Part IV

Domains of Practice
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Institutionalization in Public Relations

Another Step in Examining its Place in Strategic Communication

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No matter how much they champion innovation, greater competitive advantage, or enhanced services, virtually all organizations must also harbor enduring values and practices. Typically, these fundamentals are developed through persistent trial and error coupled with ongoing theoretical assessment from the best and, in some cases, failed practices within a given industry or field. Many domains (accounting, business management, economics, law, the political sciences, etc.), have accumulated a body of knowledge that guides entire entities or specific functions within those entities in their efforts to achieve maximum effectiveness.

In organizational literature, a state or environment where widely accepted fundamentals of an industry endure even in the midst of change is best characterized as institutionalization. Institutionalization is defined as the process of infusing ‘rule-like’ values and procedures into an organization and sustaining them over time, regardless of circumstances or of the individual personalities and philosophies of the entity’s main leaders (Zucker, 1977). In institutionalizing their processes and patterns, organizations are able to establish ongoing legitimacy for themselves in the various contexts in which they function (Suchman, 1995). Some critics argue that institutionalization makes organizations too rigid and resistant to necessary change (Oliver, 1992), but others counter that institutionalization need not preclude adaptability. Rather, the enduring fundamentals of institutionalization offer the very stability that organizations need to persist despite the inevitable changes and adaptations they must deal with in their daily activities and encounters (Selznick, 1957; Scott, 1987).

With institutionalization being a debated yet vital aspect of organizational theory, a natural corollary to that debate addresses the field of strategic communication or public relations—its role, if any, in fostering organizational institutionalization, and whether or not strategic communication should itself be institutionalized. This question is relevant to theory building because public relations is often seen as the main organizational function that anticipates and guides strategic change. Yi (2005) argued that strategic public relations can help organizations recognize relationships in the environment and continually facilitate changes in those relationships (Yi, 2005). It may be asked how public relations can do this if it becomes institutionalized and then, as some suggest, more resistant to change (Oliver, 1992).

The concept of institutionalization should also be important to strategic communication because it can help legitimize the function in organizations and society. Understanding this, scholars and veteran practitioners are always attempting to establish a body of knowledge about the fundamental principles needed to effectively practice public relations and to make it valuable to the organizations it serves. Yet, James E. Grunig (2006) said, “a major task remains . . . in institutionalizing strategic
public relations as actual practice in most organizations” (p. 171). His assumption was that public
relations efforts too often depend not on enduring standards or principles of effectiveness but on the
philosophies of senior organizational executives or public relations managers who are in charge at
any given time. Frequently, when one regime leaves an entity and is replaced by another, within a
short time the public relations program looks entirely different to how it looked before the transi-
tion. Sometimes these changes create needed improvements but more often than not they simply
reflect the whims of a given group of managers.

In his challenge to institutionalize public relations, J. E. Grunig (2006) argued that most public
relations practices today center around tactical support processes instead of strategic implementa-
tion of values that genuinely assist the ongoing legitimacy of the organization. He cited research by Yi
(2005), which indicated that whatever institutionalization of public relations may exist, it centers on
buffering organizations against outside pressures rather than on the more essential bridging or linkage
activities that, in the long run, help organizations adapt better to change and, as a result, make them
more successful in their missions.

This chapter represents a qualitative multiple-case study of institutionalization in several organiza-
tions that have experienced a turnover of public relations executives or top management. A study
was conducted that determined whether the public relations programs remained intact or changed
significantly as a result of the transition—and, if changes occurred, why? The study observed whether
changes that took place were positive or harmful, or made little difference. This chapter also assesses
whether these cases suggest that strategic public relations should be more enduring in organizations
regardless of who may be supervising the program.

Theoretical Basis for Institutionalization

Institutionalization offers the perpetuation of basic values, norms, and processes that are widely
accepted or prescribed within a given domain or societal context. Meyer and Rowan (1977) proposed
that institutionalization is the construct “by which social processes, obligations, or actualities come
to take on a rule-like status in social thought and action” (p. 341), partly because these, processed,
are passed down from generation to generation (Sandhu, 2009). Scott (1987) explained further
that through institutionalization, “individuals come to accept a shared definition of social reality—a
conception whose validity is seen as independent of the actor’s own views or actions but . . . as
defining the ‘way things are’ and/or the ‘way things are to be done” (p. 496). Yi (2005) said:
“Institutionalists argue that within an organizational field, there would be a dominant form or
practices that are taken for granted” (p. 8).

Strategic Communication

Institutionalization is a form of and could be considered subordinate to strategic communication.
Argenti, Howell and Beck in 2005 defined strategic communication “as communication aligned
with the company’s overall strategy, to enhance its strategic positioning.”

The term strategic in a military sense is usually referring to the highest levels of command and to
large, far-reaching military campaigns (Harvard Business Essentials, 2003). Ideally, it would occur at
the highest or leadership levels of an organization and be carried out at the lowest or tactical levels.
It educates and informs publics; but the most effective strategic communication changes behavior.
Strategic communication sets measureable communication goals and considers the long-term effects
on key publics or strategic stakeholders while constantly scanning the organizational environment for
issues that might affect the organization (J. E. Grunig & White, 1992).

