

## Power in Conflict for Public Relations

Kenneth D. Plowman

*School of Journalism and Mass Communication  
San Jose State University*

The use of conflict resolution and mixed motives can empower public relations managers to become part of the decision-making group of an organization. The conclusions of this study were, first, that public relations will become a part of the dominant coalition if it has experience in the new model of symmetry to include tactics of conflict resolution. Second, top management directly affects the practice of public relations to operate according to its own agenda—in a two-way, mixed motive manner.

The primary purpose in this study was to explore further how public relations managers gain power in organizations. The inclusion of public relations in an organization's dominant coalition is "perhaps more important to the profession of public relations than any other measure of professional growth" (Broom & Dozier, 1986, p. 8). J. E. Grunig and Hunt (1984) went even further in asserting that there is little justification for any practice of public relations unless practitioners are included in the dominant coalition. If the assertions of these and other scholars are well-founded, then determining the relationship of conflict resolution and public relations in an organization—specifically how practitioners can become part of the dominant coalition—seems crucial.

*In this study, I explain that conflict resolution can empower public relations managers to become an effective part of the communication process in the management decision-making group or dominant coalition of an organization. The premise here is that methods of conflict resolution are used in J. E. Grunig's new model of symmetry as two-way practices for public relations (Dozier, L. A. Grunig, & J. E. Grunig, 1995).*

## SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TOPIC

Communication is the link of interaction between the organization and its publics, a situation of inevitable conflict (Coser, 1956; Follet, 1940; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Few practitioners or scholars of public relations have investigated the relationship between public relations and conflict resolution. From the practice of public relations, Gossen and Sharp (1987) saw public relations as the management of conflict with the objective of win/win solutions. Researchers who examined this relationship directly include Ehling (1984, 1985), Lauzen (1986), and Murphy (1991). Ehling developed a theory of public relations management based on concepts from decision theory, game theory, and conflict resolution theory. Lauzen built on J. E. Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four models of public relations—press agency, public information, two-way asymmetrical, and two-way symmetrical. She found that organizations use characteristics of all four models of public relations to manage conflict. Murphy described game theory as the science of conflict resolution. She urged symmetrical compromise while never ignoring the asymmetrical centrality of self-interest. The resulting practice of public relations would be one of mixed motives, in which “each side retains a strong sense of its own interests, yet each is motivated to cooperate in a limited fashion in order to attain, at least, some resolution of the conflict” (Murphy, 1991, p. 125).

## THE NEW MODEL

The most recent model of public relations, which incorporates the two-way models and mixed motives, is the new model of symmetry as two-way practices (Dozier et al., 1995). This model is based on the Excellence Study and research by Murphy (1991), who used game theory to examine the two-way models. Her mixed motive game incorporated both asymmetrical and symmetrical tactics, and she argued that it better describes the practice of public relations in the real world. Again, in mixed motives, organizations pursue their own interests while anticipating the reactions of their important publics.

The Excellence Study (J. E. Grunig et al., 1991) determined that excellent public relations has a “conflict mediation orientation and requires the establishment of two-way communication between an organization and its publics” (Carrington, 1992, p. 18). In connection with this same study, a professional in the field concluded: “There is a shortage of communicators with mastery of the attitude, negotiation and conflict resolution theories vital to the win/win outcomes that CEOs of excellent organizations seek” (Carrington, 1992, p. 19). These are skills that top management values and supports and may lead to membership in the dominant coalition for the public relations manager.

## CONFLICT RESOLUTION

The use of conflict as a theoretical base to resolve problems in public relations is not new (Ehling, 1984; Gossen & Sharp, 1987; J. E. Grunig & L. A. Grunig, 1992; J. E. Grunig & Hickson, 1976; Pavlik, 1987; Prior-Miller, 1989). In a recent content analysis of public relations firm-related articles in the *Public Relations Journal* from 1980 to 1989, 45 conflict-related issues were discovered. The key issues, attributed to either firm or client, were concerns over knowing each other's businesses, contributing to a consistent communication flow, finances, and chemistry (Bourland, 1993).

Communication skills developed by public relations seem vital to resolving conflict, whereas communication and conflict seem to be endemic to organizations (Deutsch, 1973; Roloff, 1987). Communication can cause conflict, can be a symptom of conflict, and is effective for resolving conflicts (Hocker & Wilmot, 1991). Conflict, in communication terms, is the notion of perceived incompatibilities.

The resolution of conflict is a natural activity for public relations managers because the communication activities of public relations in an organization interrelate with communication activities in other organizations. Organizations are usually in some kind of conflict about their relationship with each other (Roloff, 1987). Although public relations managers work for the interests of their own organizations, they may come to realize that other organizations have legitimate interests that should be considered in their relationship with each other.

The resolution of conflict by public relations in the business and public policy arena is also growing in demand (Gossen & Sharp, 1987). Conflicts are becoming more complex in more organizations and are involving multiple issues as well. Handling such conflicts "enhance[s] the client's ability to function successfully in a volatile environment" (p. 35). In other words, more organizations have the potential for conflict that needs to be resolved than ever before. Skills are needed by public relations managers to evaluate the divergent interests of different groups to formulate alternatives that will satisfy the parties involved in the dispute. Otherwise, conflicts will keep arising until they are resolved.

Game theory originated the term *mixed motives* (Schelling, 1980). Schelling said there were conflicting as well as common interests in a dispute. One can win by bargaining, by mutual accommodation, or by avoidance of mutually damaging behavior. He called these types of games on a conflict-cooperation continuum mixed motives.

