in the respective companies in comparison to the excellence theory, the researcher used the theory to assess whether the respondents agree that they play a strategic role in their respective companies as outlined by the excellence theory, and whether their departments are structured optimally as suggested by the excellence theory. To explore the structure of the department, the researcher asked questions about reporting lines, flow of command and where the public relations practitioner fitted in the hierarchy, to compare the feedback with the theoretical perspective as outlined by the excellence theory.

Their theory on dominant coalition was used to develop questions to probe whether the practitioners are members of the organisation's dominant coalition, as described by Berger (2005), or have easy access to and openly counsel the dominant coalition in order to participate in and influence decisions made by top management. The researcher explored the constructs overleaf during the interviews:

- How often does the top management of your organisation meet?
- Are you involved in those meetings?
- How autonomous is your department?
- Do you feel that you have power and authority to openly counsel the dominant coalition?
- How are your feedback and insight received among the top management?

The researcher referred to the theory on the relational approach to enquire whether the respondents' organisations value relationships with key stakeholders. To comprehend this construct, the researcher asked how the respondent's organisation aims to balance the interests of both the organisation and its stakeholders. The researcher enquired about crisis communication processes as the theory on the relational approach recommends that the senior communication practitioner should be involved in this process.

The researcher had to interpret whether the respondents' role as reflective strategists is recognised and practised as per the reflective paradigm. The researcher used the theory on the reflective paradigm to ascertain whether the respondents play this critical role in their respective companies to make sense of their external environment to reflect, contextualise and integrate these external aspects internally in the organisation.

As a means to deduce whether the strategic role of public relations as per the roles theory is recognised and practised in each of the selected companies, the roles theory provided the researcher with a distinctive outline of how public relations practitioners can enact their roles as strategists to contribute to the development of an organisation's enterprise strategy and decision making. The researcher asked interviewees to explain in their own words what role they fulfil within their organisations to determine how the individuals perceive their roles. By using the roles theory as a theoretical lens, the researcher was able to assess whether the respondents' role as strategists is being implemented and experienced in practice. Where it was not, the researcher was able to use the respondents' feedback to identify the barriers to providing strategic input.

Theory on the strategic role of public relations was used to develop questions that would assess whether the interview respondents contribute to strategy development in their respective organisations and if 'yes', what that contribution entailed. The researcher asked the interviewees questions such as:

- Do you contribute to organisational strategy development?
- How do you align the communication strategy with corporate goals?
- How are stakeholders' views conveyed to top management?
- Do you have to coach top management in how the company's behaviour, policies and strategies affect key stakeholders?
- Do you influence management to adapt their strategies to align with stakeholders' views, norms and expectations?
- Do you educate the members of the organisation on how to behave in order to respond to societal demands?

The theory discussed on public relations' role in decision making provided a theoretical lens for the researcher to determine to what extent public relations practitioners are involved in decision-making processes in their respective organisations. The researcher aimed to establish whether the respondents are involved from the initial stages of the decision-making process and whether they are able to influence the process. In order to analyse their role in the decision-making process, the researcher asked the interviewees questions, including:

- Do you participate in organisational decision making when it comes to public relations issues?
- Do you participate in organisational decision making when it comes to non-public relations issues?
- What type of intellect and intelligence do you add to the decision-making process?
- Do you play the role of an activist during the decision-making process to ensure that there's an interchange between the organisation and its external environment?
- Do you guide top management towards the most suitable choice during the decision-making process?

The researcher elicited from the interviewees their opinions on what distinguishes the communication manager from other managers at the executive table, and to state why they believe that public relations or communication practitioners deserve a seat at the executive table. To answer Research Question 4 and 5, the researcher asked the respondents what barriers they face in their current roles that prevent them from playing a strategic role and participating in decision making, what other barriers they perceive to exist in the industry, and what potential solutions they suggest to overcome these barriers

See Addendum D for a mind map that the researcher conceptualised as guidance for constructing the interview questions. Please refer to Addendum B for the full list of semi-structured interview questions the researcher asked all the interviewees. The interview questions were grouped into the following themes: the structure of the department, the role the interviewee fulfils, the value of relationships in their organisation, strategic involvement, their role in decision making, crisis communication, the dominant coalition, and public relations at the executive table. Please refer to Addendum C for the list of interview questions as it was regrouped according to the themes for the purpose of the interview discussions.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

Participation in the research was completely voluntary and the researcher obtained consent from all the interviewees, before agreeing on the date and time of interview. The researcher explained the purpose of the study to encourage recipients to respond to the questions as truthfully as possible. The identities of all the interviewees will remain completely confidential. While the researcher knows what information each interviewee provided, their personal information (such as name, surname and place of employment) will not be provided as part of the data analysis, and only the industries they operate in will be mentioned.

In line with keeping the identities of the participants anonymous, the researcher signed a non-disclosure agreement with the transcriber responsible for transcribing the audio recordings of the interviews. The audio and written data is stored on the researcher's personal laptop, which is kept in a password-controlled environment. Only the researcher has access to this information. The researcher made copies of the voice recordings and will store them in her personal records for ten years, should the original copies be requested by CPUT for audit purposes.

As part of the research process, the researcher obtained relevant ethics clearance through the official channels of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (ethical clearance number: Engelbrecht/2019/02). There was no additional source of funding, since the researcher was able to absorb the minimal costs involved in gathering information, such as travelling to the interview location or the cost of making phone calls to the Johannesburg-based participants. The purpose of the study is purely academic and unbiased, as the researcher does not have any obligation towards another party to complete this research.

3.4 Data Analysis

The researcher employed qualitative content analysis to analyse the data emerging from the interviews with the practitioners. Renz et al. (2018:825) noted that content analysis is one of the most commonly used methodologies to study phenomena in qualitative research. The purpose of content analysis is to discover the underlying meaning of text. Content analysis can provide significant insights into phenomena through analysis of text. It allows the researcher to be close to the data, is highly reliable as it follows systematic steps, and is relatively inexpensive to implement. Through replication of a tested process, data is judiciously prepared, coded and analysed and can reveal important themes to generate inferences about human behaviour (Renz et al., 2018:825). Through qualitative analysis and interpretation, data is transformed into findings. This transformation is enabled when the researcher is fully immersed in the data by identifying and describing patterns of meaning emerging from the data (Bezuidenhout & Cronjé, 2014:229).

According to Schreier (2014:171), qualitative content analysis is a method for systematically describing the meaning of qualitative data by assigning successive parts of the material to the categories of a coding frame.

Bezuidenhout and Cronjé (2014:235) adapted Zhang and Wildemuth's (2009) eight-step process of qualitative content analysis as follows:

1. Prepare the data.

2. Define the coding unit to be analysed.
3. Develop categories and a coding scheme or conceptual framework.
4. Test the coding scheme on a sample text.
5. Code all text.
6. Assess the coding consistency.
7. Draw conclusions from the coded data (interpret the data).
8. Report methods and findings.

By giving the data an order, the researcher grouped the data according to the themes identified in the theoretical construct to allow her to identify patterns related to the theory. This process is also known as coding (Bezuidenhout & Cronjé, 2014:235). By means of coding, the researcher breaks the text down into codes and concepts and rearranges the data into meaningful categories.

The researcher adopted the above-mentioned process of analysis as it allows the researcher to present the results in a systematic and sequential format.

3.4.1 Preparing the data

Basit (2003:144) notes that raw data can be interesting to look at, but it does not assist the reader in understanding the topic under scrutiny and the way the participants view that topic. Such data must be analysed systematically to illuminate an existent situation.

As a first step, the researcher had all ten audio recordings of the interviews transcribed into text. The researcher read through the transcribed text and highlighted all descriptions that were relevant to the topic to have a better understanding of the data. Bezuidenhout and Cronjé (2014:236) also state that not all raw data is relevant. As part of this first step in this process, the researcher removed irrelevant text from the tables in order to analyse relevant and significant text only.

3.4.2 Defining the coding unit

The researcher placed the relevant text into tables, grouping the transcribed text according to the list of interview questions, and aligning the text according to the theoretical constructs discussed in Chapter 2. This also allowed the researcher to have an overall view of all ten respondents' feedback to each question.

According to Basit (2003:144), codes or categories are labels for allocating units of meaning to the information gathered through research. Basit describes codes as groups of varying-

sized words, phrases, sentences or whole paragraphs that are connected or unconnected to a specific setting. Creating categories triggers the construction of a conceptual scheme that suits the data.

The researcher must use individual words, phrases, symbols, sentences or paragraphs as coding units as a way of organising data into different sections. During this step the researcher examines the text to decide how it will be broken down (Bezuidenhout & Cronjé, 2014:236).

For this study, the researcher decided to use phrases, sentences and paragraphs as coding units to break the data into different sections. The researcher highlighted relevant phrases, sentences and paragraphs to organise the data in relevant categories.

3.4.3 Developing categories from the conceptual framework

Urquhart (2013:40) explains that the framework can be built from the literature review and applied to the data. The researcher used the mind map (Addendum D), as the conceptual framework to categorise the data.

According to Bezuidenhout and Cronjé (2014:238), this step involves grouping coding units together to form categories, by labelling these categories. This could be done through using terms used by participants during the interviews.

Through this approach, the researcher grouped the raw data into broad categories of related meaning in order to structure the data into themes that could be applied to the entire text. The broad categories were aligned with the literature review to categorise the coding units according to the following headings:

- Excellence theory
- Dominant coalition
- Relational approach
- Reflective paradigm
- Roles theory
- Strategic role of public relations
- Public relations' involvement in strategic decision making

3.4.4 Testing the coding scheme

This step involves testing the clarity and consistency of the categories on a sample of the data to resolve any doubts or problems related to the coding categories (Bezuidenhout & Cronjé,

2014:238). The researcher conducted a first set of coding on the first category of data pertaining to the excellence theory and the coding method was appropriate.

3.4.5 Coding all the text

The researcher thereafter implemented the coding method across the entire text by theming the data to describe and organise observations or interpret aspects of the phenomenon. The researcher implemented line-by-line coding where she read through the text line by line while marking the phrases, sentences and paragraphs relevant to the study (Bezuidenhout & Cronjé, 2014:240).

The researcher analysed the text to extract repeated ideas, terms, transitions, similarities, differences, connections, theoretical issues, and even what was missing or not discussed in the data (Saldaña, 2009:143).

3.4.6 Assessing the coding consistency

Bezuidenhout & Cronjé (2014:242) explain that once all coding has been completed, the researcher must confirm the consistency with which the coding was conducted.

The researcher applied the coding scheme to all the text and data gathered through the primary data collection. The researcher confirms that she was able to apply the coding scheme consistently throughout the data-analysis method. The coding scheme and categories developed for the data analysis were sufficient and allowed the researcher to group the data into meaningful categories in order to identify patterns, similarities, connections and repeated ideas and terms throughout all the data collected.

3.4.7 Drawing conclusions from the coded data

According to Bezuidenhout and Cronjé (2014:242), interpretation of the themes or categories relies on the researcher's ability to augment the analysis of their own interpretation by drawing on existing theories to construct meaning from the text.

The researcher considered the theoretical constructs identified in Chapter 2 and used answers to Research Question 1 and 2 to make sense of the meanings imbedded in the text, augmenting this understanding through referencing the broader theoretical context of the study.

3.4.8 Report methods and findings

The researcher discusses the findings of the empirical data in full in Chapter 4.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the research methodology, data collection, sample strategy and data-analysis methods adopted for this study to equip the researcher to:

- determine to what extent public relations is practised as a strategic management function and contributes towards strategic decision making and enterprise strategy formulation in the sample of top 100 JSE-listed companies;
- understand which barriers may prevent senior public relations practitioners in the sample of top 100 JSE-listed companies from providing input for strategic decision making and enterprise strategy formulation; and
- suggest what can be done to overcome the above-mentioned barriers.

In the next chapter the researcher explores the findings of the empirical research and answers Research Questions 3, 4 and 5.

CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The researcher extrapolated the theoretical constructs discussed in Chapter 2 to answer research Questions 1 and 2, as well as conceptualising a mind map which was an important tool in developing the interview questions. In this chapter, the researcher draws findings and conclusions by comparing the results from the primary research with the theoretical and conceptual framework that the researcher developed, to:

- determine to what extent public relations is practised as a strategic management function and how it contributes to strategic decision making and enterprise strategy formulation in the selected top 100 JSE-listed companies;
- identify possible barriers that may prevent senior public relations practitioners in the selected top 100 JSE-listed companies from providing input for strategic decision making and enterprise strategy formulation; and
- offer recommendations to overcome the identified barriers.

4.1 Excellence Theory

In line with the summary of the excellence theory that the researcher presented in Section 2.3.2 in Chapter 2 of the study, a public relations department is excellent if/when the following criteria are met:

- The department has a direct reporting line to the CEO.
- It is empowered through representation in the dominant coalition or has access to powerful individuals within the organisation.
- It is involved in strategic management.
- It identifies strategic publics as part of the strategic management process.
- It plans and chooses communication systems to minimise conflict and maximise cooperation between an organisation and its strategic publics.
- It scans the social, political, and institutional environment of the organisation to bring an outside perspective to strategic decision making.
- It is involved before strategic decisions are made and influences management decisions to align with key stakeholders' values and norms.

To determine to what extent the ten participant public relations practitioners practise public relations as a strategic management function and contribute towards strategic decision making in their respective organisations, the researcher enquired about the structure of their departments and the roles the respondents perceive themselves to fulfil.