In the seminal article on strategic communication in the inaugural issue of the International Journal
of Strategic Communication, Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verčič, and Sriramesh (2007) covered
the origins of strategic communication from a number of fields. Strategic communication as defined by these authors fits more under changing behavior and psychological operations in the military. They addressed the term *strategic* as well, citing its origins as coming from warfare, the art of war. The authors also focus on the term *communication* and the process of communication that is the key ingredient for this study. The authors define communication “as the constitutive activity of management” (p. 27). Under the article’s section on management they write of the focus on rational decision-making using the SWOT Analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) as part of the process of goal setting, strategy formulation and implementation, and evaluation (Porter, 1985). They later cite Mintzberg (1990) about environmental scanning of stakeholders, issues management and the integration of the communications functions. In 1994 Mintzberg defined strategy as a plan for a future course of an action and broadened that definition to include strategy as a pattern, consistency in behavior over time. This consistency is usually a combination of deliberate and emergent strategies. Deliberate strategies are realized or fulfilled whereas emergent strategies are realized but not expressly intended. These emergent strategies include the influence of stakeholders incorporating the concept of relationships from Botan, 2006; Hallahan et al., 2007; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Ledingham & Bruning, 2000).

**Leadership**

Admiral James G. Stavridis of the U.S. Navy spoke about strategic communication in the following terms:

> Effective communication requires leaders of an organization to take an early and persistent role in deciding how ideas and decisions are shaped and delivered. Certainly in the national security context, a leader can improve the effects of operational and policies planning by ensuring communications implications of that planning are considered as early as possible in the process. If planning is done in that fashion, then it is likely that the communications associated with it will indeed be strategic in its effects.

*Stavridis 2007, p. 4*

This quote adds further to the planning and leadership aspects of strategic communication as well as negotiating how these ideas are shaped and delivered. Argenti, Howell and Beck (2005) and Plowman (1995, 1998), as well as many others in the field of public relations, have argued for public relations having a seat at the management decision table so that the ideas discussed above have a better chance to make it in final strategic communication plans.

Leadership plays a vital role in institutionalization. “The key tasks of leaders,” Fleck (2007) explained, “include the definition of institutional mission and role; the institutional embodiment of purpose; the defense of institutional integrity; and the ordering of internal conflict. It is up to leadership not only to create but to preserve values” (p. 68).

Of course, all creations eventually decay or get demolished. In human–built systems, some changes come through simple evolution: individual entities, communities, or societies arise anew, gradually institutionalize, and then reassess, adapt, change, or even disappear (Fleck, 2007). Other changes are purposefully imposed by societal mandate or individual whim. Oliver (1992) referred to these change processes as *deinstitutionalization*. Deinstitutionalization is seen as a theoretical opposition to institutionalization—the needs and desires for change instead of the push for stability.

Oliver (1992) noted several conditions that would render organizations and industries susceptible to deinstitutionalization. Just a few of these conditions are organizational crises, pressures from important internal or external constituents, loss of competitive advantage, and alterations in the...
social, political, or economic environment in which the entity operates. Whatever the impetus for organizational change, it can come suddenly and dramatically, imposed by people or forces seeking to overthrow entrenched traditions and norms, or through prolonged neglect and atrophy.

If change amidst stability seems contradictory, scholars have explained how it is possible. Selznick (1957) perceived that organizations can be adaptive if they are institutionalized around values rather than technical processes. “To institutionalize,” he explained, “is to infuse with value beyond the technical requirements of the task at hand” (p. 17). Scott (1987) added that with bureaucratized technical processes, adaptation is difficult; but if stability stems from enduring values and culture instead of the imposition of processes, adaptation is possible.

The chapter to this point has looked at institutionalization as a principle of leadership and a necessary requirement for stability and legitimacy. This is coupled with an ability to adapt to needed changes through shared value systems. Institutionalization can be sustained in organizations, industries, and entire societies. Stability is not inherently a static phenomenon, however; various factors within and outside the entity or industry can lead to desired and even necessary changes. Therefore, a critical decision point for leaders in the institutionalization process is to wisely strike the proper balance between stability and change (Selznick, 1996).

From here, this chapter will explore how these observations affect strategic communication. As mentioned above, institutionalization is important for establishing legitimacy for a given industry. As Scott (1987) said, a given industry is rewarded with greater legitimacy when it is institutionalized because people outside that industry can then clearly understand its core principles and functions as well as its inherent value to the greater society in which it operates.

Perhaps surprisingly for a field that has existed for a long time, “very little attention has been paid to institutionalization as a relevant . . . perspective for public relations” (Jensen, 2009, p. 113). Scholars and practitioners have only recently advocated the need to institutionalize the field. For example, J. E. Grunig (2007) said, “the practice of public relations is in dire need of conceptualization . . . about what public relations is, what its value is to organizations and society, and what its core values should be” (p. 1). Given this concern, he advocated for “institutionalizing strategic public relations” (J. E. Grunig, 2006, p. 171). Arnold (1995), Hutton (2001), and Macnamara (2006) are among the many more who have argued for institutionalization of the industry. Nielsen (2006) observed: “The standing and reputation of our own profession could benefit from a coming together around a shared set of values that speak about what we believe our responsibilities are and what we hold as important about what we do” (p. 1).

To a limited extent, encouragements toward more institutionalization are starting to be answered. In 2008, the annual conference of the European Public Relations Education and Research Association (EUPRERA) emphasized the subject, but only a handful of the papers actually addressed it. A special issue of the International Journal of Strategic Communication in 2009 also focused on the subject. The introduction to that issue cited as one of the first discussions on the topic an earlier version of this study presented by Wakefield (2008) at the International Public Relations Research Conference in Miami (Zerfass, 2009).