The intersection, then, of the fields of public relations and conflict resolution is *mixed motives*. *Mixed motives* acknowledge the primacy of the organization's interests and encompass the scale between two-way asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical communication in public relations. This scale is described in both fields with such terms and tactics as *bargaining*, *negotiation*, *mediation*, *compro-*

*mise, accommodation, avoidance, withdrawing, competition, contention, cooperation, and collaboration.*

For the practice of public relations, I attempted in this study to make a connection between the use of mixed motives in solving problems for the organization and entrance into the dominant coalition of the organization. Communication scholars have examined other theories to explain the movement of public relations into the dominant coalition of an organization, including structural, environmental-imperative, and power-control theories. These theories, by themselves, have not completely explained public relations practitioners as effective strategic managers. The dominant coalition is that core group in management that sets the direction of the organization. The power-control theory will be revisited, in conjunction with the new model and conflict resolution because, despite any other factor, power maintained by public relations would seem to be at the sufferance of the dominant coalition.

Many public relations theorists believe that, of the four J. E. Grunig and Hunt (1984) models, the practice of the two-way symmetrical model would be characteristic of effective public relations managers and that those managers should be part of the dominant coalition. Ehling (1992) took this premise further, developing a theory of public relations as conflict management and asserting that only his equivalent of symmetrical communication management is really public relations. In fact, J. E. Grunig (1992b) provided strong links among public relations, the two-way models, conflict resolution, and access to the dominant coalition. Given those strong associations and Ehling's assertion, J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig (1992) suggested that the next step to develop theory for the practice of public relations is to look at applying general theories of conflict resolution to the two-way models of public relations.

## CONCEPTUALIZATION

The theoretical development of this study was limited to the concept of power, models of public relations, and conflict resolution. The concept of power was used to understand more fully what was meant for public relations to become part of the dominant coalition. The four models of public relations introduced other factors that might possibly lead to entrance in the dominant coalition and, then, evolved into mixed motives and the new model of symmetry. Conflict resolution was discussed and the power-control theory was considered as a final catalyst for power involving public relations.

### Public Relations

*Power.* Power gained by the public relations manager from resolving problems for an organization is related to what Salancik and Pfeffer (1989) called the

*strategic-contingency theory*, in which one aspect of power is something that accrues to organizational departments that cope with organizational problems. They defined power as the ability to get things done. This can be interpreted to mean that power is the ability to solve problems.

Power, it has also been suggested, is not something that a person possesses but is instead a relationship among people (Dahl, 1957). Pfeffer (1981) defined power as "context or relationship specific" and that a person is powerful "only with respect to other social actors in a specific social setting" (p. 3). Power, then, involves interactions among different players and the ability to employ some means to achieve an intended effect. Both of these conditions—the ability to solve problems and power as a relationship—point to the ability and process of exercising power instead of any importance attached to identifying sources of power (Mumby, 1988). Mumby maintained that power can perform an integrationist function as opposed to domination in an organization. Keltner (1994) called this the development of skills or services the dominant coalition deems critical to solving the organization's problems. Through this constant interplay of power, an organization constitutes and reconstitutes itself.

If, in the strategic-contingency theory, power is determined by problems facing the organization, it also influences decisions in the organization. Power, then, facilitates the organization's adaptation to its environment or its problems (Mintzberg, 1983; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1989). L. A. Grunig (1992b) confirmed this conclusion when she said that, if the dominant coalition is willing to share its power, it would be in a better position to manage its environmental dependencies.

Recent research on power in public relations has not focused on the relationship of problem solving and power; therefore, its findings are inconclusive for purposes of this study. Pollack (1986) found moderate support for the public relations department and found that the dominant coalition considered its function important. In the most extensive study of power in public relations, L. A. Grunig (1990) found almost unilateral support for public relations functions but also found that support and understanding do not necessarily equate with value. Most recently, Dozier et al. (1995), in the follow-up case studies to the Excellence Study, found the following:

Excellent communication programs incorporate another dimension of power: the communicator's ability to influence decisions about an organization's goods and services, its policies, and its behavior. The communication department must have power and influence within the dominant coalition to help organizations practice the two-way symmetrical model. (p. 75)

The follow-up case studies showed that the power of the communication department is represented by the value and support the department receives from the dominant coalition. Much of this value and support for public relations managers can come from the use of skills attained from experience and training to resolve conflicts or problems with the organization's environment.

*The dominant coalition.* L. A. Grunig (1992b) followed her discussion of power with the conclusion that defining power is not enough. It is also important to understand the concept of coalitions within an organization that are the major power wielders. She used the term *dominant coalition* to identify the group of people who control an organization's resources. The most extensive definition of a coalition was as follows:

An interacting group of individuals, deliberately constructed, independent of the formal structure, lacking its own internal formal structure, consisting of mutually perceived memberships, issue oriented, focused on a goal or goals external to the coalition, and requiring concerted member action. (Stevenson, Pearce, & Porter, 1985, p. 261)

These coalitions may be formed from members of upper management, or they may be a collection of people from other departments. Stevenson et al. stated that "what makes them unique is their attempts to operate in a concerted manner outside of the formally constructed, legitimated structure" (p. 262). Mintzberg (1983) defined internal coalitions as those full-time employees who make decisions about the direction of the company and are able to act on those decisions. Coalitions form "to protect and improve their vested interests" (Robbins, 1990, p. 250). Dozier et al. (1995) developed the concept further, as the group of powerful individuals within an organization who affect its structure, define its mission, and set its course through strategic choices the coalition makes. Because public relations usually is not part of upper management (L. A. Grunig, 1992b), it follows, then, that it is not part of the dominant coalition. Although the follow-up case studies did find that communicators may be part of the dominant coalition, this was not always the case. The first and basic research question (RQ), then, for this study was as follows:

RQ1: Are public relations managers typically part of the dominant coalition?

