

Chelsea Stern
Dr. Moon Lee
PRL 424
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Midterm Take-Home Essay Examination

Question 1:

On my search for my perfect “culture fit” in a workplace at the start of my career, the lessons I’ve held onto from PRL 424 have helped me shape what exactly this “culture fit” looks like. For Gen Z, especially, company values that align personal values help create a more positive, natural match. As brought up in a rapid-fire discussion, even Facebook’s Metaverse innovation has faced backlash because of its history of showcasing its corrupt, privacy-breaching value system.¹ Likewise, the people who uphold organizational values play a major role in the work atmosphere. Consequently, in my experience, I’ve tend to work best in an environment filled with 1) fulfilling, purposeful work and 2) constructive role models.

As we’ve discussed in lecture, leaders can possess certain traits and demonstrate particular behaviors that, in turn, impact the well-being of the organization at large. Personally, I find that my preferred work dynamic occurs when I’m supervised by a lower-level manager of a tall organization that takes both initiating-structure and consideration approaches. In a managerial role, an initiating-structure mindset helps clearly define expectations and formalize procedures whereas consideration for one’s subordinates helps express a supportive, friendly feeling to ensure the utmost comfort. As a result, the direct and warm characteristics balance each other even in terms of employee morale. While initiating-structure tends to lead to high performance and low satisfaction, consideration oppositely affects the company culture with high satisfaction and low performance.² PRL 424 helped me further understand my need for direct instruction and constructive criticism to learn in tandem with reinforcement and affirmation to keep up my motivation.

In my own experiences as an entry-level intern in the realm of public relations agencies, I often approached my work with a task-oriented leadership style. As previously mentioned, I work well with the directness and clarity of the initiating-structure approach from my managers. However, currently, in my student leader role as the Co-President of Women in Communications at Syracuse University, I find myself actively practicing the visionary style of leadership as I often start with big ambitions and blank slates. Admittedly, large-scale, long-term goals often come with their challenges, like struggling to delegate the hefty workload or missing small yet crucial details. However, I ultimately see my bold visions as a strength because my sense of responsibility and commitment to my work allows me to see the entire project through to the end—successfully. As I continue my leadership journey, I aspire most to implement charisma in

¹ The Associated Press. (2021, October 18). *Facebook plans to hire 10,000 in Europe to build a virtual reality-based 'metaverse'*. NPR. Retrieved November 3, 2021, from <https://www.npr.org/2021/10/18/1047033994/facebook-metaverse-10-000-workers-europe-virtual-reality>.

² Smudde, P.M. (2014). *Managing public relations: Methods and tools for achieving solid success*. New York: Oxford University Press.

my style to ensure that my interpersonal attraction to colleagues—regardless of their hierarchical level—inspires and influences both high satisfaction and performance in the workplace.

Question 3:

Hello, members of the Central New York Chapter of PRSA. Thank you for hosting me today. As a public relations student among a group of talented communications professionals, I can assure you we have at least one thing in common, maybe in our vocabulary. *Strategic*: it's a word we've all heard before. Let's be honest in how we define it; perhaps a communications buzzword that often loses its meaning to its overuse in descriptions of actions made for some unnamed or unknown purpose. Well, here's a hint about strategy's actual significance: why do you think Tylenol sales are currently surging even after numerous recalls over the years? Why do people seem to know the Nike slogan by heart? Why do so many Americans have a collective memory of posters advertising milk in our public schools? Let's talk strategic planning.

It starts with all of you who make up the team for strategic management. Your decisions and actions help sustain organizational advantage and determine the long-run organizational performance. No pressure. Seriously though, no pressure because with the right *strategic* steps, things will fall into place:

- Step 1: Environmental scanning, or what I like to call the research phase. This requires monitoring, analyzing and evaluating any pertinent information from your environments. Look around; insights can be found within, outside of and around your organization. Think about your internal structure, competitors, stakeholders, vendors and beyond, and identify all of the key people involved. Side note: it's best practice to use the term 'publics', as opposed to 'audience' to imply more active (not passive) engagement in organizational efforts.³
- Step 2: Strategy formulation, which is essentially the plan. Here you develop a long-range plan to manage those environments in terms of both positive opportunities and strengths as well as negative threats and weaknesses. Consider how everyone will be affected every step of the way. Define an organizational mission that speaks to the goals, objectives and strategies you want to achieve. To engage your publics and design an effective plan, identify those affected according to the specific, current state and goals of the organization.⁴ This mission serves as your north star; when in doubt, go back to it for direction.
- Step 3: Implement and execute. This is the time for your leadership to shine. Work according to plan and make adjustments where needed. Manage your resources wisely: human, financial, physical and information. Motivate your team to work in the

³ Wilson, L.J., Ogden, J.D., and Wilson, C. (2019). *Strategic communication planning for public relations, social media and marketing*, 7th Edition. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company

⁴ Ibid

organization's best interest. Remember: power isn't innate; it comes when people give you support and you give it back.⁵

- Step 4: Evaluate and control, or in other words, assess and fix what didn't work.

Clearly, not everything in communications is *strategic*, but every efficient, effective, successful plan follows some version of these steps to implement a well-thought-out strategy into organizational functions. Without strategy, public relations is just noise.

Question 4:

In this class, I've found that many of our baseline topics spiral into conversations about pressing modern issues that public relations leaders currently face. The open forum fostered within our classroom has allowed for conventionally taboo professional topics—from diversity issues in criminal cases to psychological methods for decision-making—to unravel, enriching our education about the implications and challenges surrounding communications.