Several scholars have reflected the concept proposed by Scott (1987), that institutionalization would make public relations more legitimate if centered on overall strategic communication values instead of technical processes. Macnamara (2006), however, contended that if any institutionalization had occurred it was in the wrong direction, emphasizing the tactical over the strategic. He said, “public relations [has] continued down its practical path . . . based on outdated assumptions about the effects of communication” (p. 6). This path, he added, begins in university curriculum, where students learn “how to write news releases, brochures, advertisements and scripts, work with producers and designers to arrange events—but with little or no understanding of what effects if any their work might produce within the groups that they target” (p. 9). Others, like J. E. Grunig (2006) and Falconi (2006) have agreed that the persistent focus on tactics and techniques instead
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of strategic principles robs the field of respect. This focus hardly seems to be rectified by the more recent obsession towards creating blogs, tweets, and viral videos.

When the institutionalization of strategic values of environmental scanning, issues anticipation, relationship building and reputation management is encouraged, as opposed to technical functions like publicity or marketing support (J. E. Grunig, 2007; Macnamara, 2006), public relations can then accomplish what it was intended to do. It can help entities maintain enduring stability and legitimacy within their respective environments. But to enact these strategic processes, the industry itself must have its own enduring legitimacy.

So, if the institutionalization of strategic public relations placed highly within the entity helps to build legitimacy for the field, then it seems it would be valuable to determine to what extent public relations may be institutionalized around these fundamental values and principles. This chapter has investigated the relationship of leadership, adaptation, change and legitimacy in the institutionalization of public relations in organizations. The idea was to determine to what extent institutionalization is occurring; and, if so, whether it is at the strategic or tactical level. If the study were to indicate that institutionalization of strategic public relations is occurring in organizations, then it could be possible that the field itself may be institutionalizing and thus gaining legitimacy. If, however, institutionalization is occurring at the tactical level, then Scott’s (1987) characterizations could hold true—that this would make the field unable to help entities respond to changes in their environment. A cross-case analysis of common themes seemed the next step in this research. Specific questions to be investigated included:

1. To what extent is public relations an institutionalized function in entities that practice strategic communication?
2. What factors (leadership) foster institutionalization or deinstitutionalization of public relations in a given entity?
3. If practitioners can best serve as change agents in an entity, how does institutionalization occur without losing the ability to foster change?
4. If strategic communication is institutionalizing in entities, does it stand to reason that the field is gaining legitimacy? Why would that be the case, or why not?

**Method for the Study**

According to Yin (2009), a case study design should be considered when the focus of the study is to answer “how” and “why” questions and when behavior of those involved in the study (in this case organizational leaders) cannot be manipulated. A multiple case study (or collective: Stake, 1995) enables the researcher to explore differences within and between cases. The goal is to replicate and compare findings across cases. Such a design has advantages and disadvantages, and generally control for bias through a triangulation of sources of data and comparisons by researchers is requisite. Overall, the evidence created from a multiple-case study is considered robust and reliable (Baxter & Jack, 2008). However, this particular study was exploratory in nature—the intent was to examine a few organizations to determine whether there might be any factors that contribute to the potential for institutionalization in organizational public relations.

**Data Sources and Analysis**

One key strength of case study research is the use of triangulation through multiple data sources, a strategy which also enhances data credibility (Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 1991; Yin, 2009). For this study, five of Yin’s (2009) six sources of evidence were used: interviews, physical artifacts, documentation, direct observation, and participant-observation. This data was converged in the individual cases
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and then the strongest common themes across the cases were coded for in the multiple cases. This convergence adds strength to the findings but there are weaknesses involved. One is that the findings are not generalizable to a population (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin 2009), but they are generalizable to theory with the strength being that they can be replicated across cases. Another weakness is the enormous amounts of data that require management and analysis. This was the situation in this study because it involved six cases.

Yin (2009) described a number of techniques for analysis. The ones chosen for this study were pattern matching, linking the guiding research questions, and cross-case synthesis. For this study, six entities were analyzed. Selection of these entities was purposeful—partly because we as researchers had access to them—but we also intended to examine organizations that were quite different in terms of size, structure, and industry or service. The study included six organizations: two transnational corporations, a small university, a political office, and two military units. The first four of these entities were headquartered in the United States (with those various locations stretching from the east coast to the west coast), but each of them also had significant operations or reach outside the United States. The two military units were based in the Middle East. The first corporation was a major Fortune 500 firm with hundreds of public relations practitioners around the world (Entity A); and the second was a mid-sized corporation (annual turnover of about $1 billion per year) that operated in consumer products industries (Entity B). The university was a private, not-for-profit educational institution (Entity C), and the political office was that of a governor of one of the states in the USA, with a communications staff of more than a dozen people (Entity D). The two military entities included multinational force units in Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom encompassing almost 160,000 personnel and over 200 public affairs-related officers (Entities E and F).

Data for the study were gathered through extensive emails and personal telephone or face-to-face interviews, ranging from 40 minutes to one hour, with current and former heads of public relations or related functions in each of these entities. In some cases, interviews were conducted with other public relations personnel who supervised specific aspects of public relations. The authors of this chapter also examined related or relevant internal emails, organizational and industry newsletters, communication plans, PowerPoint presentations, organizational charts, and other documents. Direct or participant observation was also incorporated into four of the organizations.

