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Look in the Mirror with a Public Relations Agency Performance Audit

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Communitarianism: A Foundation for Communication Symmetry

By Hugh M. Culbertson and Ni Chen



In a seminal 1994 book chapter, James E. Grunig and Todd Hunt proposed a four-stage model of public relations' evolution. They contended that these stages have developed — at least, in the United States — in roughly the following chronological order:

1. **The press-agent publicity model**, under which the public relations practitioner seeks to gain awareness of his or her client or employer — primarily through rather sensational events or revelations designed to gain press coverage.
2. **The public-information model**. Here the practitioner distributes information to the media, hoping to disseminate it widely and accurately.
3. **The two-way asymmetric model**. Unlike with the first two approaches, practitioners

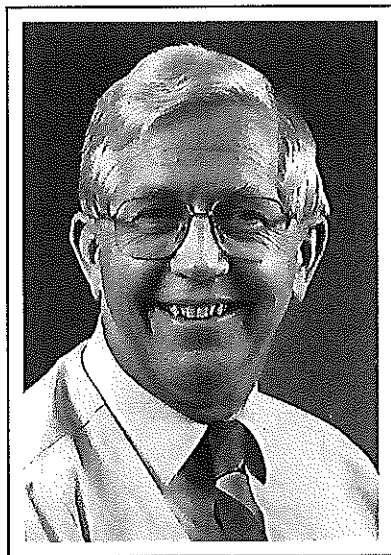
spend much time receiving, as well as sending, messages to and from publics. Largely in support of advertising and marketing, the goal is to learn about publics so one can more effectively persuade people to buy, vote, write, and otherwise behave in accordance with the client's interests.

4. **The two-way symmetric model**. While also emphasizing two-way communication, this approach has a central goal very different from persuasion. The intent is to establish and maintain fruitful, mutually satisfying long-term relationships between a client and his, her or its publics. (Grunig and Hunt, 1994, pp. 13-46)

James Grunig and his associates note that all four models now operate in various places. The two-way approaches appear to have gained popularity in recent years, but they have not supplanted press relations designed to enhance awareness and information level (J. Grunig, et al., 1996).

Initially, James Grunig (1992, pp. 219-250) proposed that the two-way symmetric model would yield the greatest long-term success for clients and for society. However, recent evidence (J. Grunig, et al., 1996) and commentary (Karlberg, 1996) suggest excellence often requires both two-way symmetric and two-way asymmetric practice. That is, practitioners seek to persuade as well as build relationships. James Grunig, et al. (1996) refer to this combination as a **mixed-motive model**.

Clearly, no organization can function without resources — money, materials, and person power — from its environment. Even the most idealistic corporation can do little to help society after going broke and ceasing to exist. Thus some persuasion directed at stakeholders usually is essential.



Hugh M. Culbertson

The widely quoted "excellence study" sponsored by the International Association of Business Communicators has made a case for two-way practice — particularly of the symmetric type. This case is based largely on *logical-positivist* theory and research designed to explain and predict *what actually works best* in public relations (J. Grunig, et al., 1996). Such research uses *observational data* to test *more or less universal laws* linking results to prior conditions that help explain them.

Kruckeberg and Starck (1998, pp. 17-21) suggest, however, that American public relations has focused excessively on persuasion to help achieve rather narrow partisan goals for clients and employers. These authors call for increasing emphasis on building a *sense of community* involving stable but flexible relationships based on mutual understanding and trust.

Traveling a road parallel to that of IABC researchers, the Kruckeberg-Starck analysis fits nicely with a movement called *communitarianism* that focuses on *what should be done*. This paper seeks to enhance dialogue by outlining some basic premises of communitarianism — and by showing how these relate to two-way symmetric practice.

In short, the arguments presented here support a *normative* theory about symmetry hinging partly on communitarian tenets. Such a theory spells out *how things ought to be*, based partly on explicitly defined *assumptions about how things are*.

The paper describes six basic assumptions of communitarians, drawing on the work of movement leader Amitai Etzioni (1993) along with other authors such as Robert Bellah, et al. (1991), Parker J. Palmer (1992), Cornel West (1994), and Georgie Anne Geyer (1996).

Also, in clarifying and supporting these assumptions, attention is given to phenomena that involve a marked absence of community: post-traumatic stress disorder among combat veterans (Shay, 1994), Ku Klux Klan violence against Jews in Mississippi (Nelson, 1993), hard-core poverty in the American inner city (Dash, 1996), and war-related atrocities in Bosnia (Maass, 1996).

While discussing each tenet, we attempt to show how it supports — and is supported by — symmetry in communication.

Some Communitarian Tenets

Tenet 1 — Whether a behavior is right or wrong depends in large part on its positive contribution to *commitment to and quality of relationships*.

Quality appears to involve several things.