When asked about the structure of their departments and how the reporting lines at their organisation flow, nine of the respondents indicated that they report directly to the CEO or have a direct line to the CEO. Five of the respondents are part of their organisation's executive committees (EXCO) and the other respondents confirmed that their superior serves on the EXCO. All respondents confirmed that they have easy access to the CEO of their organisation and there is a line of reporting to the CEO, either directly or through a dotted line with their superior.

It was positive to note that nine out of the ten public relations specialists interviewed have a reporting line to the CEO and that the function is represented at the most senior level in the organisation at the executive committees. The findings demonstrate that the respondents' departments are structured optimally, as suggested by the excellence theory discussed in Section 2.3.2 in Chapter 2, to allow the individuals to make a strategic contribution to their respective organisations. This alone is, however, not a sufficient indicator of whether the function contributes meaningfully to the organisation.

4.1.1 Excellence will stem from applying theory to practice

When asked about the role they fulfil, the interviewed practitioners used a variety of phrases to explain the responsibilities and tasks they fulfil, relating to the organisation's reputation, internal communication, customer issues, stakeholder engagement, investor relations, strategic guidance, community engagement, culture driver, and crisis communication. Respondent G explained that the role is chameleon-like in that the role changes depending on the various stakeholders.

Respondent A declared that she wears a reputational hat to determine how executive decisions that are made at a board level will affect the business internally and how they will translate externally. She elaborated that her role also involves "...enabling communication internally and externally". Both Respondents B and C also agreed that the company's reputation is a key priority for them. Respondent C further contextualised that it is also important to monitor the external conversation and field this internally to determine whether it will affect her organisation.

Respondent E indicated different expectations for her role within an organisation that operates in the mining industry. She explained that mining companies have to adhere to regulations of the South African Department of Resources and Energy in order to obtain a licence to operate. The conditions for obtaining and retaining that licence include elements of community engagement, community development, transformation, housing for employees, resettlements,

environmental sustainability, and procurement practices. She described that when mining companies do not adhere to the conditions stipulated by the department, the business's licence to operate will be suspended. Within her department, they are responsible for implementing strategies to retain the business's licence to operate and therefore the corporate affairs department plays a critical role within the organisation and it is purely a strategic role.

Respondent H explained that the role is threefold: first there's a strong reputation management element and that you have to keep an eye on all the different moving parts of the organisation to understand how each of those independent items could impact the overall reputation of the company. Second, she plays the role of a fire fighter. This includes her role during crisis communications. Third is a product of the interplay between the internal and external environments which is increasingly blurred. She also noted that she plays the role of a culture change driver within the organisation. She also concurred that it is important to have support from the senior leadership in order to make a valuable contribution to the company.

Respondent D noted that, "Our role is to protect ... If you know which stakeholders you have to protect ... that is your best compass."

4.1.2 Conclusion

The data revealed that the role that public relations practitioners assume is varied, but respondents mentioned key phrases including monitoring, relationships, stakeholders, reputation, community engagement, licence to operate, and strategic role. The use of these phrases proves that the respondents understand that the role of communication and public relations is not simply one-way communication with one or a select number of stakeholders, but that communication plays a strategic role in engaging with communities and numerous stakeholders to retain the organisation's licence to operate and foster a good organisational reputation. From this data, the findings substantiate that the public relations practitioners understand how they can make society more functional when they fulfil a strategic public relations role.

The excellence theory discussed in Section 2.3 in Chapter 2 as part of the literature review specifies that public relations departments participate in strategic management through monitoring the organisation's external environment and bringing that outside perspective to the strategic discussions. This is in line with how the respondents explained the role that they fulfil in their respective organisations. All the respondents agreed that they monitor or scan their organisation's external environment in order to take that intelligence back to the executive table for discussion. The respondents used affirmative phrases such as: 'protect our stakeholders',

'enable communication internally and externally', 'community engagement', 'reputation management' and 'interplay between the internal and external environments'.

4.2 Dominant Coalition

As noted in Section 2.4 of the literature review, the theory on dominant coalition indicates that there is a need for public relations practitioners to be a part of an organisation's dominant coalition in order to influence decision making and strategy formulation processes in an organisation. One can assume that when a public relations practitioner does have influence over an organisation's decision making, he or she is part of the dominant coalition of the organisation. For this study, it will be important to determine whether the ten public relations practitioners in the sample are part of the dominant coalition in their respective JSE-listed companies, and if not, which barriers prevent them from being part of this coalition.

The researcher did not deliberate the additional factors that allow individuals to be part of the dominant coalition or not. The researcher considers whether or not public relations practitioners serve on their organisation's executive committee as a sufficient indicator of being part of their organisation's dominant coalition.

The five respondents who serve on their organisation's EXCO committees are part of the regular top management meetings in their organisations. The five respondents who are not involved in these meetings are represented by a supervisor who will convey the department's views to the top management. The frequency of the meetings varies from weekly (Respondent D), bi-weekly (Respondent C, E and F), monthly (Respondent A, B, G, I and J) to every second month (Respondent H).

This is the main channel that the respondents use to communicate with the dominant coalition and the respondents who are not involved in these meetings submit specific reports to raise issues with the dominant coalition.

4.2.1 The need for senior public relations practitioners to be part of the dominant coalition

All ten respondents indicated that they do have the power and authority to openly counsel the dominant coalition about ethical courses of action. Respondent A noted that, "It is about having those tough conversations and sometimes they are really, really tough. But they do happen, and it happens in an open and honest way."

Respondent B highlighted that it is part of a CEO's leadership style and therefore it would depend on whether such input is welcomed. She however noted that at her organisation this

type of input is asked for and highly valued at the most senior level. Respondent G agreed with that sentiment, stating that it depends on the personalities of the individuals. She noted that she can send the CEO of her organisation instant messages via mobile and he welcomes that.

4.2.1.1 Do top management understand how issues can be misunderstood by stakeholders?

In response to the question on how top management respond when the respondents voice their concerns and bring stakeholder views to the discussion, the majority of the respondents indicated that their opinions are respected within the business, despite the fact that their input or suggestions will not always be actioned. Respondent C stated that the purpose might not always be to change the decision or to sway the views of top management, but rather to inform top management about the potential outcome of a decision. In her opinion, it allows top management to make a properly informed decision. According to her the important factor for a communicator is that your stakeholders are represented. The stakeholders may not necessarily have the right or most popular view, but it is important that top management is aware of the different views and how people perceive things.

Respondent E agrees that counselling is about informing top management, even if they don't implement your feedback. "Nobody can come back to you and say you that you should have warned [them] ... Sometimes they come back and beg you to sort it [a crisis] out and then you call the shots. It could have been avoided and if you don't say anything you're going to deal with a much bigger crisis" (Respondent E, 2019). Respondent E therefore argues that the communication or public relations expert can avoid crisis by openly counselling top management.

In addition, Respondent I also noted that she has very open and honest engagement with top management; "[The CEO] knows I play the role of devil's advocate quite often – it's a key part of my job."

The respondents all agree that top management show understanding of how issues can be misunderstood by stakeholders and they do consider changing action based on this insight. The respondents presumed that it is also dependent on the leadership style of the top management; when there's a strong commitment to acting in the best interests of the stakeholders, it trickles down to the rest of the organisation. Respondent D explained that sometimes you need to agree to disagree with other individuals in the dominant coalition, but "... we move on and we do what we need to do". She noted that people won't always agree, but it is important that everyone in the room should have the right to talk and state what they believe is right and ethical.

4.2.2 Autonomous involvement in the dominant coalition

While the majority of the respondents illustrated that their departments are autonomous, the respondents prefer to not operate autonomously. They prefer to collaborate and consult with others in the business. Respondent B noted that her department is very autonomous, “but with that autonomy comes a high level of responsibility ... You always have to be mindful of that ... so always give your bosses visibility of what you’re doing, where’re you’re going and how you’re going to do it. Because once there is that overall alignment, you are literally independent to run with the show” (Respondent B, 2019). Respondent D proposed that if anything, the communication team interferes and is involved in everybody else’s business in order to shape what they should be doing from a communication perspective.

As Respondent E explained, the public relations department serves as a service provider to all the various functions and therefore you cannot work alone. “Collaboration is important” (Respondent E, 2019). According to Respondent I, her department works very closely with the CEO and the rest of the EXCO, so they aren’t hampered by unnecessary bureaucracies to get things done. Respondent J agreed that because there are open lines of communication with the top management in her organisation, they do not encounter a lot of red tape.

The respondents all agreed that when they must act timeously on initiatives or queries, they do not have to go through a rigorous process to get their work done and they can make decisions quickly. However, when they face big issues they prefer to consult with the wider business and discuss these with the top management.

4.2.3 Conclusion

The data revealed that half of the sample are part of their organisation’s dominant coalition and the other half are represented by a senior from their department. The practitioners emphasised that they all have power and authority to counsel the dominant coalition openly when they need to raise issues and that their top management understands when the practitioners raise these issues.

The findings suggest that the sample of senior public relations practitioners provide valuable insights into stakeholders to facilitate tough conversations with the dominant coalition about how their organisation acts and stakeholders’ views and opinions about that behaviour. The participants highlighted that even if their feedback does not always get implemented, it remains important that the dominant coalition knows how their actions affect stakeholders for them to make informed decisions.

The theory discussed in Section 2.4.2 outlines a need for the public relations department to operate autonomously, without having to be ratified by levels of bureaucracy. Bowen (2006:331) contends autonomy in public relations is vital to how much practitioners can contribute to strategic management. The findings show that the majority of the respondents do not advocate that public relations departments should operate autonomously. The respondents highlighted the importance of cooperation and consulting with various experts inside the business, instead of working autonomously and in isolation. While the respondents agreed that their departments can function autonomously, the respondents indicated that they prefer to work with in consultation with others in the business to ensure alignment of activities.

4.3 Relational Approach

The theory on the relational approach discussed in Section 2.5 in Chapter 2 indicated the importance of relationships as a new paradigm for public relations and that public relations practitioners need to focus on balancing the interests of both the organisation and its stakeholders to create mutual benefit for all parties. Dozier and Broom (1995:23) note that the value of communication is determined by the quality of mutually beneficial relations that such communication helps to establish with key publics. The researcher therefore investigated the importance of balancing relationships among the ten participating public relations practitioners to determine whether the practitioners contribute insight on mutually beneficial relationships towards strategy formulation and decision making in their respective organisations.

4.3.1 Balancing the interests of both the organisation and its stakeholders

When asked whether their organisation aims to balance the interests of both the organisation and its stakeholders, all respondents concur that their organisations do strive to balance interests of all stakeholders, but that can prove to be a difficult job. As Respondent C indicated, a business is not an island and therefore cannot operate in isolation. She noted that even when you do not have the answer to a certain stakeholder's problem or the issue might be an industry-wide problem, it is important to be respectful towards all stakeholders and engage appropriately on issues to give stakeholders peace of mind that their concerns are being listened to and that the business will act where it can play a role. She recommended:

Besides reading I would say you need to have a very extensive and wide network of relationships. What I mean by that as a PR or corporate affairs person, is that it doesn't necessarily just translate to good relationships with the media. It also helps to have good relationships with departments within the business.

Respondent B explained that the notion of good relationships applies across all stakeholder groups. She elaborated on an example and explained that a colleague contacted her recently

to state that the organisation does not have any policies for paternity leave, as his wife was about to have a baby and he wanted to take time off to spend with the new baby. As corporate affairs, Respondent B approached her Human Resources (HR) department to discuss their HR policies and the possibility of the policies being outdated. As a result of the engagement, the organisation is now changing its HR policies and amending several clauses to align with global best-practices within the HR industry, in addition to developing a paternity leave policy.

Respondent D elaborated that any organisation has a huge responsibility towards stakeholders. However, she explained that it is challenging to always balance interests:

You've got the challenge of what consumers think we should be doing, which is often far removed from our mandate of what we are actually able to do. It becomes quite a battle to try and meet their expectations and be able to run a business.

Respondent E expanded further to say that it's about achieving win-win outcomes as you have to consider what it is that the other party wants to see where you can compromise. She proposed trade offs when negotiating with stakeholders to determine what it is that the business has to give up or if certain conditions are set, whether these are realistic for the business. According to her:

The most important thing for us is to be a trusted partner by stakeholders. When I say stakeholders, I'm talking about government, communities, NGOs, other mining companies in the area that we might partner with, and our customers. We want to unlock shared value that will help us to enhance our reputation. Shared value for us does not mean that we are the only ones who benefit. We share the pie with other partners and stakeholders. That's the premise of how we work and how we approach stakeholder relationships.

The data indicated that the practitioners understand that it is not possible to keep all the stakeholders satisfied, but it is important to comprehend what is at stake and what will be in the best interests of all the parties involved.

For example, in the discussion with Respondent A she mentioned investment analysts as a main stakeholder. Her organisation had to make a business decision to negotiate payment holidays with a big client. In turn, the business decided to invest cash into their client's business in return for an opportunity to be involved in the operational strategy of their client's business. This move was not received well among investment analysts and the business received negative media exposure on the issue, but from a strategic point of view it made sense for the business to follow this course of action and it ensured validity for the business and its client.

Respondent F specified that big institutional investors are an important stakeholder for her organisation. When a senior fund manager who is well known in the industry resigned from the business, the business could have lost a lot of money if the institutional clients decided that they wanted to follow the fund manager to his new organisation. Fortunately, Respondent F explained that because there was a good relationship with the institutional clients, their business did not lose any of its clients.