Results

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, this study was considered to be an introductory exploration into the possibility of institutionalization in public relations—both as a function within organizations and as an industry. Nevertheless, it was possible to show some patterns related to the theory of institutionalization. The results are organized by entity with the characteristics and factors mentioned previously: leadership in the organization or the public relations function; organizational adaptation to change; and legitimacy of the public relations function within each organization described. Table 23.1 below shows the transition from method to results that specifically addresses change, organizational response and evidence of institutionalization—to what degree it is strategic or tactical.

Entity A. The main analysis of Entity A, the Fortune 500 firm, came from a 50-minute interview with a senior public relations executive who has worked in this particular entity for several years. We also spoke with another public relations staff member in the organization and examined newsletters and other documents that are widely used within the industry. More than 400 employees serve in various areas of public relations in this corporation, and the firm has an overall communications budget that can approach $200 million.
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About two years ago, the senior public relations executive left the firm, thus necessitating a change in leadership. Yet, with the change, according to the interviewee, basic missions, strategies, and activities remained intact. The reporting system also did not change, as the senior public relations executive continued to report directly to the chief executive officer. The change in the organization, therefore, had no major impact. “I believe institutionalization is built into our company because we are in an industry that mandates effective outreach to our stakeholders,” the interviewee reported. “In our company, we have a long history of communication; it has always been given high priority, and it cannot be underestimated. It would be hard for someone to change it, because too much stake is put into it. A lot of people have a strong commitment to the traditions of our organization.” The interviewee described scenarios reflecting Zucker’s (1977) explanations that in highly

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<th>Table 23.1 Methods and Results Summary for Seven Organizations</th>
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<td>Organization type</td>
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<td>A: Transnational corporation—Midwest U.S.</td>
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<td>B: Transnational corporation—Mountain West U.S.</td>
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<td>C: University—West Coast</td>
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<td>D: Governor’s office—West United States</td>
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<td>E &amp; F: Multinational Forces—Iraq</td>
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institutionalized entities, it is difficult for outsiders to make changes. “We’ve had employees come in from different companies and try to change things. They resist our procedures, fight it, but sooner or later they conform,” the respondent said.

Despite the earlier claim that the industry demands highly responsive public relations and that the executive’s own company adapts to those demands, the interviewee did acknowledge that other firms in the industry have not been so institutionalized in their procedures. One firm, for example, has had considerable volatility over the past two or three decades, including different ownership. Under yet another new chief executive, the company restructured its highest levels and replaced a vice president of communications with a lower-level executive who would report to a human resources vice president.

But Entity A continues to operate its public relations in a manner consistent with Scott’s (1987) contention that organizations can adapt to their environment even when institutionalized, as long as the institutionalization has occurred at the strategic and cultural levels rather than at the tactical levels. For example, the organization was among the first major companies to create and build a unit focused specifically on communicating and building relationships through social networking. “We spend a lot of money on social networking and on working with activists and non-governmental organizations,” said the respondent. “We identify major cities or areas, we even communicate with people who are highly critical of us, and we bring them to our headquarters and show them what is going on there in the company. We don’t give up on people very quickly; we feel there is nobody’s mind we cannot change if given the opportunity, or at least we can convert people to a mutually neutral situation.”

The respondent for Entity A expressed strong belief in the processes of institutionalization. The executive stated that public relations must show its value to the entity at the highest levels, assisting with corporate reputation through sound relationship building and through accurate and honest communication of the entity’s products and services. In addition, the respondent realized the important role of public relations in creating change, in “transforming the organization to new heights. Organizations should be dynamic and open to their stakeholders,” the respondent explained. “Communications can be the tail that leads the dog. In our company, we have resolved a lot of issues, and we are in a position to be very competitive.”

In summary of Entity A, then, it appeared that the company has institutionalized its public relations programs regardless of who supervises the function. Perhaps size and company history influenced this institutionalization, as well as the philosophies and vision of those who had led both the organization and the public relations units. The industry’s need for responsiveness and adaptation to stakeholders was also described as a factor, but this was not supported by the mention of other companies in the industry that did not have records of institutionalization. Even with Entity A’s established traditions, it was apparent as well that the company and its public relations unit actively support and are engaged in changes and improvements to become even more responsive to stakeholders as society changes. It seems that the company’s public relations units have gained a great element of legitimacy among senior officers and other functions in the firm.

Such institutionalization did not occur with either Entity B or Entity C. In fact, quite the opposite took place. Both of these entities experienced leadership changes, but the first changed at the senior level of public relations and the second underwent a change in the entity’s senior executive. Nevertheless, in each case, changes in leadership drastically affected the public relations programs in the entity.

**Entity B.** The person interviewed for this mid-size transnational corporation started out as director of communications and then became vice president of corporate communication for about eight years. When hired, he replaced another vice president who had been brought into the firm specifically to help resolve a nationwide public relations crisis. The first executive had convinced senior leadership
that a long-term, strategic public relations approach was necessary not only to survive the crisis but to ensure that such a situation would not occur again. The interview respondent had carried on most of the programs initiated by the first vice president, despite fairly regular pressures by some in senior management to reduce public relations efforts “now that the crisis is passed and we don’t need all of this anymore.” When he was hired, the company’s public relations department had 15 employees; when he left, it had 100. “I took over the PR department in this corporation when it had been vacant for a year. And I felt there were things that needed to be done that hadn’t been done, and so it became a process then of making people aware and selling the idea of what we needed to do. And so the changes were pretty significant over the first year or so.”

