The Symetric Model of Communication Re-Visited

Richard Dool, DMgt, Tim P. McMahon, PhD

College of Arts & Science, Seton Hall University, South Orange, NJ 07079
doolrich@shu.edu

Abstract

Traditionally in the Public Relations field there were four models of practice. The press agency model, the public information model, the two-way asymmetrical model and the two-way symmetrical model. This paper takes these approaches and argues that in today's environment the two-way symmetrical model should be revisited and deployed across organizations as a means to connect more effectively both internally and externally.

Introduction

Why communication really must be two-way and symmetrical?

"There is always someone who knows better than you
what you meant by your message"
- Osmo A. Wiio [1]

Nearly 30 years ago, public relations researchers Grunig and Hunt [2] offered four models of public relations practice to track the historical development of the field and to describe the different ways in which public relations is practiced. They are (a) press agency/publicity, (b) public information, (c) two-way asymmetrical and (d) two-way symmetrical. The first two models represent the roots of public relations when one-way communication was the norm. These two models are fundamentally concerned with messaging efforts aimed at capturing the attention and interest of groups of people, called publics, in order to persuade or influence them in a particular way of thinking. In this classic model, the PR professional "pitches" journalists who determine if the information is truthful and would be valued by their readers, listeners, or viewers. If so, they published it and the story reached the targeted audience or public.

At its highest level of practice, the father of public relations, Edward Bernays [3] made effective use of this practice to solve client problems like quelling damaging public rumors.

Megaphones and Headphones

Many years have passed since Bernays introduced these effective one-way practices of shaping, or crystallizing as he called it, public opinion. His techniques were highly effective so he had many followers. No doubt, *megaphones*—one-way messages—can be highly effective.

What about feedback? That is, is there a place in effective communications for *headphones*—the two-way kind of communication—that closes the loop by listening for feedback from constituents?

One-way models focus on preserving and promoting a favorable image of the firm among its constituents. In Systems Theory, the one-way models function like closed systems, which are bounded and "cannot exchange matter, energy, or information with their environments" [3]. Since they do not *exchange*, that is, incorporate feedback, the press agency/publicity and public information models are ill equipped to function in an organizational decision-making capacity because they produce no usable knowledge or insights about the environment (constituencies). Unless you have a shrewd thinker like Bernays around, it is virtually impossible to predict the reaction of message recipients.

Two-way models are more akin to open systems that "adjust and adapt in order to counteract or accommodate environmental variations from the environment" [3]. The two-way models complete the loop with constituencies, and put the practitioner in a position to inform the broader organization sending the message about the effect of the message. In the two-way asymmetrical model, the feedback is confined to optimizing the message; whereas in the two-way symmetrical model the aim is engagement with constituencies. When that occurs a firm can shape and influence meaning making in a dynamic and evolving manner. The two-way symmetrical model "has the capacity to initiate corrective actions within organizations and direct programs to affect knowledge, predisposition, and behavior of both internal and external publics" [3]. This perspective is both instructional and prescriptive. "When you look at the world systematically, it becomes clear that everything is dynamic, complex, and interdependent" (Anderson and Johnson) [4]. Given this, active participation in the exchange is advised because it informs all participants of greater possibilities.

The Allusion of Control

Just as the top-down, one-way communication models have become an inadequate response to today's fast-moving, transparent, and often quixotic environment, so too, has our traditional concept of command and control. In a world of complete transparency and information overload, leading in an organization today requires rising above the notion that you control anything other than your own discretionary behavior; which is true of those you are attempting to lead, too.

In anticipation of this brave, new world we face, Professor Joseph Rost [5] was prescient when he advised "the reality that leaders and followers face in their organizations and societies is much more complex than the simplistic notions …[that have been] handed down in the mythology would have us believe" (p. 98). He argued that leadership is *not* just good management by a great man. Rather, he considered leadership to be "an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes" (p. 102). This definition serves to shift the burden that accompanies the allusion of control. It provides the context for collaborative, or iterative engagement, away from hierarchical control.