### Gaining Power in an Organization

If public relations managers are not always part of the dominant coalition, then what are the methods for those managers to gain power and move into the dominant coalition? One possible avenue is increased education. L. A. Grunig (1992b) stated: "The ability to make valid decisions in public relations depends partly on the knowledge of communication theory and research methods that comes with a university education in the field—primarily a master's or doctoral student" (p. 498). Ehling (1992) supported this statement by concluding that "professionalism is dependent on a high level of sophistication presented through formal education" (p. 463).

Earlier in 1989, J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig found that, in general, managerial support for and understanding of public relations correlated with the most sophisticated, two-way models of public relations. Based primarily on Pollack's (1986) study, J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig posited that only those with the expertise to practice such a model would be included in the dominant coalition. They found significant correlations between inclusion in the dominant coalition and both education and experience in public relations. The relationship between the dominant coalition and education and experience in public relations later evolved into the professional continuum of public relations (asymmetrical to symmetrical; J. E. Grunig & L. A. Grunig, 1992). Gaining increased education specifically in the field of public relations aids the professional in public relations by giving him or her a body of knowledge with which to work in designing and evaluating communications programs with their strategic publics (L. A. Grunig, 1992b).

Other factors of higher education include self-study, professional association workshops and seminars, mentoring, workshops for communications department, and professional accreditation for individuals (Dozier et al., 1995). Clearly, the existing literature on education in public relations shows that increased knowledge of the field adds to the practitioners' ability and expertise.

The Dozier et al. (1995) follow-up case studies also mentioned knowledge of a specific business or industry. One highly successful communicator said not only that higher education played a key role in her success but that she supplemented her broad training in communication with other course work in marketing and management "with specialized training in a content area related to the business itself" (p. 70). In a study of 74 senior executives, Lindeman and Lapetina (1981) found that one of the weaknesses of public relations professionals is the lack of knowledge about business problems and lack of experience in business operations. Falb (1992) stated: "Public relations is in fact moving in the direction of being a part of the management process. Therefore, it must be based on a knowledge of business and management practices" (p. 100). In a broader approach, Heath (1991) advocated that public relations programs incorporate both social sciences and humanities for conceptual depth but that they also become closely aligned with business departments to include strategic business planning and technical disciplines. In the follow-up case studies, Dozier et al. (1995) said that several communicators stressed the importance of business knowledge; for example, "The top communicator at a chemical manufacturing company stressed the importance of knowing the chemical industry" (p. 65). Clearly, knowledge of strategic business planning and management will aid the public relations practitioner in gaining support for his or her programs from senior management.

However, additional knowledge about business practices is not the only contributing factor to public relations practitioners not being in the dominant coalition. Lack of professionalism and expertise in the field itself also contributes (L. A. Grunig, 1992b). When professionals in public relations do not have the expertise

in their own field, it is difficult for them to persuade the dominant coalition to enact ill-conceived programs. Burger (1983) encouraged those in public relations to increase their level of professionalism by not only getting involved in the business that they are working for but also by increasing the quality of work they produce.

Pfeffer (1981) stated that “the power of organizational actors is fundamentally determined by two things, the importance of what they do in the organization and their skill in doing it” (p. 18). He postulated that people within an organization can have levels of expertise to solve organizational problems. It is, however, control of this knowledge that leads to power. There are several ways that individuals control this expertise, including lack of documentation, use of jargon within the field, centralization of expertise and knowledge, and maintaining control of external sources of expertise. These are all ways for an individual to maximize his or her power within an organization.

As public relations managers increase their level of expertise in the field, they will gain power in the organization. Commanding a field of specialized knowledge, practitioners will become more indispensable to the organization. All of these three aspects—education, increased business knowledge, and expertise in the field—will result in additional power for the practitioner. This leads to the development of the next RQ:

RQ2: As public relations managers obtain education, experience, and expertise in public relations and the business practices of an organization, do they gain entry into the dominant coalition?

### Mixed Motive Model of Public Relations

The two-way models of public relations have already been mentioned as factors of education and experience. In 1996, Plowman developed a model of public relations that encompassed the two-way models of public relations, the new model of symmetry, and seven negotiation tactics that fit in the new model.

*The new model of symmetry.* Based on the Excellence Study, Dozier et al. (1995) suggested a new way of organizing the model of two-way communication practices that incorporates mixed motives. Dozier et al. dubbed this model *two-way*, subsuming the former two-way asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical models. By doing so, they did not exclude the use of asymmetrical means to achieve symmetrical ends:

Asymmetrical tactics are sometimes used to gain the best position for organizations within the win/win zone. Because such practices are bounded by a symmetrical world



view that respects the integrity of long-term relationships, the two-way model is essentially symmetrical. (p. 49)

The dual concern model in the conflict resolution field, which was developed most completely by Thomas (1976), is conceptualized as two dimensions: concern for self and concern for others. In 1995, Plowman et al. adapted this model to public relations and arrived at five negotiation tactics that would fall at points on this conflict grid. The five tactics were *contending*, *collaborating*, *compromising*, *avoiding*, and *accommodating*. Contending means "I win, you lose" in game theory terms. Collaborating is a win/win for both parties. Compromising is a 50/50 split. Avoiding is an "I lose, you lose" condition, in which one or both parties have a better alternative than to deal with each other. Accommodating is an "I lose, you win" type situation. The model served as a basis from which to develop further the new model of symmetry as two-way practices and resulted in the development of a mixed motive model for public relations (Plowman, 1996). This mixed motive model included not only the five negotiation tactics mentioned previously but also two additional tactics: (a) unconditionally constructive and (b) win/win or no deal.