For example, one of the early rapid-fire discussion presentations discussed the current event and social media phenomenon following the case of Gabby Petito. In addition to gathering the facts and key insights about how America hopped onto the collective search party for a missing person's case, our class begged the question: how does white privilege play a role in this news coverage? We held a meaningful discussion about the soaring numbers of missing and murdered indigenous women. We shed light on the truth of the matter being that if Gabby Petito were a woman of color, no one would be nearly as concerned. We used the lens of a public relations leader who asks "why". This lecture, in particular, stands out as one of my favorites to date because we, as a class, looked beyond the mere headlines and dug into the embedded social issues, which is a skill of mastery for a public relations leader.

Further, this class has opened me up to challenging what I already believe to be true. In the class reading, "8 Tough Questions to Ask About Your Company's Strategy," I found where public relations intersects with the expression of talking the talk and walking the walk. I realize that as a leader, it is easy to become blind to the outdated, insufficient functions of an organization's structure that have proved to be successful in the past as a result of hegemony. However, this article presents the hard-hitting questions that keep an organization—and its leaders—on top of how the mission is being both communicated and executed with consideration of everchanging conditions.⁶ I find this article particularly essential to organizational improvement because it applies the pressure to leaders to spark the curiosity for change and ignite company-wide motivation.

Lastly, as a communicator myself, stories resonate with me most. The TEDx Talk, "The Power of Decision-Making," applied storytelling to my fascination with psychology and indecisive nature. The presentation harped on the mental traps that we as humans and everyday decision-makers become victims of: stimulus overflow, perfectionism and permanent stress. I

⁵ TEDx Talks. (2012, April 10). *The rarest commodity is leadership without ego: Bob Davids at TEDxESCP*. YouTube. Retrieved November 3, 2021, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UQrPVmcgJJk>.

⁶ Leinwand, P., & Bäumlér, M. (2017). 8 Tough Questions to Ask About Your Company's Strategy. *Harvard Business Review*.

especially found the tactical approach to conquering the mental traps useful. In communications, decisions are rarely black and white; however, Ahlfeld breaks down successful decision-making into very concrete, procedural steps, much like an organized public relations campaign. Stimulus overflow can be appeased by narrowing down the selection to fewer options. Perfectionism can be mitigated by having confidence in just 80% of the necessary information to make a well-informed decision. And, permanent stress can be fixed by stepping out of your comfort zone.⁷

As an aspiring public relations leader, I plan to bear in mind three major takeaways from the aforementioned class materials: amplify oppressed voices, question hegemonic structures, become comfortable with the uncomfortable.

Question 5:

In terms of the PRL 424 course lectures this past semester, the lesson on emotional leadership, in particular, best reflects and applies to effective public relations management. Emotional leadership fits into the five dimensions of leadership beneath self-dynamics as a crucial component of bringing pathos into practice and emotion into enterprise. In particular, emotional leadership allows for empathy to permeate through organizational tasks and relationship-building efforts.⁸

Empathy is known to be a key emotional leadership trait, and it is often akin to the warm, accommodating nature of women in leadership roles. As a female student leader and aspiring public relations leader myself, I especially find both truthful and problematic elements in this construct of what an emotional leader looks like. On average, women innately possessing a more effective leadership soft skill offers hope for the future of female leadership. However, it is naive to think that empathy will not be mistaken for weakness and overshadowed by the well-respected assertiveness of typical male leadership styles.

Ultimately, however, emotional leadership serves organizations well with its strong ties with the demonstration of transformational leadership. Transformational leadership shifts the focus from the prosperity of the leader to the community in which the manager leads. A transactional leader goes above and beyond ordinary expectations by transmitting a sense of mission to stimulate learning and inspire new ways of thinking.

Subway CMO Carrie Walsh exemplifies a transformational leader who encourages continued education and welcomes organizational change. As of recent, Subway has taken leaps into the social and paid media spheres complete with witty user engagement and strategically selected celebrity advocates. Additionally, in light of the company-wide and the individually-challenging impact of the pandemic, Walsh prioritized the employees' safety and comfortability with a digitized platform for curbside pickup.⁹ However, these developments would not have

⁷ TEDx Talks. (2016, December 23). *The Power of Decision-Making | Benedikt Ahlfeld | TEDxGraz*. YouTube. Retrieved November 3, 2021, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=542qgGgL1s4>.

⁸ Jin, Y (2010, April 5) Emotional Leadership as a Key Dimension of Public Relations Leadership: A National Survey of Public Relations Leaders. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 22:2, 159-181, DOI: 10.1080/10627261003601622

⁹ Bradley, D. (2021, October 7). *Subway CMO Carrie Walsh unwraps the company's recent changes*. PR Week. Retrieved November 3, 2021, from <https://www.prweek.com/article/1727511/subway-cmo-carrie-walsh-unwraps-companys-recent-changes>.

made tractions if it were not for the employee-centric, mission-driven mindset and emotional, transformational leadership of Walsh.

“We leaned into some talent we think embodies this idea that in order to be fresh you have to refresh,” said Walsh.¹⁰ In the spirit of idealized influence, inspirational motivation, individual consideration and intellectual stimulation, leaders like Walsh put aside other objectives to focus on creating an optimal atmosphere for collaborating toward the greater organizational mission.

My own agency experiences, at MB and Associates Public Relations and M Booth Agency, both of which are owned by women and operated by a majority of women, followed transformational leadership styles. The trickle-down effect of the top leadership led to an open forum for personal connections and shared decision-making. Emotional leadership proliferated the company culture, inciting hope that this style of public relations leadership that shows statistical success and earns academic acclaim is applicable to my future career.

¹⁰ Ibid

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