Leading once was about a great man (and sadly, it usually was a *man*) laying out the task, assigning responsibilities, and storming the hill! Abraham Zaleznik [6], who wrote extensively about the difference between management and leadership, taught management was about tactical direction, limited choices, and risk avoidance. The management battle cry is *Focus! Focus! Focus!* [Presumably because the answer is in the details]. Yet, too often, today the boss is quick

to encourage people to, *think outside of the box!* [Presumably because the answer is not *inside* the box]. Followers are justified to ask: should I focus on the box or think outside of it? Mixed messages do not connect the dots; they form a misleading pattern.

If you hold a controlling mindset, then you believe you must give firm direction. Give them clear orders. William Bridges [7] warned, "You find yourself thinking wistfully about the old days when the bosses just told people what to do—and they did it" (p.xi). Front line workers who are prepared to exercise judgment on the actions asked of them expand *control* by allowing the reality of the situation to inform the response. After all, control is the power to influence or direct favorable actions. When we are collaborating we expand the role of people to size up and act favorably with respect to their unique perspective and observations. The reality is that constituents (employees, customers, vendors, etc.) today have more access to information and this gives them greater ability to scale up communication in organizing opposition. Further, they regularly exercise it against entities they feel run contrary to their worldview. Anyone who has witnessed a flash mob can attest to the spontaneous power and influence it potentially holds. Knowledge is power. The concept of control is no longer one way, and top-down. The larger environment carries the same megaphones and headphones that once belonged only to the organization elite. So, unless you understand and adapt, control is an allusion. The question today is, "How do we deal with this new world where two-way communication has brought on a need for symmetrical learning?" The answer: Build two-way, symmetrical skills.

Iterative Engagement

Open systems thrive on learning, and we are living today in one massive, transparent, interactive system where practitioners have one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many communication platforms in the palm of their hand, and know how to use them. The challenge is to put time-honored wisdom about people and relationships to work along with the new communication environment that produces a carpet bomb of communication. This requires iterative engagement.

Today, information travels freely like an overflowing river and it is fruitless to believe you can control such a river. It is more beneficial to jump in and start paddling like everyone else. In the river—while what we say about ourselves matters—it is more about what others say about us. The massive evolution of digital technology is real and it is powerful and it has changed the way the game is played. Make no mistake; the traditional skills are far from obsolete. It is still possible to create a clever campaign that captures the attention of significant publics and imparts a favorable construct through which to promote our cause. But with iterative engagement, it is possible to significantly encourage wider and deeper adoption; and even raise meaningful dialogue that might eventually expand the franchise for your product, idea, or perspective.

Old School: What Really Communicates?

Let's step back in time to some bedrock realities in which we may anchor our modern two-way, symmetrical concept as a powerful theory-in-use (Argyris) [8]. In all communication what really matters is what really communicates. The river of dialogue is highly influenced by what it perceives as honest and uncensored. So, as effective communicators, working in a two-way symmetrical model, we categorize our messaging in same three areas that have proven

effective for decades. What really communicates are (a) leadership—what it says and does, (b) systems & structure—the framework that governs, rewards and orders the organization, and (c) the formal media—print, audio, visual, and web-based that we control (Shaffer) [9]. In this new, transparent communication environment we have the tools to shape these forces at scale—more quickly and effectively.

The reality is that we must embrace the tools of two-way, symmetrical communication manifest in historical best practices and supercharged through the new digital landscape if we hope to leverage the power of inherent in the organization today.

Connecting the Dots

Knowing how to harness organizational resolve is the lynchpin in addressing organizational challenges. Individual desire and will is driven by clarity and purpose. If the members of an organization know what the firm needs, know what they bring to the party, have the information that tells them if they are bringing it, and are subsequently recognized and rewarded for doing it … the individual and the organization win.