*Unconditionally constructive.* Being unconditionally constructive is used in the positive sense of Fisher and Brown (1988); that is, it "will be both good for the relationship and good for me, *whether or not you follow the same guidelines* [italics added]" (p. 37). Even if the other party in the conflict does not reciprocate, the organization acts in reconciling the strategic interests of both the organization and its strategic public. Although the decision to take this altruistic tactic is unilateral, it remains two-way because the organization must have done research to determine the interests of its strategic public. It is also a win/win situation because both parties mutually benefit from the result of the tactic. Although the strategic public does not have a choice in the decision and may already regret that decision, it will tend to be better off. This is so, just as the organization is better off than if it were to pursue another negotiation tactic with different choice alternatives. The key lies in both parties' common interests. One party cannot be unconditionally constructive if the interests of the other party are not affected positively. Those common interests allow for a limited set of options to be unconditionally constructive (T. Schelling, personal communication, November 8, 1995).

*Win/win or no deal.* This alternative negotiation tactic goes beyond being unconditionally constructive. To reach agreement in a conflict for both parties in a positive way, at least one party's best alternative to a negotiated agreement is the option of no deal at all. The only options in this situation are for both parties either to collaborate in mutually beneficial circumstances or to hold off on any agreement until both parties are ready for a win/win deal to be made.

In 1989, Covey adapted the game theory terms of Deutsch (1973) into what he called "six paradigms of human interaction." The first five are covered essentially in the five tactics of negotiation for public relations described for this study. Covey said: "If these individuals had not come up with a synergistic solution—one that is agreeable to both—they could have gone for an even higher expression of Win/Win—Win/Win or no deal" (p. 213). The addition of *no deal* to the *win/win* term means that, if no solution would benefit both parties, then they would agree to disagree, that is, no deal. "It would be better not to deal than to live with a decision that wasn't right for us both. Then maybe another time we might be able to get together" (p. 214). This alternative tactic is similar to avoiding, but combines it with the condition of collaborating, or there will not be any type of solution to a particular conflict or problem.

The mixed motive model of public relations (Plowman, 1996) is a combination of asymmetrical and symmetrical communication. This model deals with degrees of each over the spectrum of asymmetrical and symmetrical communication. The only way to represent two ends on either side of the model would be to represent the one-way models of press agency and public information. The two-way models would not quite extend to the one-way model ends. Two-way symmetrical communication is not entirely win/win. It can include elements of compromise, accommodation, and even avoidance because part of avoidance is unconditional or win/win or no deal. Likewise, two-way asymmetrical is not entirely contending but can include elements of all the other negotiation tactics. It differs from the new model of symmetry in public relations in that mixed motives are not symmetrical but can stretch along the entire spectrum of the new model to include asymmetrical communication either from the dominant coalition or from the strategic publics' perspective.

The premise in this study was that the new model of symmetry as two-way practices (Dozier et al., 1995) could be verified and further explained by these, now seven, categories. As a result of the development of this model, the third RQ was the following:

- RQ3: Do knowledge and experience in solving problems of public relations include the mixed motive model of public relations and apply to its membership in the dominant coalition?

### Power-Control Theory

All the previous RQs may not be enough to answer the abiding question of this study: How do public relations managers increase their power in organizations? L. A. Grunig (1990) and J. E. Grunig (1989) found weak and inconsistent relations among an organization's structure, its environment, and the models of public

relations it practices. (L. A. Grunig studied 48 organizations in the Washington, DC area; see Schneider, a.k.a. L. A. Grunig, 1985.) By implication, this weak relationship could be extended to the new conflict resolution model for public relations. The reason for this is that stakeholder environments are not objective reality for managers of organizations. Instead, managers choose, subjectively, to observe only parts of their environments. The parts they choose to observe are a product of their mind set and organizational culture (L. A. Grunig, 1992a). This is the power-control theory.

A power-control theory (Child, 1972; Pfeffer, 1981) may explain more completely the relationships between organizational environment and the two-way models. In 1963, Cyert and March presented a theory in which there is a coalition of individuals who determine the organization's goals. Stevenson et al. (1985), in their work on coalitions, stated: "Coalitions are formed to advance the purposes of their members" (p. 262). Members of the power elite also attempt to select the environments that will help them maintain their control over the direction of the organization. For public relations to be a part of the dominant coalition, the members must view public relations as helping to maintain that control.

In any case, the dominant coalition has the power to choose the model of public relations the organization practices. L. A. Grunig (1992a) found statistically significant support for a relationship between the dominant coalition and the practice of public relations. This does not mean membership in the dominant coalition. Because it has been established already that public relations managers are rarely part of the dominant coalition, it would take a radical change in the organization to include them. Under the power-control theory, the rise of the public relations professional to power, including entry into the dominant coalition, is blocked by the desire of the coalition to protect its own interests and deny change in the organization.