For close to 13 years, the staff included a dozen employees dedicated to media and community relations, international communication, issues management, and other public relations functions. Another 30 to 40 employees, depending on the year, assisted these efforts with graphic design, photography, and visual production. These activities all continued as the organization expanded its product lines and geographic reach around the world, became a public company, and slowly improved its reputation in its home state, nationally, and internationally. Both vice presidents and other senior managers guided these efforts with the veteran leadership that reflected their decades of experience in the field. Whenever one employee would leave, another would be hired who was known and trusted by these vice presidents, and the culture of the public relations unit was maintained as one of experience, strategic thinking, and teamwork.

The interviewee stated that the company’s communications strategy was impacted “in part by values and in part by events. For example, if the company decided that it wanted to expand into overseas markets, then that drove what we did—although the way we did it was very much impacted by values.” However, the steps taken to carry out public relations strategies were in large measure dependent on who was in charge and on selling the ideas to the senior executives. “We made a concerted effort to put together a strategic plan to explain to the company why the company needed to do those things in order to achieve its desired results. . . . There was always a selling process going on.”

This need to “sell” the public relations department’s value, or to establish legitimacy of the function within senior management ranks, was something the interviewee touched on during the interview: “It was a never-ending education process. We had an ongoing effort to educate the people at the top of the business and to cut us in when they were contemplating major changes.” During the interviewee’s time with the company, this ‘selling’ process was effective in that it gave him and his department the latitude to make many of the company’s communications decisions. Those decisions were put into action by a written mission statement “that was a reflection of the business plan of the company. And so, it was basically an identification of what the PR department was going to do to help realize the results that they were seeking. But it took a lot of reminding because there was an inclination on the part of some senior executives not to see the PR organization as a player. And so it was a never-ending education process.” When senior executives bought into his ideas, they generally endured during his tenure. With his departure, however, came a swift demise of the changes that he had put into place, and much returned to the way it had been prior to his time with the company. Arguably, even, the state of public relations returned to how it was before this interviewee’s predecessor came in to save the company from a major public relations crisis—many of the needed strategic functions again became virtually non-existent. When asked if the communications efforts remained in place no matter who was in charge, the interviewee responded that it “depended on who was there. In my case, I took over the PR department, was elevated to a vice-president level, and the public relations department remained pretty strong players until about a year after I retired. At that time they just dismantled and changed things because they didn’t have anybody who was strongly pushing it anymore. And so, it went back to the way it originally was.”

In 2004, this company suffered a prolonged sales slump and decided to reduce its workforce. Several top managers, including the respondent to this study, were offered early retirement incentives.
The respondent and several other long-term public relations employees accepted the retirement package or were simply laid off. As a result, the staff which had once numbered more than 50 was reduced to less than 20. Of those who remained, none had experience in or inclination toward long-term relationship-building strategies. The leadership over the broad area of “public relations” was reduced to the media relations specialist, a former graphic design manager, and a person who had been the chief executive’s special projects manager.

So, why did the institutionalization process fall apart in this case? Most likely, the respondent surmised, it was because many in the senior managerial positions outside of public relations never fully supported the department’s creation in the first place. They assumed that once the original crisis had passed, the entity would no longer need costly strategic communication efforts. As the years went by and no other major crisis occurred, this confirmed the idea in their minds that public relations was no longer needed. Senior managers seemed to believe that the company was naturally satisfying stakeholder expectations and that no continual adaptation to stakeholders was worth expenditures for a strategic public relations program.

As the respondent explained, “At the beginning the concept and practice of building bridges with our stakeholders was not encouraged by upper management, supposedly because of their lack of understanding of the responsibilities and value of corporate communication experts. But the CEO realized the value of the function in helping a much-needed effort to improve the company’s reputation, so the function survived for many years. Ultimately, when the CEO kind of stepped away from daily management of the company, his influence over managerial decisions waned and other influential managers were finally able to get their way. And getting their way included getting rid of most of the public relations function.”

**Entity C.**  One of the people interviewed for this small, private university had worked there for more than 15 years, serving mostly as a director of alumni relations. The respondent had seen the evolution of public relations from virtually nothing to a full-scale program that included a new identity movement; hosting of dignitaries and other special guests; media, community, government, and alumni relations; special events management; international outreach; creation, supervision, and production of print communication collateral materials, including a biennial magazine; and visual production of a variety of communication messages. These tasks were led by a vice president over development, a director of communications who joined the university in 2001 as the first-ever to serve in such a position, and a director of alumni relations, with support from photographers, graphic designers and visual production supervisors. This made up a total staff of up to 20 individuals. The staff had strong support from the entity’s president and most of the vice presidents. As another public relations staff member said, “We had great freedom to be innovative and to accomplish the tasks we felt were needed to improve our relationships and to build awareness and understanding among constituents.”

In 2007, after serving for more than 13 years, the president of the institution retired. The board of trustees replaced him with a president brought in from another state, and arguably from a considerably different cultural and philosophical background (he had been an accounting professor at a university in the eastern United States). The new leader, according to the respondent to this study, possessed managerial values that differed vastly from those the long-standing organizational culture was accustomed to, and the leader also carried a mandate from the entity’s board to significantly streamline costs and personnel. This new approach apparently sent shock waves throughout the organization, and changes were made rapidly over the next year or two.