On the other hand, when people are confused and uninformed they are most likely not going to assist in producing desired organizational results. Such people, Jim Shaffer [9]wrote: "are a drag on productivity … on quality and service. … they cause costs to rise … [and cause] everything to move slower while they're trying to figure to what to do" (p. 3). The fact is confused and uninformed people don't want to be a drag. But, due to a lack of leadership, they have little choice.

Shaffer advised leaders to *connect the dots*: "linking people and what they do to the business and its strategy, vision, and goals" [9].

People are free agents. They are open to a robust system of connections, information, opinions, and ideas—the veritable carpet bomb of communication. "To bring about clarity and build shared meaning communication must be managed as a business process just as planning, engineering, manufacturing and distribution must be managed as business processes" [9]. The process is one that is focused on making sure each individual across the enterprise understands:

- that they can contribute (What is their unique skill set?)
- how they make a difference (What is their contribution?)
- that they have the information they need (How am I measured? How am I doing?); and
- that they will benefit when they produce results (What is my reward?)

Shaffer points out that the heart of leadership is to recognize that execution matters greatly on individual actions and such actions are discretionary. In other words, if the leader fails to connect the dots, the desired discretionary effort may fail to emerge.

So, we have a process tied to organizational performance and built on an understanding of leadership as "an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes" (Rost) [5]. This, coupled with an understanding of social construction—how people create their reality—and how the digital environment has brought scale-up possibilities to the challenge, and we have a contemporary model of the two-way, symmetrical theory.

The Contemporary Context

Why do communication leaders need a new approach like this? A number of years ago, the Arthur W. Page Society prepared a white paper that addressed new challenges in successfully managing relationships with customers, investors, partners, employees and other key audiences and stakeholders. *The Authentic Enterprise* [10] predicted great changes in digital networking, global integration, and stakeholder empowerment would fragment organizations and markets. This work was followed by a subsequent study dubbed *The Dynamics of Public Trust in Business—Emerging Opportunities for Leaders* [11] which pointed to the compelling need for organizations to recognize that transparency of information and democratization of media, meant we could no longer "manage reputations and brands—our external personas—separately from our workforces and cultures" (Building Belief) [12].

The Human Nature of Adaptation

As leaders we often feel our credibility is at stake if we cannot keep things orderly, structured, and, on course. We say to ourselves, "this is just another problem, we need to work harder or faster or smarter." The trouble is, it's not just another problem it is a problem for which we have no experience in solving. How is a leader going to deal with an organization, looking to its leaders to guide the way, have no clear set of marching orders? The answer is threefold: (a) vigorously confront reality, (b) expand the individual and organizational knowledge, and create safety for members taking bold, legitimate action. These actions are tougher than they appear, especially if the leader has not fostered an environment in which to confront adaptive problems.

When a simple solution eludes us we fear those we have been appointed to lead may see us as incompetent. And worse, if they do, they will inevitably and quietly withdraw their support of our authority. This happens because we do not understand, nor have we properly diagnosed the problem. The reality is that ***not*** all problems have easy answers. Easy answers are the kind we have seen before and have effectively solved. In such cases, this is the nature of systems: "simplification, structure, and linear thinking have their limits, and can generate as many problems as they solve" (Anderson & Johnson) [13]. Too often, when leaders get confused about the nature of the challenge at hand, and embark on solving a complex problem as if it were a technical problem with a known answer, the result is the organization fails to adapt. Workers have experienced failed attempts at dealing with change repeatedly and thus invoke the refrain: this too shall pass.

Ron Heifetz [14] advised there are two kinds of problems: technical and adaptive. The former can be diagnosed and solved by applying established know-how. It is best served through detailed management. For example, if you are diagnosed with appendicitis, an experienced, qualified physician will perform an appendectomy, and with proper follow-up care the problem will likely disappear.

The second type of problem, however, presents a challenge with an unknown solution and requires a skilled diagnosis, followed by a series of actions aimed at determining a solution to the problem.