The final RQ for this study, then, is the following:

RQ4: Despite the recognition given the performance of the public relations manager or any other factor affecting that manager, does entry into the dominant coalition depend entirely on the agenda of the dominant coalition?

## METHOD

The qualitative method was the preferred method for this study because it seeks to interpret and understand the meaning of interpersonal attitudes and behavior among the public relations manager, external publics, and the top management or dominant coalition of an organization. In this study, I used a combination of depth interviewing and case studies.

## Interviewing

Interviews are conversations with a purpose (Kahn & Cannell, 1957), rather than a formal set of structured questions. The interview respects how the interviewee frames and structures responses. This type of qualitative interviewing is known as *depth, long, intensive, collaborative, informal, semistructured, and unstructured* (Lindlof, 1995; Marshall & Rossman, 1989; McCracken, 1988; Patton, 1990). The voluntary character of the interview process is vital so that the interaction between researcher and participant occurs as freely as interviewing (possible strangers) can permit. The whole interviewing process leads to a view of something between (inter-) people (Brenner, 1985). Lindlof pointed out that, although a researcher wants to cover certain areas in an interview, relatively little structure is involved.

## Case Studies

In 1994, Yin defined a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 13). Multiple case designs are almost always advisable (Yin, 1989).

When collecting evidence in case studies, it typically comes from six sources (Yin, 1989):

1. *Documents*: Letters; meeting minutes; internal documents; and news clippings that help corroborate evidence from other, primary sources.
2. *Archival records*: Maps; lists; surveys; diaries; and organizational charts or records.
3. *Interviews*: One of the most important information sources for case studies, includes in-depth, open-ended interviews; focused interviews or focus groups for clarification of evidence; and survey interviews.
4. *Direct observation*: Site visit to observe environmental conditions and relevant behaviors; using multiple observers if possible and taking extensive field notes.
5. *Participant observation*: Observer becomes active member of community and when researcher wants to perceive reality as an insider (but is subject to biases of involvement).
6. *Physical artifacts*: Computer printout, tool, work of art, and other physical evidence.

One strength of case studies arises out of a necessity to understand complex social phenomena. Case studies are the preferred strategy when how or why questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is to explain a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life

context (Yin, 1994). Another strength of case studies is its use of triangulation. Triangulation, in the case study sense, is a process of multiple perceptions gathered from the multiple sources of data and a comparison of them to clarify meaning (Flick, 1992). A strength and a weakness of case studies is generalizability. Case studies are generalizable to theoretical propositions but not to populations or universes (Yin, 1989).

## Procedures

*Interviewing.* For the interviewing portion of the study, the interview guide approach of Lindlof (1995) and Patton (1990) was adopted. The interview guide approach uses elements of the semistructured and unstructured interviewing techniques. Semistructured interviewing calls for a specific list of questions, given in a specific order, whereas unstructured interviewing is completely open-ended, allowing the participants to lead the conversation where they will.

An interview guide creates a menu of questions to be covered and leaves the exact order and articulation to the interviewer's discretion. Of course, all questions were asked of all participants in roughly the same way. However, there exists flexibility for the interviewer to ask optional questions, pass on others, and depart briefly to follow unexpected conversational paths. Experiences and background vary among participants, and the interviewer should have the discretion to reshuffle questions to pursue issues relevant to the moment or to pursue new issues altogether (Lindlof, 1995). In essence, the interview guide approach emphasizes the goals of the interview in terms of the RQs to be explored and the criteria of a relevant and adequate response (Gorden, 1969).

Specific questions in the interview guide of this study were adapted either to the public relations participant or to the dominant coalition participant in each organization. The interviews were conducted in 14 organizations with a representative of the dominant coalition familiar with the public relations function, the head of public relations, and occasionally another member of the public relations department. A total of 30 interviews were conducted. In the 10 companies in which interviews only were conducted, anonymity was guaranteed. Full case studies were conducted in the other 4 organizations to include at least three of the six methods of data collection for each case. Anonymity was not guaranteed for the case studies. One company was United Defense, one of the country's largest defense contractors; another was Deloitte & Touche, a Big 6 accounting firm; the third was Radius, Inc., a high-technology firm; and the last was Oracle Corporation, the second-ranked company (at the time) behind Microsoft in the computer industry. All of the case studies were conducted in the fall of 1994.

For the interviews alone, a varied (on the excellence scale; see J. E. Grunig, 1992a) and purposive sample was used across industry types. A cosmetics firm and an experiment station classified as excellent in the Excellence Study were chosen.

Four of the firms, a city government and three associations, were not classified as excellent in the study. Four of the other companies did not participate in the Excellence Study at all. They were a drug company; a holding firm that owned a bank, auto dealerships, and a sports franchise; a spice company; and a high-tech corporation. Interviewing began in April 1994 with four companies in Texas. A second round of interviewing occurred in July with another four firms in or around Washington, DC. The final two organizations were interviewed in November 1994 and were located in or around San Francisco, California.

## Data Analysis

A combined method of interpretive analysis was used based on the in-depth interview method of Marshall and Rossman (1989), the long interview method of McCracken (1988), the case study methods of Yin (1989) and Bogdan and Biklen (1992), and the analysis techniques of Miles and Huberman (1984). To capitalize on the advantages of these approaches, yet control for inherent disadvantages, six steps were used:

1. A study of key issues and recurrent events in the individual interviews or cases.
2. A comparison of dominant coalition participants to each other in search of patterns.
3. A comparison of public relations participants across companies for patterns or themes.
4. A comparison of patterns between the dominant coalition and public relations participants.
5. After the data were gathered and patterns seemed to emerge, a search for alternative explanations—to challenge the very patterns that seem so evident or obvious.
6. After patterns developed, conclude with a comparison of findings back to theory to establish or discredit the specific model developed from theory.