Among the changes was a wholesale reordering of the vice presidents of the institution. The vice president of development retired right after the new president arrived, and the director of communications left the university shortly before the presidency changed. The remaining communication functions were restructured under an executive who had served as the previous president’s administrative assistant. The respondent said that this person had no real communication background but
was asked to supervise a new director of communication who had more than 30 years of experience in the field—mostly in broadcast production. Therefore, visual production remained in this unit, as well as graphic design—however, the strategic oversight of the communications area largely went away when the new president arrived. Graphic design was drastically reduced (the full-color biennial magazine reaching out to important alumni, for example, ceased production), and visual production was changed from an outreach tool to mostly a means for supporting distance learning programs. The alumni relations director was assigned to another position entirely, and the alumni relations role was given to a junior executive in the student services department.

In this case, the changes in public relations were implemented by the new president despite strong support for the function by the previous administration and throughout the organization and community. Many of these stakeholders lost considerable influence in the organization in the months after the new president arrived. The function which had evolved into a full-scale strategic unit became separated into new reporting roles and relationships and marginalized in the university, according to the interviewee. Many employees in the previous public relations unit either immediately or eventually left the university.

The first respondent reported that some of the broader organizational alterations were necessary—the previous administration had become entrenched in traditional thinking and the financial situation did need to be tightened. However, the respondent did state that the administration’s relationships, both inside the university and with the small local community, became worse because of the changes. “Obviously,” the respondent added, “I have to be careful about what I say, because I want to support the new president and be positive.” Judging from many of the decisions made by and under the new president, it is apparent that the president saw no value for public relations; therefore, there is a need all over again to establish legitimacy for the function in this university.

Entity D. This governor’s office serves a large and diverse population. An interview was conducted with a former chief deputy communications director and chief speechwriter who worked in the office for three years in the mid-2000s. Not only was he involved in and privy to the discussions surrounding major communications decisions, he also witnessed numerous transitions in communications, press, and other senior staff leadership. The interviewee indicated that the overarching communications goal in the office was to communicate the governor’s energy and agenda to the citizens of the state. This goal informed the communications decisions that were made, and although the tactics and strategies used to realize the goal changed at times, this change had less to do with the personalities inside the office than with circumstances outside the office. In other words, changes in communication strategy “would have happened even without a new communications chief and new chief of staff,” according to the interviewee.

According to the respondent, the personalities in charge did play an important role in how communications challenges were met on a day-to-day basis and on how goals were conveyed to others in the office. Decision making came from the governor and the senior communications executives: “the governor had ideas, of course, and goals—but the strategy for the most part was hatched by the very strong chief of staff and the communications director. The staff contributed ideas and were encouraged to weigh in, but for the most part it was a top-down approach. There was a tendency on the part of the chief of staff and communications director to keep information close to the vest so staff was sometimes left to . . . guess what the strategy was from day to day.”

Another issue that contributed to changes in communication tactics was that at certain times the governor’s office had a particular issue of focus (including getting re-elected) that required strategizing about the communications message. For example, senior staff “held regular and frequent meetings . . . when the re-election was paramount, and we were all clear on the objectives. When the urgency diminished in the natural course of political cycles, the strategy was not as clear and the meetings not as frequent.”
In defense of the changes to strategy and tactics, the respondent was clear that the nature of political work made adaptable communications efforts paramount to the success of the office and agenda. “The pace is so fast in an office like the governor’s and outside forces are examining and reacting to everything you do so quickly and so reflexively that you are constantly changing gears and reacting to what happens outside the office. You try, of course, to stick to your basic message but chaos rules much of the time and it’s easy to get knocked off track.”

When asked if communications strategy and programs endured despite who was leading the communications team, he said: “I think for the most part it endured. Obviously, there is a shift in emphasis and different levels of success when it comes to execution. But the overall strategy . . . stayed pretty constant.” Therefore, it seems that in this case the public relations function operated under some sense of legitimacy.

It should be noted that one of the authors of this paper was a participant observer and worked in this same governor’s office for more than five years as a member of the communications team, and his own experiences confirm those of the respondent. This author concludes that the enduring and overarching goals of the administration guided mostly tactical communications efforts that shifted with political trends that render adaptability as highly necessary. Most of the changes were generally well received by public relations staff members as long as they were consistent with the office’s long-term goals.

Entities E and F. The U.S. military is unique in that public relations is practiced as information operations, psychological operations, public affairs, civil affairs, and strategic communications. The difference among these terms is still evolving (Army Public Affairs Handbook, 2007). This state of flux affects how public affairs are practiced in the military. There is public affairs doctrine that calls for education of publics as in the public information model (J. E. Grunig & Hunt, 1984). There is also information operations and strategic communications doctrine that allows for influence and behavioral change (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2006; U.S. Department of Defense, 2010). That doctrine, however, is largely limited to international publics. So, the institutionalization structure is in place but is highly adaptable to the changing military operations at hand in Iraq and other military operations abroad. Public affairs operators have also had to act quickly to counter social media and Internet abilities by opposition forces, and therefore strategic communications plans are highly flexible according to the “situation on the ground” and how local military commanders want to address the various public affairs situations that arise.