However, sometimes problems are both technical *and* adaptive, as in the case of a person with a heart ailment. A qualified surgeon may diagnose the technical problem as a blockage and capably install a stint to reduce the immediate threat to the patient. However, an adaptive problem—creating and adopting a healthy lifestyle—remains in the patient's need to reduce the

risk of repeat blockage. Heifetz advised that technical problems respond to authority; while adaptive challenges require leadership. Such is the case when the members of an organization recognize an insurmountable gap exists between what constitutes thriving and their current reality. In other words, because the problem has no known solution, and because they cannot conceive of themselves as having the skills or desire to deliver a solution, they fail to engage.

Adaptive challenges are complex and will shred the formal authority that feigns to have the answer. The reality is, that as members of the organization facing an adaptive challenge, "we look to our authorities for answers they cannot provide. What happens, then? Authorities, under pressure to be decisive, sometimes fake the remedy or take action that avoids the issue by skirting it" [14]. Relying on authority where it is unlikely to produce a desired outcome, is dangerous "for two reasons: first, because work avoidance often occurs in response to our biggest problems and, second because it disables some of our most important personal and collective resources for accomplishing adaptive work" [14]. In adaptive situations, learning is required.

Yet, "for a social system to learn, old patterns of relationship—balances of power, customary operating procedures, distributions of wealth—may be threatened" [14]. Further, a firm's culture, a powerful unifying and often unspoken force, serves as a means to fend off attempts to alter, or change, the system even when it appears logical that people must adapt or face extinction. Yet, *change* is an equal opportunity provider, from which no firm, team, or family may escape.

The New Capability of Communication

For example, corporate communication guru Ron Rhody advised of the danger of accepting conventional knowledge about certain age-old phenomenon like the differences between perceptions and facts. He lamented his contemporaries' pre-occupation with the power of logic delivered through facts. Rhody [15] observed, "People don't pay much attention to facts. What they pay attention to is their understanding of the facts—their perceptions" [15]. He reminded us of what really drives human behavior. He wrote: "It's not the managers' fault, of course. All their training and education reinforces the idea that reason wins out. What really wins out is self," [15]. Rhody described a human reality that plays out to this day, but now in hyper speed. Forever, the power of facts comes from the meaning we attach to them after we run them "through our filters of self-interest and end up with a product different from the raw materials we began with" [15]. So, how does that inform our current environment?

Those little devices in people's hands connect them to a world of endless connection. In a word: networks. If you own such a device you have unfettered access to the raw data, and, you have complete control over selecting a network that will help you filter faster. Further, this network of people and data is digital, so it is searchable, that is, you may draw upon it at any given time to provide the facts in a moment's notice. Moreover, as you spend more time in this digital world, you develop trusted sources that provide the filters of shared self-interest that fit you. It may be a community of friends on Facebook or jobseekers on LinkedIn; or, a blogger who you turn to for wisdom on politics; or, a service that draws upon restaurant-goers to review your interest in a local eatery (Urban Spoon or Yelp!).

Most of these web resources work off the capacity to link people and their needs in seconds by virtue of search. Initially, one may use a massive search engine like Google to get them an answer. Once they become more familiar, they may download an application, like the

aforementioned Urban Spoon, to provide them a simple-to-use interface to tap into their dining needs. In this case, the application puts to work a nearly hundred-year-old theory on group intelligence. Dating back to the 1920s, sociologists determined that group intelligence was a valid means to answer pressing questions like finding a good Indian meal in Omaha, or counting jellybeans in a jar. In the latter case, finance professor Jack Treynor's class determined there were 871 beans in a jar that actually held 850! This was reported in James Surowiecki's,*The Wisdom of Crowds*[16],where he posits aggregation of information in groups results in decisions that are often better than could have been made by any single member of the group. In the jellybean example only one of the 56 students guessed closer to the actual number than the group's aggregate guess.

So, what is at work in this new gadgetry is ages-old theory being played out in scale never before achieved, that is, before we had the ability to connect the way we do with social media. Think about it, once upon a time if you owned a vast TV network like CBS, you could broadcast in a one-to-many fashion and hold tremendous power by virtue of owning the broadcast tower. Then, along comes cable and Ted Turner seizes similar power, through focus and subscription, by reaching vast amounts of cable homes.