According to Respondent C, her organisation pays the necessary respect to all stakeholders and have made bold decisions in the past to be transparent and acknowledge when they have made a mistake. She specified that in those cases, their antagonistic stakeholders have been complimentary of how the organisation has approached issues. Therefore, even when there isn't a good existing relationship between the business and a certain stakeholder, she argued that you need to engage with them. "These engagements will always assist in trying to get all parties off on the right foot, even if the stakeholder has a different agenda."

Respondent J discussed that if a brand promises to be transparent, the organisation has to live up to that brand promise and really buy into relationships. She explained that her organisation has taken a step back. "Instead of just writing out a cheque, we find opportunities to give back and engage with the people ... We identify the king pin community members across all the stakeholders to discuss what their challenges are, what issues they face and what we can do to help and understand what our impact on their lives should be. Out of that, we decide where we can collaborate and come up with our own initiative and plan and we share ideas" (Respondent J, 2019).

However, Respondent H comprehended that it isn't always possible to get it right with all stakeholders in South Africa, considering the country's economic, political and social environment, but that is why relationships with stakeholders are important.

4.3.1.1 Communicating during times of crisis

The empirical research indicated that all the public relations practitioners interviewed are the key facilitators during times of crisis and are responsible for developing the crisis communication policy. The public relations practitioners play an important role in managing the crisis response but they are not necessarily the ones to decide how the organisation will respond. Each crisis is handled differently, based on the severity of the issue. The respondents will work in consultation with the various departments to facilitate the crisis response – for example the human resources department for staff issues, or the legal department to vet the

crisis response from a legal point of view. All respondents are responsible for determining the best approach, and the strategy to execute and manage the crisis communication activities.

All the respondents agreed that the CEO is the one who must speak to the media during times of crisis, but this could also depend on the severity and type of crisis. When it is a small issue that is not regarded as a big organisational risk, another individual might handle the communication. This is also where the escalation levels that constitute the crisis communication policy come in and the crisis response will be guided by those escalation levels.

4.3.2 Conclusion

All ten respondents noted that relationships are essential in their current roles, frequently mentioning good relationships with stakeholders, both internally and externally. This closely aligns with the theory on the relational approach discussed in Section 2.5.

The notion of profitability came into play, as the respondents understand the need for the business to focus on profits, which sometimes lead to stakeholder issues being neglected. However, the respondents indicated that it is important to consider what is at stake when these interests cannot be balanced to determine which relationship is most important to the business and which course of action will yield the best results for the business. Some respondents cited instances where they would receive criticism from a certain stakeholder for choosing a specific route of action, but that the route of action was in the best interests of the stakeholders directly involved.

The findings confirmed that most of the respondents are not simply informed that they need to implement certain communication campaigns after decisions are made, but the majority of the public relations specialists are included in the initial phases of decision making to ensure that good relationships can be secured with stakeholders as the public relations specialist will take their views and concerns to the executive table.

The theory on the relational approach also notes the important role that the public relations specialist fulfils during crisis situations, through striving to achieve communal relationships as a way to encounter less opposition from stakeholders (Kim et al., 2013:204). All the respondents confirmed that they play a critical role in managing crisis response for their organisations and they are the ones who will decide what the best approach is to deal with a crisis and manage the implementation of the crisis response. Based on the research, the researcher confirms that the respondents are following the theoretical framework in practice when it comes to fostering relationships during times of crisis.

According to the relational theory, when organisations are perceived to care about their stakeholders and strive to achieve communal relationships, they will build a reputation for being concerned about the communal relationships with their stakeholders and therefore encounter less opposition and more support from their stakeholders (Hung, 2005:397-398). The researcher concurs that this is how the respondents strive to practise public relations in their respective organisations and they realise that this perspective is what gives a business social legitimacy. The ten respondents confirmed that they are responsible for aligning the organisation with societal demands and take the bigger societal picture into consideration when conducting the organisation's daily business.

4.4 Reflective Paradigm

The theoretical framework outlines that in the act of reflection the organisation aims to achieve mutual understanding with stakeholders and seeks to find a balance between the organisation and the stakeholders' needs (Holmström, 2002:14). The act of reflection means that practitioners act as boundary spanners to monitor the external environment relevant to their organisation and reflect that information internally to determine what the impact on the organisation and its stakeholders will be. To assist the researcher to determine whether public relations is practised as a strategic management function and contributes towards strategic decision making and enterprise strategy formulation in large organisations in South Africa, the researcher questioned the ten research participants about the methods they use to monitor the external environment and whether/how they feed this intelligence to top management to consider when making decisions and formulating strategies.

4.4.1 Organisational context and making sense of the organisation's environment

When asked how they make sense of the external environment to reflect those elements internally, the majority (nine out of ten) of the respondents reported that they conduct environmental scanning or monitoring of some sort to understand what issues their organisation or industry is facing and determine what the impact could be. Respondent A realised that it is important to be sensitive to the larger political and social environment as that will affect how you speak to your market. She argued that it is essential to have those conversations at an executive level and to bring that awareness of the external environment to the table.

Respondent B agreed in saying that by reading the external environment it allows the communication department to align the business's objectives to the external environment to

determine how your organisation can play a role as a corporate citizen in addressing some of the imbalances that we experiences in southern African countries.

Respondent C concurred that monitoring is an essential part of her job and that the organisation is aiming to move away from being reactive to using a proactive approach. Hence, the monitoring of different conversations is important to ensure that the organisation has an understanding of important issues and to determine how, or if, the organisation should react and whether the organisation can play a role within those conversations. She therefore has assisted the business to move from a reactive approach to a proactive approach to communication.

In addition, Respondent D revealed that her external monitoring includes research such as focus groups and surveys among key target audiences, including journalists, analysts, clients, the general public and staff members. The results of the research assist the department in determining how the organisation should respond to issues and external events.

Respondent E used the term 'broad scanning' as her means of making sense of the external environment or "... to understand how the pieces of the puzzle fit". Respondent G noted that they monitor the media through a situational analysis. Their communication team conducts pre-emptive monitoring in a process where relevant articles are picked up in the news, including articles that do not mention or affect the company directly but could impact them, to discuss the outcome should the same situation have impacted the organisation.

Respondent I explained that she scans the news and social discourse to determine what impact the current environment could have on the business and her team also advises the company when they need to take a stand or position on a particular national issue. As an example, she described when there was an issue in 2019 with xenophobia in South Africa, the communication department advised top management that the organisation should have a stand on xenophobia and condemn the violence ubiquitous in South Africa.

4.4.2 The role of reflection in public relations

According to Respondent A, there are mostly business and financially minded individuals around the table at the executive meetings, so having a communication or public relations expert in the room brings the softer and 'human' themes to the table. That is where she argued that the value of public relations and communication lies:

They [senior management] look at the rands and cents and what you [the communicator] end up looking at is everything else around the rands and cents ... What

the response is going to be from a behavioural point of view, how is it going to affect the culture of the organisation, how are our clients going to feel about this ...? That is the value.

Respondent C concurred in saying that she wears the hat of the stakeholder to look at things from the stakeholder's view and play the role of 'devil's advocate' and explain what might happen when things go wrong. She recommended that method as the best starting point in the decision-making process to determine what approach to use and what the organisation must do.

Respondent E elaborated that in their EXCO meetings, individuals are not just expected to participate in the discussion on topics that relate to their function, but team members are encouraged to ask questions on a variety of matters such as appointing an auditing firm, selling commodity, marketing campaigns, etc. Because she sits on the EXCO, she is stretched to add value to the conversation that happens at those meetings, regardless of the topic. She will base her insight and contribution on the context and trends which she monitors as part of her broad scanning (mentioned above), to bring those perspectives to light during the decision-making process.

According to Respondent J, she considers everything from the engagement perspective to determine how issues, strategies and decisions are going to impact stakeholders.

All ten respondents agreed that they feed insight and intelligence to top management about all stakeholders, not just one stakeholder group.

4.4.3 Conclusion

All respondents confirmed that they are *boundary spanners*, without using that exact phrase. They used the phrases 'monitoring' or 'scanning' when explaining how they enact the role of a boundary spanner, to understand what issues their organisation or industry is facing from an external perspective, and to take that intelligence back to the executive table for discussion. The respondents regard this act of monitoring as a critical part of their job to make sense of the organisation's external environment.

The findings confirm that the ten respondents provide a strategic contribution to managerial planning and decision-making processes in the form of feeding intelligence about the external environment to top management. The practitioners play an important role in the operations of their respective organisations by discussing this intelligence about social, political and environmental issues with the executive team.

The findings correlate with the theory on the reflective paradigm cited in Section 2.6 in Chapter 2, and illustrate that the participating practitioners do fulfil a strategic role within their respective organisations.

4.5 Roles Theory

Roles theory also highlights the importance of boundary spanning as a strategic role of public relations. The researcher considered the four characteristics Van Ruler and Vercic (2005) conceptualised as inclusive communication management of public relations as counselling, coaching, conceptualising, and execution in addition to Steyn's (2009) description of the role of a 'reflective strategist' to determine whether the respondents enact these roles and characteristics in their daily practice.

To determine whether public relations is practised as a strategic management function and contributes towards strategic decision making and enterprise strategy formulation in large organisations in South Africa, the researcher questioned the ten research participants on whether they:

- develop communication policies for their organisation;
- were involved in developing the vision and mission of the organisation;
- participate in decision making about public relations issues and non-public relations issues;
- coach top management about how the company's behaviour, policies and strategies affect stakeholders;
- influence top management to adapt strategies to align with stakeholder views and norms;
- counsel top management to adjust the organisation's values and norms to align with stakeholders' views;
- educate members of the organisation on how to behave to respond to societal demands; and
- argue that communication can be used to solve managerial problems.

4.5.1 Developing policies and vision and mission statements

Roles theory argues that public relations practitioners should be responsible for developing policies in the organisation (Kim et al., 2013:202). All the respondents specified that they are responsible for developing communication policies within their organisations.

All respondents noted that they either were involved when vision and mission statements were developed or are involved when the vision and mission statements are reviewed. However, Respondent F noted that her organisation's vision and mission statements are not reviewed often. The other nine respondents noted that the development of the vision and mission statements is a consultative process and Respondent H noted that her organisation obtained input and feedback from employees during the process.

When asked whether they are happy with their organisation's current vision and mission statements, eight respondents agreed that they were satisfied with their organisation's vision and mission statements. Respondent A noted that she would like it to be revisited more frequently than at present, but that one does not always have the luxury of getting the board members to give their attention to the vision and mission. Respondent D countered that more should be done to align her organisation's strategy with the vision, as she noted that the two are separate at the moment. Respondent G criticised her organisation's vision as vague, and because the organisation is going through a transitional phase, the mission doesn't speak to where the company will be in a year's time. "It needs to adapt with where the business is going" (Respondent G, 2019).

4.5.2 Participation in decision making for public relations and non-public relations issues

All respondents agreed that they are the key individuals to make decisions in respect of public relations issues. However, when it pertains to non-public relations issues, only five respondents agreed that they participate in making decisions regarding those issues. The other five respondents stated that whether they participate or not would depend on the type of issue at hand. These respondents noted that they would not get involved in operational decision making, but Respondent D noted that when a public relations specialist understands the operational components of the business, they are able to add value at that level. Respondent I agreed, noting that her contribution might be relative when it comes to non-public relations issues, but it is still about building trust for the business.

4.5.3 Conveying stakeholders' views to top management

The individuals who serve on their organisation's EXCO noted that those meetings are important in conveying stakeholder views to the senior management. All respondents indicated that they do have a direct line to the CEO for raising urgent or pressing stakeholder issues with the leadership.

Other ways of conveying stakeholder views to top management include context reports, media monitoring reports and stakeholder metric reports which track external conversations and provide the context for their applicability to the organisation.

4.5.4 Does top management understand that the company's behaviour, policies and strategies affect key stakeholders and interest groups?

In response to the question on whether the top management of the respective organisations understand how the organisation's policies, behaviour or strategies affect stakeholders, the data illustrates that there is some level of understanding among top management on these issues, but the communication practitioners are required to educate them further. The majority of the respondents also mentioned that they expect senior management to acknowledge and comprehend why stakeholder issues are important, owing to their seniority. Respondents contextualised that CEOs or individuals in senior management positions are expected to have a basic level of understanding of stakeholder engagement owing to the seniority of their position and their presumed many years of experience. As Respondent H noted, "At this level, if there's a senior manager that doesn't understand [how stakeholders are affected by the company's behaviour] that is a problem and they shouldn't necessarily be in that senior position" (Respondent H, 2019).

According to Respondent D, the senior management at her organisation mainly focus on customers and sometimes forget about the wider society. In her view, in the quest for profit, top management sometimes neglect other stakeholders and that is where the communication practitioner plays an important role to illustrate to top management what the impact of their decisions will be.

Interestingly, Respondent E described that the top management in her organisation are aware of these issues as it determines the organisation's very existence. She argued that this is due to the nature of the mining sector and the licence to operate that must be retained. "[I] don't even have to justify [my] existence ... they know that if we don't do this, we might as well not exist as a company – the executives get it" (Respondent E, 2019).

Respondent G expanded that it boils down to the individuals. She noted that some senior managers understand the role of public relations while others are completely oblivious.

Respondent H provided an example stating that a few years ago her organisation faced serious issues. The most senior leader was dismissive of some of the important stakeholders and the company witnessed massive strike action and "all hell broke loose".