Initially for Iraq, 100-page strategic communication plans were written but were not used because public affairs operations were reacting so quickly to changing circumstances. By policy (APAH, 2007), a Public Affairs Operations Center, or PAOC, was established in Iraq to handle public affairs for the entire theater of operations. That PAOC later evolved into an expanded media credentialing and news conference operation. News conferences were held twice a week in the Green Zone in Baghdad. Initially, just U.S and other multinational force commanders in Iraq (MNF-I) conducted those news conferences attended by international and Pan–Arab media. By 2008, this responsibility for the news conferences was split with Iraqi commanders.

The other organization that evolved under MNF-I was a division of communications under the Strategic Effects Command. That division developed four internal sections involved in public relations activities. Those included

- a communication section that acted as a liaison with public affairs officers in the government of Iraq for strategic planning, training, expansion of capacity message alignment, and performance support;
- a measurement and analysis section that developed quantitative and qualitative analysis of public affairs efforts and achievement of objectives; and
• a special forces section that planned and coordinated operations and intelligence activities as well as “declassified imagery requirements,” and that also oversaw the process of obtaining permissions for detainee photo releases.

The fourth and perhaps most important section was a media operations section that, among other duties, supervised Western, Pan-Arab and Iraqi media monitoring, responded to media inquiries, produced media releases, and developed and promulgated such documents as Public Affairs Guidance, Questions and Answers, talking points and fact sheets (Unclassified documents, Communication Division, 2008).

As can be seen, then, from a partial description of how these organizations operated in public affairs, it was highly institutionalized, but adapted for the situation at the time in those areas of operation. This was also the case in Operation Iraq Freedom, the name of the operation up until 2010 in Iraq. The communications division was organized in a manner unique to the operation but functional for the demands of the situation and the commander. Policy mandated the use of a public affairs operations center, but by 2005–2006 that had evolved into the communications division that continues today.

This description could be interpreted to mean that the institutionalization of public affairs was adapted from normal policy in a large bureaucracy that was strategic in focus but nevertheless answered the needs of the current tactical situation. Although the changing bureaucracy was large and cumbersome, as might be expected, it matched the various levels of command in Iraq at the time and therefore was not as rigid as might be expected. Organizational change moves slowly in such a bureaucracy but it was adapted relatively quickly given the very real threat from enemy forces.

Another factor that affected institutionalization was the relative rapid rate of change of personnel in the operation. Most personnel at all levels of command were on tours in the country for an average of one year, and at staggered intervals. So although there was usually an overlap of personnel to ensure institutionalization, the situation on the ground was constantly evolving. New commanders always had new ideas about how to proceed, and then there were the ideas and skills of those personnel changing at the operational and tactical levels. These skill sets or instances of expertise deteriorated somewhat as rotations of personnel increased as fewer fully trained personnel were able to be deployed. There were limits on the number of tours personnel could do and the continuing operational tempo began to deplete the pool of trained personnel available.

Conclusions and Perspectives

At this point, then, what do we know about institutionalization in public relations, based on these cases and related discussions in the literature? Institutionalization certainly suggests that there should be some common inception of basic principles and procedures wherever a given function is practiced and regardless of who may be in charge of the given organizational units. For example, it can be argued that the legal and accounting professions have institutionalized to the point that when attorneys or accountants enter any organization where their function is practiced, they likely would recognize a certain stability surrounding the basic principles, standards, and even regulations comprising the function, no matter whose name was attached to the function’s directorship or to senior management of the organization. The first research question in this chapter asked to what extent is public relations institutionalized within organizations? Does it share the same status as some of these other professions? A look at the cases examined in this chapter suggests that public relations does not share this same status and is not close to the same level of institutionalization as the professions with which its practitioners interact in given organizations.

The observation of Entity A indicates that institutionalization can occur around a strategic mission and an ongoing commitment to open, honest relationship building. It also shows that institutionalization need not preclude the ability to adjust to changing needs and mandates of stakeholders. In fact, if the recent creation of the social media unit within Entity A serves as an indicator, institutionalized
strategic public relations programs can actually adapt rapidly and be strong innovators in the communication arena without losing the fundamental values of relationship building and open communication inherent to the practice.

By contrast, Entities B and C, as well as the industry competitor mentioned by the Entity A respondent, indicate that attempts to institutionalize public relations still seem to be subject to the whims, value systems and overall understanding of public relations by organizational leaders in too many organizations. Even many years of solid public relations programs can be overturned in a short period of time, and often by leaders who hold power in the organization but who understand little about the practice or fundamental purposes of public relations. With these capricious reductions of staff or elimination of vital programs, organizations are again rendered vulnerable to future public relations problems and perhaps even major crises. Regrettably, as has too often been the case over the years, senior executives do not realize or even seem to care about the liabilities created in their own entities when public relations programs are deinstitutionalized.

Entity D seems to mirror the direction of both Entity A and Entities B and C. It was similar to Entity A in that imperatives of the stakeholder environment dictated to at least some extent the need for ongoing fundamental values and practices of public relations, regardless of the people directing each program. In both cases, long-term goals were in place to help the public relations program survive changes in personnel; yet, the political situation, like the adaptation of social media in Entity A, also influenced the ability to quickly determine changes in tactics. However, the respondent in the case of Entity D also recognized the inherent short-term nature within political public relations, noting that goals and strategies were much more focused before an election period than during other times. Related to this is the inevitability of electoral turnover, whereupon an entire office staff can then be changed in a matter of months.