But, today anyone has the power to reach out to many. We see it on a daily basis through such engaging YouTube viral videos like the classic Charlie Bit My Finger video which has millions upon millions of views in its original form, or in one of a dozen "versions" created by ordinary "netizens" choosing to fashion a video take of their own.

With the vast presence of digital connectivity, we now have a many-to-many communication possibility resembling a vast social graph. So, in a relatively short couple of decades, we have advanced from one-to-one (e-mail), to one-to-many (website), and to many-to-many (blogs, file-sharing, wiki) where people are able to communicate dynamically with no boundary between information and communication tools. Connection will be with people and such entities as organizations, products, processes, events, and concepts. Simply put, the technology has brought us together in large-scale ways heretofore inconceivable.

Communication is not a good thing to do well, it is *the* thing to do well if a firm is serious about realizing its strategic goals and serve its inherent purpose on all fronts up and down the organization. As the reader may have surmised by now, communication is often a much-misunderstood concept. Imagine that, communication, which should energize and sustain organizational capability, is frequently overlooked or minimized to the detriment of organizational performance. Playwright George Bernard Shaw said it best: "Perhaps the single biggest problem with communication is the illusion that it has taken place."

Perhaps the greatest change in communication that has emerged in recent years is the idea that the general public and mass market are horribly ineffective ways to approach the tasks of influencing public opinion and satisfying market demand. Of course, this previous sentence has mixed two heretofore distinct and separate fields: public relations and marketing. In public relations, it was thought that the practice of PR was little more than mimicking role of the free press. In its early practice, it was often the case that journalists were hired by PR firms to prepare and hopefully place stories that would benefit the client. By hiring folks from the media, PR departments acquired both the skill to craft such stories in journalistic form, as well as, friendly access to the real journalists who might be responsible for placing such stories in their publications. Thus, the art of the pitch was born; and, the number and effective placement of positive stories about the firm became measure of success.

Similarly, in marketing the big prize was found in appealing to a large segment of the market for a product through mass media such as television. Key measures of success were awareness, share of mind, cost-per-thousand, and reach and frequency of the marketing message. This seemed to work very well until the battle for the biggest share of the market led to fragmentation where competition that had been pushed out of the share of mind found the only way to become relevant was to differentiate its product offering. This led to a rapid rise in target marketing that has permeated marketing practice up to this point in time. For both public relations and marketing the "long tail" has presented an entirely fresh new paradigm.

The long tail refers to the very ends of the demand curve, where niches of demand exist for highly specific product description. As it turns out, when consumers are offered infinite choice, the true shape of demand curve is revealed. It is not as concentrated on the big middle. Further, there is potentially greater margin and customer loyalty in the niches at the ends of the long tail. People gravitate towards niches because they satisfy narrow interests better. The problem has been the ability to serve the ends. For decades marketers have adhered to Pareto's Law—20 percent of units account for 80 percent of sales—and now with the proliferation of digital ordering and delivery, we find that in a mix of 10,000 units, 98% will sell at least once (Anderson) [13].

As in marketing, PR practitioners have always believed in breaking down publics into their smallest units, "good public relations has always been two-way; the best practitioners have always listened—not just talked—to their publics" (Guth & Marsh) [17]. This is the two-way symmetrical model that "involves the notion that sometimes an organization has to change to meet the needs of its publics, just as consumer-focused marketing involves realizing that a product may need to change" [17].

Social scientists point to the significance of dialogue in shaping our way of knowing. Drath and Palus [18] wrote:

one thing that we all share—across cultures, geography, and time—is the ability, and the hunger, to make things make sense. …[or] the process of arranging our understanding of experience so that we can predict what has happened and what is happening, and so we can predict what will happen..."