As can be seen from these six stages of analysis, there usually are no fixed formulas for analysis of data in qualitative research methods. The process consists of examining, categorizing, tabulating, or otherwise recombining the evidence to address initial propositions of study. To do this, the researcher needs an analytic strategy that relies on theoretical propositions as guides.

The primary analytic strategy emphasized here was pattern matching. According to Yin (1989), this analysis of data consists of comparing empirically based patterns with a predicted one—if something was thought to predict something else, and that

something else did occur, and alternative explanations could not be found, then the outcome matched prediction.

## RESULTS

### RQ1

The predominant pattern for this study was that the senior public relations person often belonged to the dominant coalition. Of the 14 organizations involved in the study, 12 of the dominant coalition representatives agreed, whereas the holding company in Texas and Radius, Inc. did not. Among public relations managers, 10 of 14 said they belonged to the dominant coalition.

At Deloitte & Touche, the dominant coalition likened the role of the public relations manager to a local partner. The public relations manager was involved in partner meetings in the San Jose, California office and was viewed as the expert on marketing and client issues. In the case of United Defense, the director of communications did not consider himself part of the dominant coalition. Yet, he defined his role as autonomous and as part of the executive operating committee that set policy for the company.

### RQ2

This question spilled over into the two-way models and conflict resolution tactics because some of the education and experience covered these topics. All the organizations agreed with this question, except Radius, Inc., which broke out education and expertise from general business experience with the organization. There were no examples found at Radius, Inc. in which education and expertise were brought to the attention of the dominant coalition. However, regarding business practices, it did find that the nature of high-tech public relations requires a solid understanding of many complex disciplines, possibly including applications, operating systems, hardware engineering, and microprocessor design. Oracle Corporation and Deloitte & Touche also added the issue of personality, that is, people skills to get along with both strategic stakeholders and the dominant coalition criteria, for membership in the coalition.

From the perspective of the dominant coalition, then, membership in that group depended largely on the background of the practitioner. Public relations managers saw that membership in the dominant coalition hinged on their ability and expertise to resolve problems for the organization. In this category, the patterns revealed the most disparity between the dominant coalition and public relations. The broader

importance of background to the dominant coalition was a wider consideration of the expertise to solve problems from the public relations manager's viewpoint. Background included native ability, knowledge, experience, and sound judgment. All these factors contributed to a relationship of trust between the dominant coalition and public relations built over the long-term.

This pattern of background incorporated the public relations manager's focus on experience as expertise to solve problems for the organization. Another common factor of dominant coalitions was the long-term relationship both with the exposure to issues and to the dominant coalition. The product-related association labeled this factor *accumulation*. This accumulation encompassed the personal chemistry and trust engendered with the CEO over time. In the spice company, the public relations manager saw the building of relationships—not only with the dominant coalition but also with strategic publics—as vital to resolving management communication problems for the organization. This building of relationships also contributed greatly to creating the common ground for the solution of problems through mixed motives and conflict resolution tactics.

### RQ3

Public relations among the 14 organizations was, for the most part, a two-way practice. This practice encompassed the seven negotiation tactics in the mixed motive model of public relations. That is, it included the original five negotiation tactics plus unconditionally constructive and win/win or no deal.

The cosmetics firm characterized its solution of problems as accommodation; the holding company talked about compromise. The experiment station, the spice company, and the high-tech firm resolved internal communication problems cooperatively. The drug company avoided some problems, cooperated on others, and accommodated one important public on another issue. A products industry association said it used all the initial five techniques plus unconditionally constructive.

The city used compromise, accommodation, and cooperation in resolving some of its problems and also spoke of trying to be unconditionally constructive, embracing the additional tactic of win/win or no deal, that is, avoiding the problem until a cooperative solution can be found.

An example of accommodation comes from one of the four organizations that described using accommodation. The cosmetics firm accommodated on an animal rights issue with its major strategic public, an animal rights group. The law dictates that, for safety reasons, ingredients in cosmetics must be tested before they can be sold for human use, particularly on products applied to the human skin. The dominant coalition participant said: "We declared a moratorium on animal testing that evolved to the simple effect that we don't do animal testing."

He explained that this moratorium is unrealistic over time when a new ingredient is discovered and must be tested before it goes to market. He said: "That's what



cheeses me off about 'cruelty-free' products—that some people advertise themselves as being. That's just not really true. Somewhere, sometime the ingredients in their products were tested on animals.”

Avoidance of the problem was another common negotiating tactic used by several of the organizations in the study. Perhaps the best example of avoidance in this study occurred not in one of the organizations but with a public critical to it. The CEO of the products association said:

We put together a group of industry people to negotiate with a group called the National Recycling Coalition, and we worked with them using all these various conflict resolution terms that you mention here. We ended up in a position that we found acceptable as far as the negotiating teams. And actually, we had achieved so much that their board wouldn't accept it. They felt their team had given away too much.

The board of the National Recycling Association decided their alternatives were better if they avoided the problem than if they accepted the solution agreed on by its own negotiating team.