4.5.5 Coaching top management on how companies' behaviour, policies and strategies affect key stakeholders and interest groups

When discussing whether the interviewees should coach top management about stakeholder issues and raise stakeholder views to them, the majority voiced a need for educating top management. Three respondents did not like using the word 'coaching', but preferred the terms 'influence', 'advise' or 'counsel'. While the consensus is that top management do have some form of understanding, constant education and reminders are required. Respondents D, E and F concurred that educating is a significant part of their work.

According to Respondent C, she has never in her entire career met a management team that understood exactly how important it is to communicate to shareholders.

Respondent D generalised that owing to most managers being so engrossed in the operational aspects of the business, it is insightful for them to hear about and discuss the implications of certain decisions. In addition, she noted that the world is changing so drastically and rapidly, people often find themselves on the backfoot because societal demands are constantly changing. She noted that changing behaviour, even at an executive level, is the biggest challenge that a communication practitioner faces.

Respondent E revealed that the stakeholder manager in her department conducts quarterly workshops to explain and train the people in the organisation on behaviour. In these workshops the company's philosophy is shared with the team members, why they must follow this philosophy, why it is important to have good relationships with stakeholders, and also why it is important for the business to be a good corporate citizen in the areas in which it operates.

Interestingly, Respondent H countered that it is similar to the senior managers sometimes educating her on the operational side of the business. "I'm perhaps more connected ... to what the junior staff are saying about the business ... I've had arguments with the CFO that we should position [an issue] in a certain way, and then the CFO would say to me that that will scare the daylights out of investors. So best we compromise, and I don't see that as a bad thing."

4.5.6 Counselling management to adapt strategies to align with stakeholder values, norms and expectations

When asked whether they influence top management to adapt strategies to align with stakeholders' values, norms and expectations, the majority of the respondents agreed that they definitely have influence. While top management does have the final say, these individuals are able to influence strategy to some degree by having challenging conversations

with the top management to explain how certain strategies can have adverse effects on stakeholders.

As Respondent A highlighted, “I can’t say that I win every argument, but I definitely do have a say and have the ears,” of the top management. Respondent B agreed in saying that not all her suggestions are implemented as there may be different views in the organisation, but many of her suggestions are taken forward.

Respondent C further elaborated and stated that management can easily justify their decisions by claiming that “shareholders do not run the company”; however it is critical to take their expectations into account and should at least influence the strategy in some manner, which is where the communication practitioner comes in. Her view is that the more information you have about your stakeholders, the more informed your decision-making process will be.

4.5.7 Using communication to solve managerial problems

All ten respondents declared that communication can be used to solve managerial problems. Respondent A suggested that communication leads to transparency, which is important for organisations. Respondent B posed that most crises that organisations face generally are due to miscommunication, as miscommunication causes misunderstanding. Communication closes the gap to ensure that there’s alignment with what your internal and external stakeholders understand of your business.

According to Respondent C, the more information you have about your stakeholders, the more informed your decision-making process will be, which essentially can solve problems.

Respondent H noted that a managerial issue can often be resolved by engaging in face-to-face communication. This notion was supported by Respondent I who stated that communication is first and foremost engagement and feedback loops are important for effective engagement.

4.5.8 Conclusion

The findings confirm that the public relations specialists interviewed have a considerable amount of influence when discussions on decision making and strategy formulation are taking place on an executive level in their organisations. While their suggestions may not always be implemented, they have the means to voice concerns and bring stakeholder views to the executive table during these discussions. The respondents further emphasised that their

opinions carry weight and are respected when they discuss stakeholder issues with senior management.

Roles theory also argues that public relations practitioners should be responsible for developing policies in the organisation (Kim et al., 2013:202). All the respondents indicated that their department is responsible for developing policies on stakeholders, communication, crisis response and social media engagements. There is a slight exception in the multi-national organisations as they take directives from their global counterparts, but the respondents highlighted the importance of localising these policies to take local context into account when implementing policies.

All the respondents agreed that communication can be used to solve managerial problems. Because of the different perspectives public relations specialists bring to the executive table, they are able to identify potential issues or problems that other managers have not considered.

The findings suggest that there is a level of coaching and educating that the respondents should fulfil to ensure that top managers do not focus solely on profits. While there is great awareness and understanding among top managers about the need for balancing stakeholders' interests, the ten practitioners indicate a need for regular further education.

4.6 The Strategic Role of Public Relations

As noted in previous sections, public relations practitioners play a strategic role when they influence organisational strategies by monitoring issues and building relationships with stakeholders. Theory states that the new role of public relations places the focus on the external environment with respect to stakeholders (Brønn & Brønn, 2003:295). To determine whether the respondents practise public relations as a strategic management function by contributing towards enterprise in their organisation, the researcher questioned whether the ten practitioners contribute to strategy development, what input they provide and whether they align their public relations and communication strategy with the corporate goals of the organisation. Should the practitioners not contribute to strategy development, the data will provide insight into what barriers prevent these practitioners from fulfilling a strategic role.

4.6.1 Contributing to strategy formulation

Five of the respondents contribute directly to the strategy development of their organisations, while two other respondents noted that their superior is involved at that level. The remaining three respondents revealed that they do not contribute as much to the strategy development

as they would like to. The four practitioners who serve on their organisation's EXCO also have a say when the organisation discusses strategy at an executive level and provide their input. When asked what type of input the interviewees provide into the strategic planning process, the data corroborates that it spans social, political, environmental and stakeholder issues.

Interestingly, Respondent D elaborated that she does contribute to strategy but not as much as she would like to, since public relations and communication are still seen as enablers of the strategy and therefore communication is only thought of after the strategy has been set. She explained that it is a personal challenge for her to determine how she can influence the direction of the business, based on what she knows is happening in the economy and in the business world. Respondent D does however declare that communication plays an integral role when facilitating a conversation with top management about their strategy and decisions, as she reflects the internal voice of the organisation versus what is happening externally.

Respondent F noted that her department is one step removed from the business strategy. While they take charge of the marketing and communication strategy, which is derived from the business strategy, they are not involved in the business strategy.

Respondent E is of the view that the communication team pulls the holistic landscape together and asks the critical questions to ensure that the business does not just focus on profit when developing the strategy. According to her:

Communications people are Jacks of all trades. You know a little bit about everybody's business within the organisation and as a result, you look at the bigger picture. Because you are the person advising the organisation on developments in the country, the industry, global movements, political issues and developments within communities, you become the go-to person on how the business should address those issues.

According to Respondent H, organisations need to become purpose led and that is exactly where the public relations practitioner plays a vital role in influencing the strategy. This is how she contributes to the strategy development at an executive level as the organisation must deliver on its beliefs and not just consider the profits.

4.6.2 Aligning communication strategy against corporate goals

The data revealed that all the interviewees agree that corporate goals should be aligned with the communication strategy. The communication strategy is generally derived from the corporate strategy and reworked into implementation plans for various stakeholders.

Respondent J specified that her organisation does not have a company strategy that is translated into a brand strategy; it is one integrated plan which starts with an analysis of the organisation's stakeholders.

4.6.3 Conclusion

The findings indicate that only two respondents observed that their communication departments are one step removed from the strategy. The two respondents who stated that they are one step removed, critically analyse the drafted strategy in order to highlight concerns or potential issues and therefore do provide insight into how the strategy might be perceived by others.

An interesting observation from the data is the recurrence of the importance of internal stakeholders and staff in strategic planning. The respondents thereby indicate that they do not only rely on the human resources department to address employee issues. These public relations practitioners will provide insight into how employees might react to certain strategies and consider the impact on the internal stakeholders.

The theoretical framework promotes the strategic role of public relations as a means to determine whether the organisation's strategic decisions are in line with stakeholders' expectations. The findings reveal that the respondents are involved at this level in their respective organisations, to ensure that stakeholders' views and opinions are discussed at the executive table before decisions are made and strategies formulated. These findings also closely align with the conclusion of the findings on roles theory discussed in Section 4.5.

The findings confirm that the ten respondents do contribute to the development of their organisation's strategy and the type of input they provide covers social, environmental, political, and issue groups/activist facets to achieve mutual benefit for all the parties involved.

4.7 Public Relations' Involvement in Strategic Decision Making

The theory presents an argument for communication practitioners to be included when organisations make decisions, and not simply to implement decisions made by others (Dozier, 1992:342). To determine whether the respondents practise public relations as a strategic management function by participating in the decision making in their organisations, the researcher questioned whether the ten practitioners participate in the initial stages of the decision-making process at their organisations and what role they play during this process.

Should the practitioners not contribute to the decision-making process, the data will provide insight into what barriers prevent these practitioners from fulfilling a strategic role.

In addition, the theory also suggests that organisations should be able to adapt to changing and evolving external contexts, by making decisions that will have a positive impact on the organisation's stakeholders (Arcos, 2016:266). The input on the external context is what distinguishes the communication manager from other managers around the executive table, according to the theory. The researcher therefore queried whether the organisations where the ten respondents work are able to adapt to dynamic and ever-evolving external contexts and solicited their opinions on what distinguishes communication managers from other managers at the executive table.

4.7.1 Including public relations specialists in the decision-making process

The five individuals who serve on their organisation's EXCO participate from the initial stages of the decision-making process at a senior level when it involves public relations and non-public relations issues. A further three respondents said it depended on the type of decision and the remaining two respondents noted that decision making that is not related to public relations is done without them.

Respondents A, C, F and G indicated that they are generally not involved in decisions not related to public relations, but they will not simply implement decisions made by others before they fully understand the purpose and goals of such decisions. Respondent D noted she is not excluded from discussions on non-public relations decisions, but owing to the communication practitioners being removed from the operational components of the business, their input might not be regarded as highly in those areas as it is not their area of expertise.

Respondent I described that her organisation has a process for conducting due diligence before important decisions are made where they gather information about a certain topic, so stakeholder issues are usually covered during this process and therefore her department isn't involved in the decision-making process.

According to respondent J, an analysis of stakeholders is the starting point for all the planning activity at her organisation in which she is involved. From that analysis the organisation decides where to go, what strategies to implement, and what decisions to make.

While the majority of the respondents presumed that they do play the role of activist or facilitator during the decision-making process, they preferred using the phrase 'devil's advocate'.

Respondent D suggested that public relations professionals have a responsibility to represent society and not just be responsive to what the organisation wants to do, hence the need for assuming the role of activist and/or facilitator during the decision-making process.

Respondent H explained that organisations constantly face tension between the right thing to do and what is going to maximise profits. "I can't simply be the voice of the people, I have to be the voice of the company ... You have got to do the best thing for as many people as possible" (Respondent H, 2019). This closely relates to the relational approach discussed earlier substantiating that organisations should aim to balance the interests of both the organisation and its stakeholders to create mutual benefit for all parties involved.

4.7.2 Current involvement of public relations specialists in decision-making processes

When asked whether they guide top management towards the most suitable decisions during the decision-making process, six respondents argued that they definitely influence top management in this regard. The respondents contended that senior management may not always implement the advice provided by the public relations practitioner, but they ensure that they provide information or suggest different approaches to ensure that management makes an informed decision.

Respondent I offered an example, stating that her organisation was undergoing a rebranding project of a business that was acquired by her organisation in another African country. Her organisation faced two issues during this project: the acquired business was facing a reputational issue in its home country, and xenophobic attacks erupted in South Africa. She advised the top management that the rebrand should be halted as the timing was not right to launch a rebranding campaign. However, the business leaders argued that the rebrand should continue as the organisation had spent a large sum of money on the project. After consultation, Respondent I's advice was followed and the rebrand was halted.

4.7.2.1 Are organisations able to adapt to dynamic and ever-evolving external contexts?

Eight respondents declared that their organisations are able to adapt to dynamic and ever-evolving external contexts. All respondents agreed that organisations have to attempt to adapt

but that it can be difficult when trying to balance all interests and requirements across the organisation and its stakeholders

Respondent C explained that owing to consumer activism becoming mainstream, businesses must pay attention to consumer issues and communication practitioners have to apply their minds as to how they deal with these consumers and evaluate their behaviour from an external perspective to understand how others outside the organisation will perceive the organisation's actions. She specified that is what assists organisations to strike the right balance between the business and stakeholders' needs.

According to Respondent D, her organisation does not adapt as fast as it could, but in the face of regulation it can be hard and there are numerous regulatory parties that they need to work with to ensure that they comply with legislation. She also mentioned the importance of striking a balance:

There are a lot of things to balance from a communication point of view. You have to balance the regulatory environment, the law and you have to balance that with your reputation as well as societal expectations ... Not all stakeholders are ultimately happy, but our role is to protect.

4.7.2.2 What distinguishes the communication manager from other managers at the executive table?

When asked what distinguishes the communication manager from other managers at the executive table, the respondents provided interesting insights. Respondent A stated that public relations practitioners are able to look at the softer side of the business and be in touch with humanity, which brings a different perspective to the table. Respondent B concurred that public relations specialists bring a perspective to the table that isn't necessarily viewed as a direct contribution to the triple bottom line, but yet it is. She noted:

Communication and public relations have always been considered as a soft skill within business. However, let's face it – if you have a bad reputation, no one is going to want to do business with you. No one is going to want to be aligned with you or buy your products. We've seen how many multinational companies have had to rebrand due to bad reputation. Some have lost huge business, and some have even been chased out of countries due to bad reputation. I think corporates are now starting to see the value of having a PR, reputation management or corporate affairs specialist at that [executive] level ... It's all about creating an enabling environment for the business to grow and a business cannot grow in a hostile environment.