First, the people involved must care *genuinely* about each other's welfare. They must strive for win-

win solutions and mutually beneficial relationships where one's own success does not detract from another's (Etzioni, 1993, p. 31). So long as self-centered adversaryism dominates the public realm, the quality of relationships seems bound to decline. (Geyer, pp. 318-339)

Second, they must communicate *in depth*, and at length, so each person understands the others involved — even where there is conflict (Culbertson, 1989).

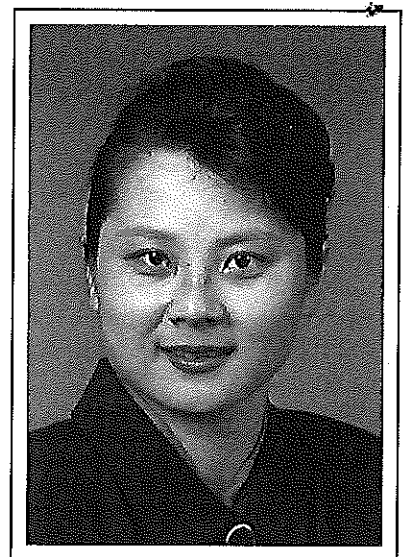
Palmer (1992, p. 26) emphasizes that friendship and sharing can be unhealthy when they rest on exclusion of outsiders. He calls for additional channels of dialogue ranging from ecumenical worship services to police neighborhood-watch programs and mall town meetings. In such settings, he believes, *strangers* can talk with each other comfortably, learning a great deal within a climate of mutual respect and caring. (Palmer, 1992, pp. 135-153)

At issue here is the need to enhance discourse partly to clarify issues. In the process, people get involved as much as possible in the public sphere.

Third, *mutual trust* is essential for genuine community. Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic apparently understood this when he destroyed community by haranguing his people about past misdeeds of Muslims and Croats. Resulting mistrust paved the way for incredible acts of cruelty — and the absence of community — in Bosnia (Maass, 1996, p. 28).

Clearly Tenet 1 lies at the heart of the two-way symmetric model. Furthermore, asymmetry of power, ego, and status apparently contributes to many relational tragedies such as those observed recently in Bosnia.

Focusing on *power*, guards at prisoner-of-war



Ni Chen

camps there felt almost divine — having complete control over prisoners and able to do anything with no chance of reprisals. Thus they had opportunities to settle old scores. For example, a poor Serb might find and torture a wealthy Muslim who had refused to give him a job five years earlier (Maass, 1996, pp. 52-53).

Given sensitivity to prodding or gentle social pressure, interconnectedness can sometimes grow when conflict occurs and is resolved through interaction, compromise, and cooperative effort.

In the realm of *status*, Croats and Serbs apparently behaved viciously partly because they envied the wealth and higher status of Muslims. Since Bosnia was under Turkish domination from the fourteenth century until the nineteenth, its Muslims were a privileged class — landowners, mayors, and professionals. In contrast, Serbs and Croats tended to be viewed as country bumpkins (Maass, 1996, p. 70).

In part, asymmetry of power and status affects relationships partly because of *ego* differences. A person is likely to behave in a condescending or arrogant way when he or she feels dramatically superior to others involved in a relationship. And closed-minded desperation may take over where one feels dramatically inferior.

Etzioni (1993, pp. 54-88) notes that a focus on relationships serves as a useful antidote to excessive reliance on social convention and formal rules or laws in defining what is right and wrong. And both conventions and rules tend to be asymmetric at base. Society and its leaders often impose them on subordinate members. Such imposition can separate people from each other, detracting from adherence to Tenet 2.

Tenet 2 — Community requires a sense of interconnectedness and social cohesion.

In this view, people must feel they are part of something larger than themselves. In some measure, they must be willing to sacrifice for the welfare of others — and for society as a whole.

Only with such a feeling, according to Etzioni (1993, p. 15), will people respond to “gentle prodding.” And, without sensitivity to such prodding,

order and cooperative effort can result only from coercion and confrontation growing out of *asymmetric* power and status differences.

Coercion and confrontation, in turn, lead people to communicate only insofar as doing so helps them defeat adversaries or escape constraints imposed by superiors. That, of course, can limit mutual understanding and quality of relationships (Peters and Austin, 1985, p. 230).

Given sensitivity to prodding or gentle social pressure, according to Palmer (1992, p. 134), interconnectedness can sometimes grow when conflict occurs and is resolved through interaction, compromise, and cooperative effort.

Also, interconnectedness can increase when symmetrical communication helps each participant understand others so he or she can attend carefully to *concrete details* of his or her partners' lives. Each person faces a unique situation each day, reacting to it in light of her or his needs, goals and capabilities (Bok, 1981, pp. 281-285). Forcing all individuals to solve problems on the basis of *abstract, broad principles* — applied uniformly as tends to occur with strict adherence to social conventions — can be destructive of community (Bellah, et al., pp. 52-81).