Simply put, meaning is what we make of it! Fingarette [19] considered two broad conceptions of *meaning*: (a) the way words, symbols, and icons represent phenomena; and (b) as representations of our values, relationships, and commitments. In the former, we are moved to name and place things in order, and this leads to interpretation. This leads to explaining why things are the way they are and what phenomena lead to what reactions. If we hear thunder and lightning, we can associate it with sound and light in a certain arrangement. With enough experience we can know what to expect and how to avoid dangers associated with thunder and lightning. Yet, we know it can be erratic and recognize a certain measure of fear is not unfounded.

In the second sense, meaning is related to commitments, or the need to feel that life is meaningful, that is, people take part in activities because they find the activity to make sense or appeal to a higher-level human need (Farley) [20].

Much of the leadership literature is grounded in this idea that meaning-making happens through leader-led processes such as visioning. Senge [21] considered visioning to be only a part of a larger set of governing ideas for the enterprise, "its vision, purpose or mission, and core values" (p. 207). In this case, meaning is generated through exploration of key questions facing the social enterprise: "What?" "Why?" and "How?" In the process, or dialogue, of answering

these questions of the firm, its members generate both definitions and commitments. As Senge concludes: "Taken as a unit, all three governing ideas answer the questions, 'What do we believe in?'" (p. 208).

Tying back to the original two-way symmetrical model, we hope to recognize that by embracing a two-way communication model, that is, we listen as well as speak; and embrace a symmetrical posture, that is, to remain open to new possibilities that have been amended to enrich coherence of shared meaning by all parties in the relationship.

Sources

1. Wiio, O. (1978). *Wiio's laws—and some others.* Espoo, Finland: Welin-Goos.
2. Grunig, J. E., & Hunt, T. (1984). *Managing public relations*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
3. Bernays, E. L. (1923/1951). *Crystallizing public opinion.* Brooklyn, NY: IG Publishing.
4. Anderson, V., and Johnson, L. (1997). *Systems thinking basics: From concepts to causal loops.* Waltham, MA: Pegasus Communications, Inc.
5. Rost, J. C. (1993). *Leadership for the 21st century.* Westport, CT: Praeger.
6. Zaleznik, A. (2004). Managers and leaders: Are they different? *Harvard Business Review, 82*(1), 74-82
7. Bridges, W. (2003). *Managing transitions* (2nd ed.). Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press.
8. Argyris, C. (1994). *On organizational learning.* Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.
9. Shaffer, J. (2000). *The leadership solution.* New York: McGraw-Hill.
10. Arthur W. Page Society, (2007, March). The Authentic Enterprise. Retrieved from http://www.awpagesociety.com/insights/authentic-enterprise-report/
11. Arthur W. Page Society, (2009, March). The Dynamics of Public trust in Business—Emerging Opportunities for Leaders. Retrieved from http://www.awpagesociety.com/insights/trust-report/
12. Arthur W. Page Society, (2012, March). Building Belief. A New Model for Activating Corporate Character & Authentic Advocacy. Retrieved from http://www.awpagesociety.com/insights/building-belief/
13. Anderson, C. (Sep 8, 2005). *Long tail 101*. (Blog) retrieved December 27, 2012 from http://www.longtail.com/the_long_tail/faq/).
14. Heifetz, R. A. (1994). *Leadership without easy answers.* Boston: Harvard University Press-Belknap
15. Rhody, R. (1999). *The CEO's playbook: Managing the outside forces that shape success*. Sacramento, CA: Academy Publishing.
16. Surowiecki, J. (2005). *The wisdom of crowds.* New York: Anchor Books.
17. Guth, D. W., and Marsh, C. (2006). *Public relations: A values-driven approach.* Boston: Pearson.
18. Drath, W. H., & Palus, C. J. (1994). *Making common sense: Leadership as meaning-making in a community of practice*. Greensboro, NC: Center for Creative Leadership.
19. Fingarette, H. (1963). *The self in transformation.* New York: Harper & Row.
20. Farley, M. (1986). *Personal commitments.* San Francisco: Harper & Row.
21. Senge, P. M. (2006). *The fifth discipline: The art & practice of the learning organization.* New York: Currency Doubleday.