Respondent C described communication as a dynamic function that has to deal with numerous unknown elements. She stated:

You never know if a particular communication you put out is going to be well received or not ... Now what we've found is that you can communicate something and the next thing, your share price comes under pressure ... Consumers hold you to a higher standard and I think that is what makes communication very complex ... Everything else in an organisation can be easily planned. Marketing is planned. Finance is planned. But communication is very different.

In addition, Respondent E explained that it is about looking at the bigger picture and being ahead of all the other executives when it comes to the external environment and being proactive in this regard. She argued that it is about noticing trends and issues in the industry and to be the first to come up with a plan to address the issue.

According to Respondent F, public relations specialists bring right-brain thinking to the table. She noted that executives in other fields are driven by numbers, process and/or statistics, whereas public relations individuals have a better connection with the intended audience.

Respondent G argued that the other managers are blinkered. "You will never get a finance person wondering about how the staff feel about something ... You won't get an HR manager understanding a balance sheet ... A communications [person], no matter their level, comes with a much broader, more holistic view of how all of that fits together (Respondent G, 2019).

Respondent I elaborated that public relations and communication is a non-core business function, and purely based on support. She declared that what public relations practitioners have that the other individuals who are in the core functions of the business don't, is the viewpoint of stakeholders, who are not necessarily clients, but ordinary South Africans.

4.7.2.3 Why public relations practitioners deserve a seat at the executive table.

Respondent A specified that organisations spend large sums of money on building brands and marketing products and services, but one bad customer experience can destroy a business. She therefore contended that it is absolutely essential for public relations to be represented at the most senior level.

Respondent D highlighted the strategic translation that a public relations specialist brings to the executive table as the reason why these specialists deserve a seat at the executive table. In her opinion, the public relations specialists translate the operational strategy and constantly shape where the business is going.

According to Respondent F, it goes back to working with people and prioritising relationships. She argued:

At the end of the day you're dealing with people and without people who are into what you're doing, who support you ... and trust you ... you're not going to have a business.

According to Respondent H, any executive has to earn the right at the table, no individual simply deserves it. "One of the things I always say to young communications people is that you have to earn your seat at the table ... and show the organisation that you understand the business" (Respondent H, 2019). However, she agreed that no business can function without keeping stakeholders happy, which justifies the need for public relations to be represented at the executive table. Respondent I elaborated that no business operates in a bubble, it functions within an environment that is impacted by social, political and environmental issues, hence the need to have a public relations practitioner at the executive table.

4.7.3 Conclusion

As prescribed by the literature reviewed in Section 2.9, the respondents provide intelligence about the external environment to top management before decisions are made, how these decisions will impact stakeholders and how they are likely to respond to decisions. While the respondents don't necessarily guide top management towards making suitable decisions, the findings reveal that there is a great level of influence that plays an important role in the decision-making process of the organisations where the respondents are employed.

Half of the respondents noted that they are always included in the initial stages of decision-making processes, as they sit on the executive committees. The other half of the respondents indicated that they are either not included in the process or that their inclusion depends on the type of issue at hand, which indicates that these respondents are only included in the process when the issue is related to public relations and that the dominant coalition decides whether or not to include public relations in the process. This approach does not align with theory, as public relations experts should be involved in all decision making, including operational decisions. The researcher noted that even though public relations specialists are not operational and financial experts, they are better equipped to advise the senior management team about potential repercussions of certain operational and financial decisions. According to the theoretical framework, the public relations specialists contribute a special concern for broader societal issues and approaches to organisational problems. The respondents agreed with this premise, explaining that senior public relations specialists should serve on the executive committee as they bring a different perspective to the discussions, including the softer side of business, bigger picture thinking, right-brain thinking, and responding to the unknown.

In addition, the majority of the respondents are of the opinion that their organisations can easily adapt to a dynamic environment, which indicates that these large organisations are able to adapt to changing societal demands.

All the respondents agree with the sentiment that public relations specialists deserve a seat at the table. It can however be argued that this is a biased view as these individuals would promote their own profession.

4.8 Barriers to playing a strategic role

To answer Research Questions 4 and 5 by investigating which barriers may prevent senior public relations practitioners in the selected top 100 JSE-listed companies from providing input for strategic decision making and enterprise strategy formulation, the researcher asked the respondents what barriers they face in practice and how they suggest overcoming these barriers.

4.8.1 Barriers preventing public relations practitioners from making a strategic contribution to their organisation in their current role?

Respondent A noted that business decisions are usually made by the financial contributors to the business (“the guys making the money”). It is extremely hard to prove communication and public relations’ contribution in monetary terms and therefore we are not the largest consideration, which is the biggest barrier for her. “At the end of the day it is the rands and cents that talk” (Respondent A, 2019). Respondent F agreed in stating that because communication and public relations is seen as a support function, it is not considered a core strategic function.

According to Respondent C, communication usually get called in for consultation only when there is a problem or an issue. She noted that with the advent of the internet and social media, it is absolutely critical to engage with stakeholders and take the stakeholder view into account, but this hasn’t translated into organisational structures yet. “There are very few companies that have an executive for communication who sits at EXCO ... and that’s ideally how you should have it ... I think the biggest barrier is how traditional business structures have organised themselves” (Respondent C, 2019).

Respondent D noted that she faces inner circle issues as certain people develop strong relationships that often exclude others from contributing.

Respondent G proposed that many individuals in the business do not understand what public relations aims to achieve, and many tend to think that they know better “or that they can’t possibly allow themselves to be guided by a PR *poppie*” (Respondent G, 2019). She also contextualised that it is important to build mutual trust with top management, because if the trust doesn’t exist it can serve as a barrier. However, “it is kind of a vicious circle, because if you can’t access them you can’t build that trust.”

Respondent H agreed, noting that she also has to deal with the assumption that she is just a PR *poppie*. According to the researcher, ‘*poppie*’ is the Afrikaans word for doll, and has a negative and stereotypical connotation. The term ‘PR *poppie*’ usually refers to women in the public relations industry and has a longstanding history as a negative label attached to women who aren’t taken seriously in the profession.

For Respondent I, the biggest barrier is the issue that it is extremely difficult to measure what she does. “There are certain things that need to happen. The company must perform ... and sustain itself to pay good dividends to all its stakeholders.” She explained that the company pays dividends in various ways – through the CSR initiatives they run, tax to the government, etc.

4.8.2 What barriers prevent senior public relations and communication specialists from making a strategic contribution to your organisation, from a wider industry perspective?

According to Respondent A, the executives at the most senior level feel they have a working knowledge of communication and therefore don’t need a specialist at the table. Respondent C noted that because the communication and public relations function has been relegated to the marketing space, it’s considered a junior function. Therefore, the perception exists that the communication specialist does not have the insight to look at the business strategically. According to her, another key barrier is that many people in business consider communication and public relations to be related to media, but the function has evolved over time. She noted that the industry must change perceptions regarding the importance of strategic communication.

In addition, Respondent C contended that the way communication roles are filled in South Africa is not correct. She noted that businesses will appoint an individual who has experience in public relations, media studies or journalism, and that is not sufficient to fulfil a strategic communication role.

According to Respondent D, public relations practitioners don’t network enough with other industry players and don’t have strong industry relationships.

Respondent F agreed that one of the greatest barriers is the perception that public relations and communication are soft skills and constitute a support function, and therefore not core to the business.

Respondent G explained that the misunderstanding of what the role of communication is and a lack of insight into what the function can offer are the biggest barriers.

Respondent H noted that there are natural barriers that exist in South Africa owing to historical reasons, as there are additional hurdles that people (especially women) of colour had to overcome as a consequence.

Respondent I once again noted that owing to public relations not having tangible outcomes, it makes it hard to justify the function's importance. Whereas a sales department can show exactly how many sales they've made for the company, the public relations department cannot directly state that the sales department was only able to make all their sales because the public relations department created a good reputation for the business.

4.8.3 How to overcome these barriers

When asked what could be done to overcome these barriers, the respondents provided thought-provoking solutions.

According to Respondent A, public relations practitioners should repeatedly emphasise their value and ask for representation at a senior level. She stated that individuals should be relentless in pursuing a seat at the executive table by showing their value. When an organisation's values and philosophy are about transparency and honesty, there is a strong argument for having public relations at the most senior level.

Respondent C noted that we need to generate a greater understanding of the role of communication. She explained that communication is still part of the marketing function, but in reality it is very different from marketing. This is due to ignorance in terms of how communication works.

Respondent D outlined that the industry should network better and develop alliances to create better opportunities for one another.

Respondent F also agreed that as individuals, public relations practitioners must re-profile their departments and ensure that they make meaningful contributions to executive discussions and request attendance at strategic meetings.

Respondent G agreed that it depends on the individual. She explained that you need to speak the same language as the senior executives.

According to Respondent I, there are two ways to overcome the barriers. Firstly, public relations practitioners must understand where they resort within the business in order to add value at a strategic level. This will also assist in building trust with the executives. Secondly, the industry must find a solution to the measurement issue. She contended that it is imperative that the industry find new ways to measure reputation and the impact of preventative steps.

4.8.4 Conclusion

The data revealed that a major barrier to providing a strategic contribution to their organisations relates to the difficulty to prove the public relations department's importance and contribution in financial terms. As JSE-listed organisations are profit driven, the senior management teams are focused on profits and core functions, like sales and operations that drive income, and are regarded as more important than a support function like public relations.

The data indicated another barrier as the perception that public relations is a crisis communication function and the department's ability to avoid crises altogether, by being involved in decision making and strategy formulation from the start, is not being utilised as it should be. Stakeholder engagement is absolutely critical in the modern age and one respondent noted that traditional business structures have not reorganised themselves to prioritise stakeholder engagement.

One respondent noted the problem of access to the dominant coalition was a barrier to her, which led to difficulty in providing strategic input. This aligns closely with the theory discussed on the need for public relations to be part of an organisation's dominant coalition.

Two respondents noted the term 'PR *poppie*' to be a barrier in their experience. This phrase alludes to a negative connotation that South African public relations specialists face, that senior management generally does not take the public relations specialist's opinion seriously and perceives the public relations specialist's abilities to be limited to event and media management.

Another barrier is the relegation of public relations into the marketing space. The marketing function is thereby regarded as the major department and public relations as a function of the marketing department – which is not how an excellent public relations department operates optimally.

Relating to ways to overcome these barriers, the findings indicate that individual public relations specialists must take it upon themselves to improve the profession. Practitioners should be relentless in proving their value and asking for representation at a senior level in the pursuit of securing a seat at the executive table. It is also individual public relations practitioners' responsibility to generate a greater understanding of the role of public relations and how it differs from marketing. Improved networking and industry allegiances could also assist in improving and correcting the current perceptions of the public relations industry in South Africa.

In addition, the findings suggest that the individual public relations practitioners need a better understanding of how they can add value at a strategic level within their organisations. It is also important that the individuals speak the same language as the senior executives and build trust with the senior management team.

4.9 Conclusion

This chapter compared the findings of the literature review and theoretical framework with the findings of the primary data in order to understand to what extent public relations is practised as a strategic management function and whether the interview respondents contribute towards strategic decision making and enterprise strategy formulation in the selected top 100 JSE-listed companies. The findings show that public relations is practised as a strategic management function and indicate that the interview respondents do contribute towards strategic decision making and enterprise strategy formulation in their companies, as outlined by the literature and theoretical construct on the excellence theory, the dominant coalition, the relational approach, reflective paradigm, roles theory, the strategic role of public relations and public relations' involvement in decision making. The theory is implemented in the daily practice of the ten public relations practitioners who participated in the study and poses positive results for the evolution of the public relations industry in South Africa.

In addition, this chapter discussed what barriers militate against the interviewed senior public relations practitioners in the selected top 100 JSE-listed companies providing input for strategic decision making and enterprise strategy formulation and suggestions on how to overcome these barriers. The findings indicated that the ten respondents still face a number of challenges

when it comes to influencing the dominant coalition and contributing towards enterprise strategy formulation and decision making processes in their organisations, including proving the function's value in monetary terms, balancing the quest for profit, incorrect perceptions about the role of public relations and senior executives not taking the public relations practitioner's advice seriously.

A detailed conclusion is provided in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter concludes the research by highlighting the key findings from the research. The main objective of the study was to determine whether the public relations function contributes to strategic decision making and enterprise strategy formulation in a selection of the top 100 companies listed on the JSE in South Africa. Through a literature review, the study investigated the requirements for practising public relations as a strategic management function in large organisations and the potential contributions of senior public relations practitioners towards strategic decision making and strategy formulation in large organisations.

The primary research was aimed at determining to what extent public relations is practised as a strategic management function and how it contributes towards strategic decision making and enterprise strategy formulation in a selection of top 100 JSE-listed companies. Barriers militating against senior public relations practitioners in the selected top 100 JSE-listed companies from providing input for strategic decision making and enterprise strategy formulation were examined, and recommendations were made on how these barriers could be overcome.

In addition, this chapter discusses the limitations and strengths of the study and identifies topics for future research that could aid in the institutionalisation of public relations in South Africa and empowering public relations professionals to play a strategic role in their organisations by contributing towards strategic decision making and strategy formulation in their organisations. For ease of reference, the research questions set out in Chapter 1 were:

Sub-question 1: What are the requirements for practising public relations as a strategic management function in large organisations?

Sub-question 2: What are the potential contributions of senior public relations practitioners towards strategic decision making and strategy formulation in large organisations?