While respecting each other's individuality, members of a true community must have something in common — a “glue” which holds them together. This requires adherence to Tenet 3.

Tenet 3 — Identification of — and humble but firm commitment to — core values and beliefs are essential to a sense of community.

Geyer (1996, pp. 318-339) fears that easy access to citizenship — and “dumbing down” of citizenship tests — in the United States may reduce knowledge of and commitment to core beliefs. That, in turn, may contribute to fragmentation and reduced social and political cohesion.

Other factors leading to such a decline are said to include widespread illegal immigration, the creation of Diaspora who live in one place while devoting primary loyalty to people and institutions located elsewhere, and service by citizens of one country in another nation's military service.

The basic idea here is that members of a community must feel they have something in common that's worth sacrificing for. Otherwise, they will not look beyond narrow, partisan interests as needed for a meaningful social contract. That contract, in turn, requires that institutions and the people who operate them seek to serve the total community.

Defining core beliefs is not easy. In an interdependent world — and within complex pluralistic

societies — diversity of belief and practice is inevitable. And communitarians celebrate such diversity as noted under Tenet 6.

In the United States, freedom of communication, religion, assembly and action are valued greatly. Ideally, at least, religious and ethnic groups are encouraged to sustain and nourish their varied heritages (Geyer, 1996, pp. 230-276).

In such settings, it often seems difficult to define core beliefs which all persons must hold to qualify as "good citizens." Certainly, in the United States, many widely held cultural values do not qualify (Culbertson, 1994). The nation's focus on individualism does not suggest looking down on or excluding collectivists. Emphasis on technical thought and efficiency does not preclude mystics and idealists. And so on.

Furthermore, guarantees of real freedom pose some inherent contradictions for philosophers as well as political leaders. For example, in a truly free society, advocates of totalitarian rule and authoritarian thought cannot be muzzled. Yet some view such advocacy as destructive of the freedom which makes it possible.

What then, are core beliefs of "true Americans, true Germans, true Afghans," and so on? Perhaps the tenets of communitarianism are a place to start in defining them. So are commandments shared by the world's great religions.

At the very least, effective citizens of any society — or persons within the world at large — should emphasize the need to reduce violence, starvation, suffering, and disrespect for others.

Two further points deserve emphasis.

First, *exclusivity of beliefs* should not exist within a given society. Americans or Chinese may hold certain beliefs, but they should not view these as their personal property unavailable to others. And they should not look down on others with different beliefs — so long as these seem consistent with basic decency and respect.

Second, *commitment to striving for common ground* may be as important as attaining it. As noted under Tenet 6, careful attention to diverse views very unlike one's own may pave the way for tolerance, creativity, and other communitarian goals.

Etzioni (1993, p. 25) suggests that lasting, deep agreement on core values requires a symmetrical approach to relationships. Further, *reciprocity of duty and effort* lies at the heart of that symmetry. While holding to certain beliefs, one must recognize that one can learn from others so as to enrich one's own views and apply them wisely.

Viewed in this context, people must give as well as get. Each citizen must be willing to "give a decent day's work for a decent day's pay." This, in turn, suggests Tenet 4.

Tenet 4 — People who claim rights must be willing to balance them with responsibilities.

Several scholars have bemoaned what they regard as excessive emphasis by Americans on self-fulfillment — and on claiming rights to support their own pleasure. Too often, it's alleged, people advance such claims without assuming concomitant responsibilities to help others — or society as a whole (Etzioni, pp. 9-11, 155-191; Geyer, p. 121; Yankelevich, pp. 3-46).

Within a relationship, balancing of rights and responsibilities by all parties seems central to true communication symmetry. In asymmetric communication, the source often hopes to draw conclusions for the receiver — not to let the receiver work autonomously and assume responsibility for drawing his or her own.

Shay (1994, pp. 3-38) notes how, in combat, some veterans suffer shrinking moral horizons — the opposite of interconnectedness with the military or nation as a whole — partly because they see themselves as placed at risk by leaders and support personnel who they believe fail to carry out responsibilities.

While holding to certain beliefs, one must recognize that one can learn from others so as to enrich one's own views and apply them wisely.

Needless to say, it's traumatic when one watches close friends die or suffer terribly in combat. Further, profound anger, loneliness and despair sometimes ensue when one feels such tragedies have occurred because rear-echelon people are said to have failed in meeting their responsibilities.

In such a case, a soldier's world can come to include only himself and a few buddies in foxholes — or out in tall elephant grass. Resulting inability to trust can destroy relationships — even after one leaves the military.

When one assumes responsibility, problems develop unless she or he is empowered to exercise it. This hinges on behavior in line with Tenet 5.