Another example of negotiation tactics used by participants in this study comes from the high-tech firm. It chose to use contention when it was faced with the alternatives of going out of business or significant downsizing. The investment community in New York was pleased with the company's actions to restore credibility to its stock. These actions of downsizing, however, essentially were dictated by the company. It had to reduce the size of its workforce significantly, and there was no room for compromise or accommodation with its employees. The CEO said: “If you're going to take the employment from 12,400 to 7,800, it's not going to be popular. ... We [the dominant coalition] had a vision, and we had a plan, and we knew what we were doing.” The CEO softened this contending stance when he said the reorganization of the company would not succeed without the support of the employees. Shortly after his arrival at the company, the CEO initiated internal perception surveys about the company and then embarked on a public information program to explain to employees “what you're doing, why you're doing it, and why the people that are going to be here after all this pain are going to be better off.”

Most of the organizations, then, used all or some of the five negotiating tactics. The city, however, emphasized that its handling of public relations problems went to the extreme of win/win or no deal in many instances. The city manager said:

If you and I are working on a project, it has to be win/win, or we just say we're not going to do it. So, we'll go through whatever mechanisms we need to do so that you honestly believe that you have won, and have, in fact, won—gotten something that's good for you. So, if we have actually, feel like

we've won, and we're happy with each other—we're willing to do a deal again in the future. Or, we just say, "Look, let's agree to disagree, and we won't do this thing."

This is a variation on the unconditionally constructive stance in which an organization unilaterally decides the best course of action and proceeds on that tact. In this case, there is no compromise, the organization decides ahead of time that both parties to the conflict will win or that one party will avoid or withdraw, and no resolution between the parties will occur. The one party unilaterally decides the negotiation tactic will be mutual cooperation. Otherwise, no resolution to the problem will occur.

Again, all seven of these tactics led to resolving problems in the environment with strategic stakeholders and helped public relations managers to participate as members of the dominant coalition for their organizations.

#### RQ4

All members of the dominant coalitions and the public relations managers who participated in the study thought the dominant coalition had a major effect on the practice of public relations in their organizations. The one possible exception was the dominant coalition representative for the spice company. She said that the overall culture of the company was the deciding factor. Yet, the culture had been established by a CEO as early as 1932.

It was the opinion of one public relations manager at United Defense that business knowledge and expertise in the field were the keys to admittance to the dominant coalition. Yet, the director of communications at the same company, who was established as a partial member of the dominant coalition, said it would take the CEO/President to include him before he would be a full member. Although the public relations manager was considered part of dominant coalition at Oracle Corporation, the interviewees made a distinction that, even in that position, it is still up to the dominant coalition for acceptance. Deloitte & Touche reiterated that view, that after all else is considered, it was the CEO's personal belief that directors should be part of the dominant coalition that allowed the public relations manager to be there. Both Oracle Corporation and Deloitte & Touche emphasized the role personalities played in entrance to the dominant coalition. These firms argued that a person must demonstrate personal compatibility and interpersonal skills with other members of the dominant coalition, which relates back to the pattern of education and expertise.

Although there was a pattern of definite influence by the dominant coalition, power control was not necessarily personal or asymmetrical. Several dominant coalition participants said that most CEOs who set the agenda do so for professional goals rather than personal ones. The member of the dominant coalition from the

experiment station said: "It is not personality-driven. The CEO wants to see the program thrive and be recognized. He doesn't do it for the money or the title. He does it for fulfillment and to do a good job." Note the use of the term *fulfillment*. Although the dominant coalition made a case for professional goals, it is difficult to separate them from personal goals.

Other dominant coalition participants returned to the pattern of unconditionally constructive in describing their approach of "doing a good job for the public good," which led to the term *benignly asymmetrical*. The trend among dominant coalition participants was to approach problems in a symmetrical manner even if they had to accomplish that goal asymmetrically. The asymmetrical model implies manipulating its strategic publics for the good of the organization. Benignly asymmetrical is an unconditionally constructive stance in which the organization may be manipulating its strategic publics, but it is for the good of the relationship.

The public relations managers were concerned more with the long-term level of trust with the dominant coalition than with the model of public relations practice. Even those public relations managers who preferred two-way symmetrical communication said that, if the dominant coalition wanted asymmetrical public relations, it would get that type of public relations. In one instance of dominant coalition influence, the practice of public relations in the cosmetics firm was still driven by the former president of the company. He favored two-way communication.

## CONCLUSIONS

How did these findings then support or fail to support the RQs determined by the current state of the fields of public relations and conflict resolution? How should these RQs be altered or changed? What really emerged from the patterns in this study?

The four major patterns found in this study of 14 organizations revolved around the models of public relations and the dominant coalition. From the perspective of both the dominant coalition and public relations, mixed motive public relations applies. First, they used all five of the negotiation tactics plus what Fisher and Brown (1988) termed *unconditionally constructive* and what Covey (1989) called *win/win* or *no deal*. Second, the knowledge, experience, and expertise gained from practicing mixed motive public relations enabled public relations managers to solve problems. Finally, despite all this expertise and ability, it remained up to the dominant coalition to give power to public relations and allow it into the coalition.

### Implications for Current Practice and Theory

These findings affected the practical and theoretical confluence of the two-way models and negotiation tactics as well as the power-control theory as it relates to membership by public relations in the dominant coalition.

*Two-way models and conflict resolution tactics.* Analysis of this study revealed that two-way communication and negotiation tactics are inextricably intertwined and leads to the following conclusion:

Public relations will become a part of the dominant coalition if it has knowledge and experience in the mixed motives of the two-way model of public relations to include the negotiation processes of contention, avoidance, compromise, accommodation, cooperation, unconditionally constructive, and win/win or no deal.