Sub-question 3: To what extent is public relations practised as a strategic management function and does it contribute towards strategic decision making and enterprise strategy formulation in the selected top 100 JSE-listed companies?

Sub-question 4: Which barriers may prevent senior public relations practitioners in the selected top 100 JSE-listed companies from providing input for strategic decision making and enterprise strategy formulation?

Sub-questions 5: What can be done to overcome the above-mentioned barriers?

5.1 Summary of the Findings

5.1.1 Excellence theory

The findings demonstrate that excellence theory is implemented and practised by the ten public relations specialists the researcher interviewed, who are employed in top 100 JSE-listed companies in South Africa. It is apparent from the findings that the ten public relations practitioners interviewed are empowered to fulfil their strategic function and thereby give a voice to the voiceless stakeholders in the organisation.

5.1.2 Dominant coalition

The findings indicate that all ten respondents have representation on their organisation's executive committee, either themselves or through a senior colleague, and are therefore part of the dominant coalition. It was positive to note that all ten respondents had easy access to the dominant coalition and the ability to counsel their dominant coalition openly and honestly on stakeholder views and opinions to influence strategy formulation and the decision-making processes.

The researcher proposes that the external perspective that distinguishes public relations practitioners from other managers was confirmed in practice by the participating practitioners and aligned with the theoretical argument for public relations to have a seat at the executive table. This view is supported by all the interview respondents and proves that the practitioners' views are aligned with the theoretical constructs.

5.1.3 Relational approach

The findings posit meaningful implications for the industry as the respondents proved that their practice has evolved to focus on relationships with all stakeholders, as stipulated in the literature discussed in Section 2.5. The findings indicate that the relational approach is implemented in practice and therefore the practice of public relations and communication now encompasses a relational approach across all stakeholders of the organisation where the ten respondents are employed. The findings highlight the importance of organisation–public relationships among the respondents in practice, which assists in making organisations more effective.

The researcher notes that the respondents understand the need for the business to focus on profits, which sometimes lead to stakeholder issues being neglected. However, in the researcher's opinion this means that whenever top management believes a certain decision

will financially benefit the business, they may implement that decision, even if it might damage relationships with certain stakeholders.

While it is important to acknowledge the need for businesses to remain financially stable to continue running the business and providing employment for all their staff, the communication specialist plays a critical role in these situations to ensure that the top managers realise what is potentially at stake. The respondents confirmed that their role is to assist top management in these situations to weigh up their options and understand that an important relationship might be jeopardised in the process, which allows top management to make an informed decision and determine the best course of action.

It was positive to note that the respondents do have a level of influence in the decision-making process and provide insight into and intelligence on all stakeholders as part of the decision-making process.

5.1.4 Reflective paradigm

The empirical data confirms that the reflective paradigm is practised within large organisations in South Africa and the ten senior public relations practitioners are fulfilling the role of reflective strategists in practice.

As reflective strategists, the interview respondents monitor their external environments, identifying issues and trends in the industry in order to reflect these issues internally to determine their impact on the organisations. The findings confirm that the respondents address stakeholder issues with senior management and use insight gathered through external monitoring to influence the decision-making process. The respondents agreed that they gather intelligence on the context in which the organisation operates, through monitoring and scanning activities, which place them in a position to offer a strategic contribution within their organisations.

5.1.5 Roles theory

The findings on roles theory demonstrate that the respondents are playing a strategic role in their respective organisations. The findings also show that all the respondents have specific and set ways of conveying stakeholder views to the organisation's top management, either through in-person communication, formal meetings or reports they regularly submit.

The respondents understand that profit remains a critical focus for the senior managers, but highlighted that it is the public relations specialist's role to ensure that in the quest for profit,

the business does not neglect other important stakeholders. According to the respondents, they must sometimes give way for capitalist means as their input will not always be implemented, but by feeding the information on stakeholders to top management, the executives are empowered to make an informed decision about their chosen course of action. The findings therefore indicate that these roles are important in the daily work of the ten respondents, which proves they fulfil a strategic role as set out by roles theory.

5.1.6 Strategic role of public relations

It was positive to note that the majority of the respondents indicated that they do contribute to the strategy development within their organisation in some form, which suggests that the theory is implemented in practice to some extent.

The researcher comprehends that there were however still situations where respondents explained that the public relations team was notified of a strategy only after it had been developed to simply implement and communicate the strategy to the internal and external stakeholders. This type of practice should be discouraged in organisations.

5.1.7 Public relations' involvement in strategic decision making

The findings indicate that as only half of the respondents do add strategic input into the decision-making process, their input may not be regarded as core business insights and therefore not carry as much weight as it should. Therefore, while the practitioners are able to provide input, their suggestions are not always considered and/or implemented, as communication or public relations experts are not regarded as experts on the operational aspects of the business.

Understandably, the senior management and CEO make the final decisions and the respondents mentioned that the main priority for senior management is to keep the business afloat and remain profitable. This however suggests that top management's decisions are profit driven.

The researcher proposes that more needs to be done to empower public relations departments to allow senior public relations specialists to be involved in the decision-making process across various business functions, from the beginning of the process.

5.1.8 Barriers to playing a strategic role

The findings showed that the sample of public relations specialists face a number of barriers that prevent them from contributing towards enterprise strategy formulation and decision-making processes in their organisations. The major barrier identified in the findings is the notion that business decisions are usually made by the financial contributors to the business and that it is extremely difficult to prove or measure communication and public relations' contribution in monetary terms.

The findings showed that misperceptions among other senior managers about the strategic role of public relations exist as it is still seen as a support function, and not considered a core strategic function as it should be. Other senior managers therefore lack insight into what the function can offer the business at a strategic level. One respondent noted that traditional business structures have not organised themselves to align with the evolving business paradigm and the need to engage with stakeholders and take the stakeholder view into account, at an executive level. Only once this happens will communication specialists be considered important contributors at the executive table.

The derogatory term 'PR *poppie*' [PR doll] was mentioned by two respondents and poses a great barrier that many women in the South African public relations industry face. In the researcher's opinion this also closely relates to the misperception that public relations is purely a media relations, event management or crisis communication function.

One respondent noted that the way in which senior public relations and communication roles are filled in South Africa is flawed. She noted that companies appoint individuals with experience in media studies or journalism, which she does not regard as sufficient to fulfil a strategic communication role.

5.1.9 How to overcome these barriers

According to the respondents, the industry (both practitioners and academics) should work together to change perceptions of the importance of strategic communication and to generate greater awareness of the strategic role of communication. There is also an argument for improved industry networks to aid practitioners to develop alliances with like-minded individuals in the public relations industry to create better opportunities for public relations professionals.

The respondents agree that the onus to overcome these barriers rests on individual practitioners. Practitioners should understand where they resort, in the business process, in

order to add value at a strategic level and continue proving the function's worth by demonstrating its value. When that happens, the individual also builds mutual trust with top management and thereby validates his/her seat at the executive table.

In addition, if an organisation's values and philosophy represent transparency and honesty, there is a strong argument for having communication at the most senior level. The researcher agrees that a business cannot claim to stand for transparency without considering stakeholders at the most senior level of decision making and strategy formulation.

One respondent noted that the industry is in need of new ways to measure reputation and the impact that preventative steps have on the business and its reputation. The researcher is of the opinion that public relations practitioners and academics need to work together to overcome these barriers and learn from one another to direct the way forward for the public relations industry in South Africa. Practitioners and academics need improved ways of working together to consider the industry from the other's perspective and to share knowledge. This will assist practitioners to discover new ways of measurement that can validate public relations' contribution to reputation and preventative steps in financial terms in order to appeal to the financial discussion at the executive table. In turn, practitioners can provide academics with insight into the questions and financial measures that executives are asking and demanding at a senior level.

From the data, the researcher notes that profit-driven business initiatives can make it difficult for public relations specialists to foster relationships with key stakeholders as senior executives are mainly concerned about profits and financial gains. The respondents explained that in the quest for profits, senior executives sometimes make decisions that do not align with stakeholder views or opinions, but will make sense for the business to remain sustainable and profitable. It is however important to recognise profitability as an important factor in a business' ability to continue paying salaries to staff, but it is vital that senior managers understand that in today's business environment, organisations cannot focus on profits alone.

The emphasis on people and the planet has increased over the years, and organisations that do not take cognisance of this will not be supported by stakeholders and therefore not generate profits. Senior managers need to grasp the new way of conducting business and why they must consider outside influences within their organisations if they wish to operate successfully and profitability in this new paradigm of business. As reflective strategists, the ten participants aim to assist senior management to understand these issues, balance the interests of all the stakeholders, and make the organisation more effective.

5.2 Answering the Research Questions

The findings of the research indicate that the public relations function does contribute to strategic decision making and enterprise strategy formulation in a selection of top 100 companies listed on the JSE in South Africa. However, academics and practitioners need to work together to further promote and institutionalise public relations in large organisations to overcome the barriers that prevent public relations practitioners from making a strategic contribution to their organisations.

Research Questions 1 and 2 were addressed and answered at the end of Chapter 2. Research Questions 3, 4 and 5 were addressed above and are interpreted below:

- To what extent is public relations practised as a strategic management function and does it contribute towards strategic decision making and enterprise strategy formulation in the selected top 100 JSE-listed companies?

Public relations is practised, to a large extent, as a strategic management function and contributes towards strategic decision making and enterprise strategy formulation in a selection of top 100 JSE-listed companies.

- Which barriers may prevent senior public relations practitioners in the selected top 100 JSE-listed companies from providing input for strategic decision making and enterprise strategy formulation?

The notion that business decisions are usually made by the financial contributors to the business and that is extremely difficult to prove or measure communication and public relations' contribution in monetary terms was identified in this research as the major barrier preventing senior public relations practitioners from providing input for strategic decision making and enterprise strategy formulation. There are several additional barriers that these practitioners face: misperceptions about the strategic role of public relations; senior managers' lack of understanding of what the function can offer the business at a strategic level; profit-focused decision making at an executive level culminating in the neglect of stakeholder issues; a lack of professional networking for public relations practitioners; and flawed methods of filling communication and public relations roles.

- What can be done to overcome the above-mentioned barriers?

The most significant recommendations to overcome the barriers, as identified in this study, are the necessity to promote partnerships and networks between public relations practitioners and academics to increase knowledge sharing between the two parties and the need for individual public relations practitioners to improve the profession by showing their worth and value in their organisation, on a daily basis.

5.3 Limitations

The findings of the research are based on the subjective responses and opinions of ten public relations practitioners employed in top 100 JSE-listed companies. The sample included only ten respondents, which does not allow the researcher to make generalisations about the entire public relations industry in South Africa. One can assume that public relations practitioners are likely to regard their profession highly and therefore argue that they deserve a seat at the executive table and contribute strategically to their organisation. A different view might emerge if CEOs and other executive members were asked similar questions.

For this study, the researcher focused on large organisations listed on the JSE. A different perspective might come to light if similar research is conducted among public relations practitioners employed in smaller organisations.

The researcher cannot state that the practice is standardised across all JSE-listed organisations, but the input from ten senior public relations practitioners in large organisations shed a positive light on the current practice of public relations in South Africa and proved that the theory is implemented in practice in a selection of top 100 JSE-listed companies.

5.4 Recommendations for Further Study

The researcher recognises the need to apply the study to a larger sample of public relations specialists to add validity to the findings of the research. A quantitative study among more practitioners with similar research questions will shed a different light on the topic and provide quantitative insights to determine what the current state of public relations practice in South Africa is and make generalisations on the institutionalisation of the practice.

A study focusing on the opinions and views of CEOs or other functional managers on whether public relations practitioners deserve a seat at the executive table would also provide a different perspective on the topic.

A study focusing on the opinions and views of CEOs on whether the public relations function in their business is adding this value would shed a different light on the topic. Further research

on CEOs' opinions on the relational approach and the need for considering stakeholder views at the most senior level could provide clarity on business leaders' opinions on including stakeholder views in decision-making and strategy-formulation processes.

Further research on the level of cooperation between public relations practitioners and academics in South Africa will further aid the institutionalisation of public relations by determining whether cooperation between practitioners and academics exists or not and how to encourage improved knowledge sharing between the two parties.

5.5 Conclusion to the Entire Study

The research commenced with a detailed investigation into the background of the study which highlighted that there has been an evolution in how public relations is practised. The background motivated the decision for undertaking this research, stated the research problem, and indicated how debates on the topic inform the research problem. The researcher formulated the research objectives and research answers that formed the foundation of the study.

In Chapter 2, the researcher discussed literature relevant to the topic. Current and recent literature provided a conceptual framework based on the premise that organisations have much to gain by involving senior practitioners when top management are making decisions and formulating strategies. The conceptual framework covered the evolution of public relations, excellence theory, the dominant coalition, the relational approach, the reflective paradigm, roles theory, the strategic role of public relations, and public relations' role in strategic decision making. The aim of this chapter was to achieve Research Objective 1 and 2 and presented what the requirements are for practising public relations as a strategic management function and what the potential contributions of senior public relations practitioners towards strategy formulation and decision making in large organisations are.

The third chapter described the research design, methodology and methods the researcher used for gathering and analysing data. The chapter outlined the motivation for selecting a qualitative research method to achieve the objective of the study and how it was applied to Chapter 4 and 5.