Tenet 5 — Community requires that all citizens have a feeling of empowerment — of involvement in making and implementing decisions that bear on their lives.

The Chicago School of Sociology has emphasized

the importance of voluntary associations in defining and solving social problems. Ordinary Americans achieve much partly because they are "belongers," according to these observers as well as the renowned French observer of 150 years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville (Kruckeberg and Starck, pp. 27-30).

Unfortunately, according to Geyer (1996, pp. 95-134), reliance on government and other experts to solve problems has contributed to a sense of *dependency hence asymmetry*. In such a context, felt involvement and a sense of shared values can decay.

Some conservatives blame cause-oriented liberal groups such as the Ford Foundation for contributing to dependency on judicial and other legal remedies — rather than community action — for meeting needs and combating social injustice (Geyer, pp. 190-229). However, liberals contend that, in the absence of such crusading, individual citizens of a large, complex society often feel powerless — hence unable to accomplish anything through political activity (Lipset, 1970, pp. 333).

Also, the growth of research universities with cohesive, turf-protecting academic specialties — the ultimate experts — has helped obscure the collaborative, shared nature of the search for knowledge observed by George Herbert Mead and John Dewey. This, in turn, has hampered scholarly activity because the social character of the search for knowledge has been ignored (Bellah, et al., 1991, pp. 145-178).

Dash (1996, pp. 251-254) showed how felt lack of power helped pave the way for a lady named Rosa Lee Cunningham to drop out of mainstream society and enter the "underclass" of crime and poverty in Washington, D. C. — and to bring six of her eight children with her.

The granddaughter of a slave, Rosa endured sneers and ridicule constantly as a little girl growing up in the rural South. Her mother taught her that Afro-American women were inferior, so she could never hope for anything other than dreary domestic work and poverty. And this basic perception remained throughout most of her life largely because, being illiterate and isolated, she was unaware of opportunities for Afro-Americans stemming from the U. S. civil rights movement.

Turning to public relations scholarship, Larissa Grunig (1992, p. 492) has regarded empowerment of varied publics as an essential element in true symmetric practice. Indeed, large disparities in power seem antithetical to symmetry.

Empowerment broadens the base of potential stakeholders in most public relations contexts, suggesting Tenet 6.

Tenet 6 — Community requires a broadening of one's social world — one's array of significant others — so as to reduce fragmentation and enhance breadth of perspective.

Culbertson (1989,1991) has argued that breadth of perspective can lead to a number of widely valued outcomes such as creativity, tolerance, sensitivity in taking others' roles, and the ability to view oneself and one's society from an external, detached perspective.

Community require a broadening of one's social world — one's array of significant others.

Caring for, and coming to understand, strangers very different from oneself are widely heralded. These achievements can reduce — or help people live fruitfully in spite of — fragmentation due to urbanization, industrialization, bureaucratization, nationalism, interest-group politics, and other modern phenomena (Kruckeberg and Starck, 1988, p. 48).

Such broadening is unlikely unless one respects others. That requires recognition that all people — or most all — have something of value to contribute in defining and reacting to their worlds. And such recognition, in turn, requires two-way symmetry and minimizing of good vs. bad or high-vs. low-status judgments about cultures.

Vercic, et al. (1996, pp. 37-40) suggest such broad-ranging, complete communication is likely to occur consistently only with:

1. Involvement of public relations in an organization's *strategic management* as part of the *dominant coalition* — the group of formal and informal leaders who really "make things happen."
2. Organization of public relations as one management *function* quite distinct from others. That function must be *integrated* — with one or more individuals who coordinate and tie together PR-related activities and plans.
3. *Diversity* within the PR function with respect to gender and ethnicity as well as role played. *Empowerment* of women and minorities is crucial. So is empowerment of both communication managers and technicians.
4. Emphasis on *internal as well as external communication* affecting an organization.

Conclusion

The thesis advanced here is two-fold. First, communitarianism has something to say for the modern practice of public relations. And second, those who accept communitarian tenets should place high priority on the two-symmetric normative model of public relations. The second conclusion holds despite a lively debate noted earlier about the efficacy of that model as explanatory or *positive* theory.

We close by repeating a point made earlier. One need not and should not choose between symmetry and asymmetry on an either-or basis. A focus on building relationships does not preclude — or eliminate the need for — persuasion.

Of course, relationship building with a hidden agenda of persuasion may lead to reduced credibility and charges of hypocrisy. Wilson has noted that "strategic cooperative communities are not created out of self-serving rationality; they are created and strengthened through mutual trust, respect, cooperation, and benefit" (Wilson, 1996, p. 76).

Communitarians call explicitly for forums and research techniques that help practitioners and their clients listen — and that promote interaction among and within publics (Kruckeberg and Starck, pp. 111-119).

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