Entities E and F represented extremely large organizations of the U.S. armed forces and other militaries around the world. In these entities, public relations is evolving at different rates. The inherent military culture tends to be so cumbersome that institutionalization is protected by sheer bureaucratic size, and inability to change rapidly. In an environment where stability and complete loyalty can be the difference between life and death, this rigidity can be a strength as well as a burden. Public relations in these entities retains continuity across cases as in Entity A, and because of the absolute requirement to adapt to oppositional activities in the Middle East, new policies are being written especially for counter-insurgency operations (U.S. Army/Marine Corps, 2007) that aggressively use strategic communication to discredit enemy propaganda and provide a more compelling alternative to the insurgencies.

So, results of this multiple-case analysis and other current investigations show support for institutionalization in certain cases. The second and third research questions in this chapter asked what factors would lead to institutionalization? For a start, it may be possible to correlate the institutionalization of the larger organization with the institutionalization of the public relations function. Larger organizations tend to be more bureaucratic, with more ingrained structure, policies, and traditions than the smaller organizations have had time to set up. In this study, the larger corporation has existed for a century, and most of the firms in its industry have certainly become highly stratified (as evidenced in this case by the 400 employees in the public relations function alone). Partly as a result of this, even when changes occurred in the public relations leadership there were few changes in the function. By contrast, the second corporation is much more entrepreneurial, and it had existed for less than 20 years when the public relations officer changed. Some of the company’s original leaders had never supported public relations, and so it was easy for them to use the change in the senior public relations officer as an excuse to disband the strategic aspects of the function in favor of continued publicity alone.

The environment in which the organization operates also seems to be a factor. For the military, it was extremely important for everyone to be on the same page, as it were, to maximize self-preservation of all soldiers. For the large firm, the tight competition and traditions of the industry helped foster continuity. The environment was also mentioned in the governor’s office, with
an electorate that carried expectations regardless of who was in office at a given time. In all of these cases, it seemed that strategic outcomes were seen as more important than any specific tactics. However, individual whims and philosophies of the organizational leaders still carried too much weight in most of the organizations studied.

The fourth and fifth questions proved much more difficult to answer. The public relations field may be growing in legitimacy because of the increasingly dynamic environment that affects organizations. And yet it seems that the field still has far to go before being permeated by institutionalization of values and standards. In smaller organizations, particularly those that are less affected by their environments and more affected by changes in leadership and personnel, institutionalization may be even less promising. The study also revealed little information regarding any correlation between institutionalization and the ability of public relations officers to serve as change agents within the organizations (and perhaps there may even be a reverse correlation—this study was not able to determine that either way).

Coombs and Holladay (2008) suggested that public relations literature often emphasizes the need for institutionalizing public relations as part of organizational management, helping to make key decisions for the organization. They believe that such efforts could be successful if they were linked to, for example, corporate social responsibility. Similarly, in a study on Chinese public relations, Chen (2009) noted that the debate on institutionalization typically hone in on two key issues: “first, the necessity to ‘legitimize’ the practice of public relations; and second, the importance of empowering PR practitioners to play strategic roles.” She then added:

Once incorporated into existing norms and values as well as recognized internally, the institutionalizing process will bring about certain advantages. These may include: first, an empowered position within organizations that enables PR people to play an important role in strategic decision-making process; second, skepticism on the “legitimacy” of PR practice can be minimized; third, PR people could avoid getting into a “tug of war” fighting for resources needed to get their jobs done; and fourth, public relations could be practiced in a more coherent and consistent way. With such coherence, public relations will become a generally accepted practice—a crucial step toward recognition as a profession, contributing to the effectiveness of organizational achievements (p. 188).

Sadly, and perhaps somewhat ironically, if any institutionalization of the function is occurring today—if perceptions of the field are coalescing—it may be towards tactical elements of the field, instead of around strategic processes. Steyn (2008), for example, argued that the technical aspects of public relations have become more or less institutionalized; the managerial aspects are only partly institutionalized and the strategic functions are not institutionalized at all. Chen (2009) added, “Though put in charge of making communication-related decisions, most PR people remain outside of ‘dominant coalitions,’ still having little chance to participate in strategic planning” (p. 188).

James E. Grunig (2011) put forward the same argument: “In the minds of most people, public relations has become institutionalized as a messaging activity whose purpose is to make organizations look good . . . rather than as a management activity that improves relationships among stakeholders” (p. 12). He then added, “Practitioners who follow [this] paradigm emphasize messages, publicity, media relations, and media effects,” as opposed to “the participation of public relations executives in strategic decision-making so that they can help manage the behavior of organizations” (p. 13). Of course, much more research needs to be conducted to fully understand the possibilities and effects of institutionalization of public relations. This particular study serves as an early view into how public relations is actually positioned in organizations in relation to leadership, adaptability, and institutionalization. It seems to be legitimate and institutionalized in some organizations and not institutionalized at all in other organizations. And yet, as an exploration, this study only really serves to more closely
examine the theory of institutionalization in public relations as well as the possibility of how it can be replicated for other similar cases. More case studies certainly are needed, with more specific questions and operationalization. Additional research methods should also be devised in order to provide more understanding of the process. Future research also could better delve into specifics about how organizations should be both institutionalized and adaptable at the same time. This study touched on the notion that these concepts are both important, but did not go into detail about how they interact. So, certainly there is much more room for qualitative and quantitative studies into these concepts.

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References