Chapter 4 presented an analysis and findings from the researcher's interviews with ten senior public relations practitioners who are employed in top 100 JSE-listed companies. The data was coded by highlighting significant sentences, phrases and words, and grouped according to the themes identified in the conceptual framework. The aim of Chapter 4 was to achieve

Research Objectives 3, 4 and 5. The findings indicate that public relations is practised as a strategic management function in the sample of JSE-listed companies and confirm that the interview respondents do contribute towards strategic decision making and enterprise strategy formulation in their companies.

In addition, this chapter outlined that the major barrier the ten participants face that prevents them from providing input for strategic decision making and enterprise strategy formulation, is the inability to report and show the value of the public relations' function in monetary terms to indicate its worth to financially minded executives.

Chapter 5 provides an overview of the key conclusions from the findings and concludes the entire study. The researcher concludes that public relations is practised, to a large extent, as a strategic management function and contributes towards strategic decision making and enterprise strategy formulation in the sample of top 100 JSE-listed companies in South Africa. The findings recommend that public relations practitioners and academics need to increase efforts to work together to change perceptions of the strategic importance of the public relations or communication function, how it has evolved, and the strategic input that public relations specialists can contribute to organisations. Many individuals and businesses still regard the function to be related to media relations only, when in actual fact the function has evolved far beyond that. This also encompasses how public relations roles are filled and the qualifications of the individuals appointed to senior public relations positions.

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ADDENDA

Addendum A: Email Sent to Invite Potential Interviewees to Participate

Subject line: MTech Student – Recruiting interview candidates

Dear [insert first name]

I am an MTech student at CPUT, doing my master's degree in Public Relations Management, and I should like to interview the most senior public relations/communication specialist at [insert company name] as part of my thesis. The aim of my research is to determine whether the public relations function contributes to strategic decision making and strategy formulation in a selection of the top 100 companies listed on the JSE in South Africa.

Would you be willing to participate as an interviewee for my data-gathering purposes, or direct me to the appropriate individual? I have attached my full research proposal for further information, a letter from my supervisor and the consent form you will have to sign if you agree to be part of the research.

I want to highlight that all my respondents' identities and the organisations they work for will remain anonymous. I shall not reveal this information in any way when writing up my research results.

I know your schedule is extremely busy, so please let me know whether you will be able to schedule a 90-minute interview with me. I shall try my best to accommodate your schedule and shall not take more than 90 minutes of your time.

For ease of reading, below is a summary of my research proposal. Please feel free to contact me if you have any queries.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely
Rene Engelbrecht
082 782 9405

Summary of the research proposal:

This dissertation will deal with the institutionalisation of public relations at executive level in large organisations and will be applied to a selection of the top 100 companies listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) in South Africa. Based on an examination of current literature on public relations as a strategic management function, the study will determine the extent to which senior public relations practitioners in the selected companies are involved in strategy formulation and decision making at an executive level. Current and recent literature will provide a conceptual framework based on the premises that organisations have much to gain by involving senior practitioners in top-level decision making and

strategy formulation. The theoretical framework derived from the literature review will inform the primary research, which will take the form of qualitative semi-structured interviews with the participating practitioners.

The main question the candidate wishes to answer through her research is:

Does the public relations function contribute to strategic decision making and strategy formulation in a selection of the top 100 companies listed on the JSE in South Africa?

In order to answer the overall research question, the following sub-questions were identified:

Sub-question 1: What are the requirements for practising public relations as a strategic management function in large organisations?

Sub-question 2: What are the potential contributions of senior public relations practitioners towards strategic decision making and strategy formulation in large organisations?

Sub-question 3: To what extent is public relations practised as a strategic management function and does it contribute towards strategic decision making and enterprise strategy formulation in the selected top 100 JSE-listed companies?

Sub-question 4: Which barriers may prevent senior public relations practitioners in the selected top 100 JSE-listed companies from providing input for strategic decision making and strategy formulation?

The candidate will adopt qualitative research methods to achieve the research aim. To collect relevant data, the candidate will conduct semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with a group of consenting practitioners to obtain insights from them that will indicate to what extent they are involved in and provide input into organisational decision making and strategy formulation. The rationale for the inclusion of top 100 JSE-listed companies in this study is that it will allow the candidate to solicit input from public relations managers working at the largest corporations in the country, and who deal with a number of stakeholders simultaneously. Apart from researching the extent to which public relations is practised as a top-level management function in the selected companies, the study will also seek to identify barriers that prevent the participating practitioners from providing strategic input at executive level, and to offer recommendations to overcome these barriers

-Ends

Addendum B: List of Interview Questions Grouped According to Theory

Excellence Theory

1. Please explain how your communication/public relations department is structured. Please also explain where you fit in.
2. In terms of the flow of command, explain to me where you fit in.
3. In terms of feedback loops, how does the circle work and where do you fit in?
4. Whom do you report to? Is there a direct reporting line to the CEO?
5. How would you explain the role that you fulfil in the organisation?

Roles Theory:

6. Are you (the PR/communication department) responsible for developing communication policies?
7. The organisation's vision and mission – were you (or the communication department) involved when that was developed?
8. Are you happy with the current vision and mission statements?
9. Do you participate in organisational decision making when it comes to public relations issues?
10. Do you participate in organisational decision making when it comes to decision making about non-public relations issues?
11. How are key stakeholders' views conveyed to top management?
12. Does top management understand that the company's behaviour, policies and strategies affect key stakeholders and interest groups?
13. Do you have to coach top management in this regard and raise the stakeholders' views to them? Can you provide an example of how the organisation was able to take advantage of an opportunity due to good relationships?
14. Do you influence management to adapt their strategies to align with stakeholders' values, norms and expectations?
15. Do you fulfil the role of counselling, in terms of adjusting the organisation's values and norms to align with stakeholders' views?
16. Do you educate the members of the organisation on how to behave in order to respond to societal demands?
17. Do you think that communication can be used to solve managerial problems? Explain your answer.

The relational approach

18. Does your organisation aim to balance the interests of both the organisation and its stakeholders? If yes, what do you do to achieve this?
19. In times of crises, do you decide how the organisation responds?
20. Who speaks to the media when there is a crisis?
21. Are you actively involved in managing the crisis response, beyond just responding to media?

Reflective paradigm:

22. How do you make sense of the external environment to reflect on and integrate the external aspects internally?
23. What type of intellect/intelligence do you add to the decision-making process?
24. Do you feed insight and intelligence about stakeholders as part of the decision-making process?
 - a. Is your intelligence based on only one stakeholder group, or numerous stakeholder groups?

The strategic role of public relations:

25. Do you contribute to the organisational strategy development? If yes, how and what do you contribute?
26. Do you provide input into the strategic planning process about:

- b. Societal issues
 - c. Environmental issues
 - d. Political environment
 - e. Issue groups/activists
27. How do you ensure that you align communication strategy with corporate goals?

Your role in decision making:

- 28. Do you contribute to the initial phases of decision making, or are you involved at a later stage?
- 29. Do you play the role of an activist/facilitator during the decision-making process to ensure that there's interchange between the organisation and its external environment?
- 30. Do you guide top management towards the most suitable choice during the decision-making process?
- 31. Is your organisation able to adapt to a dynamic and ever-evolving external context?
- 32. What do you think distinguishes the communication manager from other managers at the executive table?
- 33. Why do you think the PR/Communication function deserves a seat at the executive table?

Dominant coalition

- 34. How often does the top management meet?
- 35. Are you involved in these meetings?
- 36. What channels do you use to communicate with top management?
- 37. How autonomous (independent) is the PR department in your organisation?
- 38. Are you able to make decisions quickly, without having to go through levels of bureaucracy?
- 39. Do you feel that you have power and authority to counsel the dominant coalition openly about ethical courses of action?
- 40. Do you tell top management when their decisions are biased? If yes, how is that received?
- 41. Does top management show understanding of how issues can be misunderstood by certain stakeholders? If they do, do they change their action based on that insight?

Barriers to playing a strategic role:

- 42. In your current role, have you ever experienced any barriers that prevent you from making a strategic contribution to the organisation? Please give a reason for your answer or provide an example.
- 43. From an industry perspective, what do you think are the barriers that prevent senior public relations and communication specialists from making a strategic contribution at an executive level?
- 44. What would you recommend to overcome these barriers?

Addendum C: List of Interview Questions Grouped According to Themes for Interview Discussion

Structure of the department

1. Please explain how your communication/public relations department is structured (ask interviewee to take me through their organisational chart). Please also show where you fit in.
2. In terms of the flow of command, explain to me where you fit in.
3. In terms of feedback loops, how does the circle work and where do you fit in?
4. Whom do you report to? Is there a direct reporting line to the CEO?
5. Are you (the PR/communication department) responsible for developing communication policies?
6. The organisation's vision and mission – were you (or the communication department) involved when that was developed?
7. Are you happy with the current vision and mission statements?

The role you fulfil:

8. How would you explain the role that you fulfil in the organisation?
9. How do you make sense of the external environment, to reflect on and integrate the external aspects internally?

The value of relationships

10. Does your organisation aim to balance the interests of both the organisation and its stakeholders? If yes, what do you do to achieve this?

Strategic involvement:

11. Do you contribute to the organisational strategy development? If yes, how and what do you contribute?
12. Do you provide input into the strategic planning process about:
 - a. Societal issues
 - b. Environmental issues
 - c. Political environment
 - d. Issue groups/activists
13. How do you ensure that you align communication strategy with corporate goals?
14. How are key stakeholders' views conveyed to top management?
15. Does top management understand that the company's behaviour, policies and strategies affect key stakeholders and interest groups?
16. Do you have to coach top management in this regard and raise the stakeholders' views to them?
17. Do you influence management to adapt their strategies to align with stakeholders' values, norms and expectations?
18. Do you fulfil the role of counselling, in terms of adjusting the organisation's values and norms to align with stakeholders' views?
19. Do you educate the members of the organisation on how to behave in order to respond to societal demands?
20. Do you think that communication can be used to solve managerial problems? Explain your answer.

Your role in decision making:

21. Do you participate in organisational decision making when it comes to public relations issues?
22. Do you participate in organisational decision making when it comes to decision making about non-public relations issues?
23. Do you contribute to the initial phases of decision making, or are you involved at a later stage?
24. What type of intellect/intelligence do you add to the decision-making process?

25. Do you feed insight and intelligence about stakeholders as part of the decision-making process?
 - a. Is your intelligence based on only one stakeholder group, or numerous stakeholder groups?
26. Do you play the role of an activist/facilitator during the decision-making process to ensure that there's interchange between the organisation and its external environment?
27. Do you guide top management towards the most suitable choice during the decision-making process?
28. Is your organisation able to adapt to a dynamic and ever-evolving external context?

Crisis communication

29. In times of crisis, do you decide how the organisation responds?
30. Who speaks to the media when there is a crisis?
31. Are you actively involved in managing the crisis response, beyond just responding to media?

Dominant coalition

32. How often does the top management meet?
33. Are you involved in these meetings?
34. What channels do you use to communicate with top management?
35. How autonomous (independent) is the PR department in your organisation?
36. Are you able to make decisions quickly, without having to go through levels of bureaucracy?
37. Do you feel that you have power and authority to openly counsel the dominant coalition about ethical courses of action?
38. Do you tell top management when their decisions are biased? If yes, how is that received?
39. Does top management show understanding of how issues can be misunderstood by certain stakeholders? If they do, do they change their action based on that insight?

PR at the executive table

40. What do you think distinguishes the communication manager from other managers at the executive table?
41. Why do you think the PR/Communication function deserves a seat at the executive table?

Barriers to playing a strategic role:

42. In your current role, have you ever experienced any barriers that prevent you from making a strategic contribution to the organisation? Please give a reason for your answer or provide an example.
43. From an industry perspective, what do you think are the barriers that prevent senior public relations and communication specialists from making a strategic contribution at an executive level?
44. What would you recommend to overcome these barriers?