At any time informal or formal research is conducted to determine overt positions and underlying interests of strategic publics that have an effect on an organization, communication tactics are required for the organization to deal with those publics. In this study, I have shown that conflict resolution tactics are an integral part of those communication strategies. Ehling (1987a) described such activities to be in the public relations jurisdiction if they entailed the strategic means and ends of public relations. Strategic means entail communication and conflict resolution strategies. The "strategic end-state of public relations management is to achieve a non-conflict state via the means of a well-designed communication system" (p. 29). The mixed motives result at the strategic level seems to satisfy Ehling's requirement for "selecting courses of action which will allow an organization to survive, grow and prosper in some way over a long period of time" (Ehling, 1987b, p. 7).

*Mixed motives.* As Dozier et al. (1995) stated, the combination of asymmetrical and symmetrical tactics seemed paradoxical when examining their two extremes superficially. Dozier et al. explained the dilemma by subordinating asymmetrical to symmetrical practices. Short-term tactical advantages may be gained through two-way asymmetrical practices between parties in a mixed motive game. Yet, for long-term integrity of the game and for parties to maintain continuous relationships over the long-term, cooperative tactics should be employed to maintain the integrity of binding joint agreements that both sides believe the other will respect.

The long-term relationship revealed in this study was the trust developed between the dominant coalition and the public relations manager to allow the public relations manager to solve problems for the organization. This long-term relationship was a part of the judgment and trust condition that allowed a public relations manager to become part of the dominant coalition. The solution of problems ranged from the asymmetrical to the symmetrical in a mixed motive pattern. One was not subordinate to the other but, rather, combined elements of both in concurrent usage. As the director of corporate communications said for the holding company in this study: "Wire both ends against the middle." When considering the organization's

best interests, one should contend if the organization can win but cooperate at the same time to solidify long-term relationships with strategic publics and hedge against negative consequences for the future. To contend may or may not be unconditionally constructive based on the long-term good for the relationship between parties. A specific question regarding this short-term versus long-term usage of negotiation tactics would be a useful direction for future studies.

In the Excellence Study (J. E. Grunig, 1992b), the public relations department's knowledge of two-way symmetrical practices ranked second to manager role expertise, and knowledge of two-way asymmetrical practice ranked third as indicators of communication excellence. Earlier, Murphy (1991) connected these second- and third-ranked factors and dubbed their coexistence as *mixed motives*, borrowing the term from game theory. In mixed motives, both parties can still pursue their own self-interests. Organizations and their strategic publics can be both selfish (or contending) and cooperative. This leads the parties to engage in problem solving to reconcile their overlapping interests (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). Raiffa (1982) and Dozier et al. (1995) used the term *cooperative antagonists*. Besides that, the parties are cooperative protagonists in the struggle to satisfy their own interests with the knowledge that satisfaction is best accomplished through satisfying each other's interests as well. The question is not one of mixed motives, in which short-term asymmetrical tactics are combined with long-term symmetrical tactics as advocated by Dozier et al., but rather one of discovering the priority level of importance for the common interests of the strategic parties.

### The Dominant Coalition

In the final analysis, membership in the dominant coalition encompassed all the RQs but especially the following:

1. *Public relations influence on dominant coalition*: Solving problems—the ability to handle critical contingencies and strategic publics for the dominant coalition, plus experience in business, knowledge and experience in the field, and sound judgment.
2. *Dominant coalition influence on public relations*: Top management has a major effect on the practice of public relations. For this study, the effect, for the most part, was symmetrical. The attitude of the dominant coalition was not necessarily personal or asymmetrical and included elements of being unconditionally constructive.

The strongest pattern, then, of the four presented in the Results section was the influence of the dominant coalition on the way public relations was practiced in the organizations that participated in this study. The most diverse responses came from

the issue of membership in the dominant coalition. The pattern that emerged about that membership was that it depended on the experience of the public relations managers and their ability to solve problems for the organization. In addition, the evidence in this study showed that public relations is practiced ultimately in accordance with the preferences of the dominant coalition. Those preferences are neither personal nor asymmetrical. Part of the practice of public relations is explained by an organization's structure, environment, or models of public relations practice (J. E. Grunig, 1989a; L. A. Grunig, 1990). In this study, I found the claims of the power-control theory (L. A. Grunig, 1992b) to be true but only in the positive sense. Distilling these patterns further could lead to the following statement:

The dominant coalition directly affects the practice of public relations in a two-way, mixed motive manner.

Any long-term relationship, whether it be between a public relations manager and the dominant coalition, or between an organization and its strategic publics, depends mostly on activity that is reciprocally positive for its survival. In this study, I have shown that short-term, two-way asymmetrical or contending tactics can have a place in a long-term relationship. Those activities, however, are outweighed by longer term, two-way symmetrical tactics that can include avoidance, accommodation, compromise, cooperation, unconditionally constructive, and win/win or no deal.

### Recommendations for Further Research

A number of questions arose from these conclusions that deserve further investigation. Are short-term asymmetrical communication practices subordinate to long-term symmetrical practices, as Dozier et al. (1995) suggested, or should those communication practices be considered separately from tactics or interests? Can short-term and long-term public relations be contradictory and complementary at the same time? Should solutions to problems be considered sequentially, or should they be considered concurrently in mixed motive relationships, as this study might suggest? Are there other options to the mixed motive model of public relations? If the other side will not agree, regardless of any other options, what about dealing beyond unconditionally constructive or win/win or no deal?

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