Addendum D: Mind Map

Theoretical framework:	Theory:	Potential Interview Question:
<p>Excellence theory</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Involving public relations in strategic management is a critical characteristic of excellent public relations. - The most senior public relations practitioners need to have access to powerful or influential members of the organisation. - The most excellent public relations departments participate fully in strategic management by scanning the social, political, and institutional environment of the organisation to bring an outside perspective to strategic decision making. - Strategic public relations management is only a strategic function when the PR function is empowered and involved before strategic decisions are made. <p><u>Improve society's functionality</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - If public relations practitioners assist management to understand how certain decisions may have adverse consequences for stakeholders, management is thereby influenced to make a different decision. - Ineffective organisations cannot achieve their goals when their stakeholders do not support these actions. - Reporting to CEOs or members of a dominant coalition is not a sufficient indicator of whether public relations contributes meaningfully to an organisation if that reporting is not accompanied by active strategic work that involves a higher degree of participation in the boardroom on issues that go beyond just media publicity. - For two-way symmetrical communication to work on behalf of all groups, all discourses must be engaged ethically, equally, and without prejudice. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Please explain how your communication/public relations department is structured and where exactly you fit in? - In terms of the flow of command, explain to me where you fit in? - In terms of feedback loops, how does the circle work and where do you fit in? - Whom do you report to? Is there a direct reporting line to the CEO?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The excellence theory does not <i>give</i> voice to the voiceless because, in the truest sense of critical theory and the two-way symmetrical perspective, this power is not for the dominant coalition to give. The excellence theory creates a space for voice. 	
The relational approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There is a definite role for public relations practitioners to add value to the organisation in the form of relationships. - Practitioners should focus on what is best for the organisation's relationship with stakeholder groups through determining which strategies and decisions will have adverse or positive effects on certain stakeholder groups. <p><u>Societal role of PR</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The most important problem in public relations currently is the societal legitimization of organisations. <p><u>Balancing interests of both the organisation and stakeholders</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The organisation should focus on relationships with their key stakeholders and communicate the involvement of those activities or programmes that build the organisation–public relationship to members of their key publics. - Public relations balances the interests of both the organisation and its stakeholders through the management of organisation–public relationships. - The emphasis of public relations is no longer on manipulating public opinion with communication messages for the organisation's gain, but rather on combining communication messages and organisational behaviour to initiate, build, nurture, and maintain mutually beneficial relationships between the organisation and its stakeholders. <p><u>Importance of organisation–public relationships</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Relationships at the core of the study and practice of public relations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How important are relationships with stakeholders within the organisation? - Does your organisation aim to balance the interests of both the organisation and its stakeholders? If yes, how do you achieve that? - Do you think PR/communication as a managerial function, plays a role in the societal legitimization of your organisation?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The organisation–public relationship indicators of trust, openness, involvement, investment and commitment impact the ways in which organisation–public relationships are initiated, developed and maintained as they ultimately can engender loyalty towards the organisation among key stakeholders. - A positive relationship between the organisation and its stakeholders will influence the perception of satisfaction with the organisation. - If an organisation communicates effectively with its stakeholders before decisions are made, issues and crises may never occur, and good relationships will be secured. - When organisations are perceived to care about their stakeholders and strive to achieve communal relationships, they will build a reputation for being concerned about the communal relationship with their stakeholders and therefore encounter less opposition and more support from their publics over the long term. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Does your PR/communication department focus on relationships? - What do you think are the benefits of focusing on relationships? - In times of crisis, do you decide how the organisation responds? - Who speaks to the media when there is a crisis? - Are you actively involved in managing the crisis response, beyond just responding to media?
<p>Reflective paradigm</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In the act of reflection, an organisation attempts mutual understanding with stakeholders out of respect for differences. - This means that public relations specialists take an open and understanding position towards perspectives that differ from their own without losing their identity. - A reflective communicator will seek to find a balance between inquiring and advocacy. Too much advocacy will result in one-way communication with little room for feedback. The balancing act involves dimensions of telling, generating, asking and observing. <p><u>Making sense of the organisation's environment</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - As a boundary spanner, the PR specialist is in a privileged position to observe and interpret the context in which the organisation operates. - Research on organisational context permits the public relations practitioner to offer a strategic contribution to the decision-making process within the organisation in feeding the information to top management. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How does top management deal with opinions/views that differ from their own? - Do you consider yourself as a boundary spanner (scanning the environment) for your organisation? Explain why, why not? - Do you think boundary spanning is important as a PR/communication specialist? Why? - Do you feed insight and intelligence about stakeholders as part of the decision-making process? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Is your insight based on only one stakeholder group, or numerous groups?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sense-making from outside to inside the organisation is also essential in this process as it enables the practitioner to understand the impact and consequences of issues on the decision-making, production and managerial processes. <p><u>Role of reflection in PR</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Management should reflectively understand and learn from positions advocated by both their critics and supporters. - Organisations should not only communicate with strategic stakeholders, but also analyse, reflect, and integrate the characteristics of the public sphere dynamics. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How do you make sense of the external environment, inside the organisation? - In your role, do you reflect and integrate external aspects internally?
The strategic role of public relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The responsibility of a communication manager is to influence organisational decision making through monitoring issues, stakeholders, and opinion building. This will enable the communication specialist to support organisational strategies by building relationships with and conveying messages to relevant stakeholders to influence their mindsets and behaviour. - The current requirement that top management has of the communication function is considered to be the provision of communication intelligence to top management and the board before top-level strategies are developed. - Public relations' contribution to an organisation's strategy formulation process therefore lies in its inputs into and participation in the formulation of enterprise and functional strategy. - If public relations makes organisations more effective by building long-term relationships with strategic stakeholders, it is only logical to deduce that public relations should participate in the organisation's strategic planning. <p><u>The new role of PR</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Requires more focus on the organisation's internal state of awareness, with respect to stakeholders in a situation as a focus on the external environment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Do you contribute to the organisational strategy development? If yes, how (what do you contribute)? - Do you provide input into the strategic planning process about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Societal issues o Environmental issues o Political environment o Issue groups/activists

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The organisation therefore needs a reflection of the stakeholder's true beliefs to address the stakeholder sufficiently. The less accurate the perception of the stakeholder's beliefs, the more ineffective the communication will be. - Strategy development should be more participatory in order to be effective, as there are many things that are unpredictable in organisations owing to constructed societal meanings. <p><u>Benefits of involving PR at a strategic level</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To determine whether strategic decisions are in line with stakeholders' expectations. - Public relations contributes to strategy development when it serves as a source of intelligence regarding an organisation's social environment. - Public relations practitioners can give a number of examples of how relationships enable the organisation to take advantage of specific opportunities, such as strategic decisions, product reputation, retention of talent and moment gained in a fast-changing business market. - Ultimately, a deliberate and mutually beneficial approach to relationship management can assist in aligning the organisation's goals with public interests. - Alignment of communication with corporate goals and the creation of transparency in corporate communication is the most important motive for the practice of communication controlling. - Public relations can attain its fullest value when specialists are systematically involved in decision making rather than being limited to communicating the decisions that are taken by other organisational functions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What are the benefits of involving PR/communication specialists in the strategic planning process? - Can you provide an example of how the organisation was able to take advantage of an opportunity due to good relationships? - Can you provide an example of how the organisation lost out on an opportunity due to a bad relationship with a stakeholder group? - How do you ensure that the organisation's strategy aligns with the public's interests? - How do you align communication with corporate goals?
Roles theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Managerial role: participation involves an expert prescription, making policy decisions about the organisation's public relations programmes and making decisions, together with the dominant coalition, about public relations issues. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Are you (the PR/communication department) responsible for developing communication policies?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Public relations specialist should act as the eyes, ears and mouthpiece of the organisation. <p><u>Strategic role of PR</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - By spanning the organisation boundary, gathering information by means of environmental scanning, transmitting this information to management, and providing it as input to the strategy formulation process. - Acts as an advocate for key stakeholders by conveying their views to management to create awareness of the impact of the company's behaviour, organisational policies, and strategies on key stakeholders and interest groups. - PR practitioners should influence management to adapt their strategies to stakeholder values, norms, and expectations to balance the quest for achieving non-financial organisational goals. - The role of the boundary spanner is what gives the corporate communication manager the ability to gather internal and external organisational information and use the data to contribute to the decision-making process. - Communication management can be explained as a principle of maximising, optimising or satisfying the process of meaning creation in order to solve managerial problems. - Communication management is about maximising, optimising, or satisfying the process of meaning creation using informational, persuasive, relational, and discursive interventions to solve managerial problems by coproducing societal and public legitimation. The role of the communication management specialist is to advise and coach the members of the organisation in this process. <p><u>Strategic roles</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Counselling: Analysing the changing values, norms and issues in society and discussing that with the members of the organisation. Consequently, top management can be influenced to adjust these points of view in the organisation's values, norms and issues. This role is aimed at the 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Do you participate in decision making about public relations issues? - Do you participate in decision making about non-public relations issues? - Do you provide intelligence about the external environment to top management as part of the decision-making process? - How are key stakeholders' views conveyed to top management? - Does top management understand that the company's behaviour, policies and strategies affect key stakeholders and interest groups? - Do you have to coach top management in this regard to elevate stakeholders' views to them? - Do you influence management to adapt their strategies to align with stakeholders' values, norms and expectations? - Do you think can communication can be used to solve managerial problems? Explain your answer. - The organisation's vision and mission – were you (or the communications department) involved when that was developed? - Are you happy with the current vision and mission statements? - In your organisation, do you fulfil the role of counselling, in terms of
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	<p>development of the organisational vision, mission, corporate story and strategy.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Coaching: Educating the members of the organisation to behave competently in order to respond to societal demands. - Conceptualising: Developing plans to communicate and maintain relationships with stakeholders to gain public trust. This role is aimed at addressing commercial and other internal and external stakeholders, as well as the wider public opinion. - Execution: Preparing the means of communication for the organisation and its members, to assist the organisation in formulating its communication. 	<p>adjusting the organisation's values and norms to align with stakeholders' views?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Do you educate the members of the organisation on how to behave in order to respond to societal demands
<p>Public relations' involvement in strategic decision making</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Communication managers should be included in corporate decisions. - If public relations practitioners are to help organisations adapt to changes in the environment, these individuals must participate in the management decision-making process and not simply implement the decisions made by others. - Public relations practitioners should participate in management decision making as expert advisers and communication facilitators. - Strategic contribution these individuals can add includes information about the activities that build beneficial relationships with stakeholders. This information is particularly important in the initial phase of the decision-making process. - The decision-making process should be rooted in an ongoing interchange between the organisation and its environment. This interchange is where the public relations specialist can play a key role of activist and facilitator. Through analysing and interpreting the organisational context, the public relations specialist can guide top management towards the most suitable choice and select the most suitable language, technique and messages to communicate the decision to stakeholders. - Practitioners are expected to be more closely involved with the strategic business issues of sustainability and governance. - Adaption of the organisation's strategies and plans to a dynamic and evolving context requires an intelligence function that anticipates and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Do you contribute to the initial phases of decision making? - Do you play the role of an activist/ facilitator during decision making to ensure an interchange between the organisation and its environment? - Do you guide top management towards the most suitable choice, during the decision-making process? - Does your organisation adapt to a dynamic and evolving context?

	<p>interprets any developments, drivers of change and informs management decisions and actions strategically.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - It is vital for businesses to be future-oriented and not focused on what is happening currently, but they have to look forward to seeking and anticipating the external environment of the business, how decisions and developments in the market will impact the future of the organisation and what the drivers are that affect a given situation. <p><u>Benefits of involving PR in decision making</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What distinguishes the communication manager from other managers when they sit down at the boardroom table, is that these individuals will contribute special concern for broader societal issues and approaches to organisational problems. - The presence of the most senior public relations specialist on the executive committee has its justification in the fact that the decision must be evaluated from the standpoints of necessary resources and financial impact, necessary requirements and impact on human resources as well as the necessary communication resources and communication impact which those decisions require and imply. <p><u>Current involvement of PR in decision making</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Communication is frequently relegated to a secondary function in many organisations and people without proper training or skills have access to strategic decision making. - He/ she becomes a communication facilitator working to establish the basis for understanding among stakeholders. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Does top management at your organisation understand how the organisation's decisions can have an adverse impact on certain stakeholder groups? - What do you think distinguishes the communication manager from other managers at the executive table? - Why do you think the PR/ communication function deserve a seat at the executive table?
<p>Dominant coalition</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The dominant coalition is the group of individuals, including top management, who shape organisational behaviours. <p><u>The need for senior public relations specialists to be part of the dominant coalition</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Communication practitioners are the ideal researchers to contribute intelligence on not only on one stakeholder such as marketing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What does the power structure (i.e. dominant coalition) in your organisation look like? Who is part of the coalition? - How often does the top management meet? - Are you involved in these meetings?

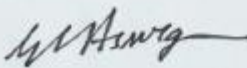
	<p>(customers) or public affairs (the government), but most of the organisation's stakeholders.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Through facilitating communication between the dominant coalition and its key stakeholders, the public relations practitioner becomes involved in decision making by acting as a go-between or boundary spanner. <p><u>Autonomous involvement in the dominant coalition</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - This involves freedom from encroachment, reporting directly to the CEO, having input in strategic management and planning and being able to make decisions without having them ratified through levels of bureaucracy. Bowen (2006) notes that the structure of the communication or public relations department includes autonomy for the function, in order to contribute at its maximum level. - Autonomy is essential to ethical decision making as a decision cannot be ethical if it is biased by self-interest, profit, greed, arrogance or other reasons that promote personal advantage. - Public relations practitioners must have the power and authority to openly counsel the dominant coalition regarding ethical courses of action. - These practitioners can view decisions or strategy options from all perspectives and bring those insights to the table and represent varying views during the decision-making process. If those perspectives aren't considered, issues can be misunderstood, and decisions will not be made with the goal of maintaining relationships as the end-goal. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What channels do you use to communicate with top management? - How autonomous is the PR department in your organisation? - Are you able to make decisions quickly, without having to go through levels of bureaucracy? - Do you feel that you have power and authority to openly counsel the dominant coalition about ethical courses of action? - So, do you tell top management when their decisions are biased? If yes, how is that received? - Does top management show understanding of how issues can be misunderstood by certain stakeholders and consequently change their action?
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Conceptualised by the researcher

Addendum E: Letter from Editor

<p style="text-align: center;">ELIZABETH S VAN ASWEGEN BA (Bibl), BA Hons (English language & literature), MA (English), DLitt (English), FSAILIS</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Language and technical editing bibliographic citation</p> <p style="text-align: center;">DECLARATION OF EDITING</p> <p>11 Rosebank Place Oranjezicht Cape Town 8001</p> <p>021 461 2650 082 883 5763 lizvanas@mweb.co.za</p>

The MTech: Public Relations Management dissertation by **Rene Engelbrecht** has been edited, the references have been checked for correctness and formatting according to CPUT Harvard bibliographic referencing style, all in-text citations have been checked against the reference list, and all items cited in the reference list have been cross-checked against the text. The candidate has been advised to make the recommended changes.



Dr ES van Aswegen
20 April 2020