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# Evaluating excellence: A model of evaluation for public relations practice in organizational culture and context

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### ABSTRACT

This paper represents the development of an innovative and comprehensive model designed to measure public relations excellence within an organizational context. Drawing on established scales of evaluation for public relations practice, researchers propose a measurement model situated within excellence Theory. Through a partnership between the research team and The Alberta Energy Regulator (AER) organization, a case study approach was developed and implemented, highlighting the relationships between organizational culture and communication. The *Excellence in Organizational Context* model was tested within the AER, using empirical data gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews and a self-report questionnaire survey conducted with individuals from various identified organizational stakeholder groups. This mixed-method approach was employed to explore and understand the multi-dimensional nature of public relations practice within this organization.

Researchers investigated eight dimensions of excellence in this model. Initial findings indicate that the *Excellence in Organizational Context* model proposed here is a valid and appropriate method for measuring public relations performance when applied as a mixed-method approach for measuring practice and establishing context within an organizational culture. This indicates the need for both organizational, stakeholder, and sector/national level data in confirming relevant benchmarks.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper presents a framework and methodology which articulates the variables, assumptions, and relationships that we argue should be considered in measuring public relations excellence within an organizational context. Drawing on established scales of evaluation for public relations practice, we propose, test and implement a comprehensive measurement model situated within Grunig's (1992) excellence theory. In this case study, the research team and an organizational partner, the Alberta Energy Regulator (AER), collaborated to develop and implement a model of evaluation which highlights the relationships between organizational culture and communication. The resulting *Excellence in Organizational Context Model* was tested within the AER using empirical data gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews and a self-report questionnaire survey conducted with individuals from various identified organizational stakeholder groups. We took this

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mixed-method approach to explore and understand the multi-dimensional nature of public relations practice. Eight dimensions of organizational practice were identified as: *Access to Dominant Coalition, Ethics and Integrity, Organizational Role and Function of Public Relations, Proactive Worldview, Relationship Satisfaction, Requisite Variety, Strategic Communication Planning, and Symmetry and Mutuality.*

To understand the practices embodied within these dimensions, we used, when possible, previously validated scales of measurement. The resulting comprehensive measurement scale was tested for reliability, factor structure and content validity through assessment of inter-correlations between variables and a confirmatory factor analysis. The Organizational Public Relations Excellence scale (OPRES) was the resulting measurement instrument.

The data and analyses from both the in-depth interviews and the organizational survey were placed into context with existing organizational evaluation and satisfaction survey results. Finally, these findings were assessed against the backdrop of the national contextual data acquired from the GAP VIII Canadian 2014 study (Thurlow, Kushniryk, Blotnick, & Yue, 2014). Thus, we report upon research which created a measurement protocol (the OPRES) which was embedded in organizational climate and culture and situated within a contextual organizational ecology.

## 2. Literature review

To better understand the landscape of public relations excellence evaluation we examined three key areas of the public relations research literature relating to theorizing and measuring public relations excellence as well as the role of organizational context in doing so.

### 2.1. Measuring excellence

Our review of the literature reaffirms that there is no general consensus on how, or indeed whether, public relations can be measured (Huang, 2012). This has been due to inconclusive notions of the multidimensional effects of public relations, and the feasibility of cross-cultural application of a measurement tool (Huang, 2012). Public relations measurement provides a quantitative means by which to evaluate the value or importance of a public relations program, typically manifested as an appraisal or evaluation of a predetermined set of organizational goals or objectives (Lindenmann, 2003). Measurement tends to be more precise and more objective than public relations evaluation and tends to be most effective when efforts are made to identify and understand an organization's key goals, objectives, publics and communications (Lindenmann, 2003). Furthermore, this process is most effective when undertaken with consideration given to the organizational context as a whole (Lindenmann, 2003). Choi and Choi (2009) maintain "understanding public relations leadership from an organization-wide perspective opens up a whole new avenue for future research to strengthen public relations as a management function" (p. 293). Thus, measurement of public relations which is organizationally and culturally situated and yet not solely based upon achievement of specific objectives is both desirable and difficult to attain.

In developing a valid quantitative measurement instrument, we allowed the existing literature to strongly guide our choices. We specifically drew upon the following research and established scales: the Worldviews scale (Deatherage & Hazleton, 1998; Grunig & White, 1992), the Measurement of Relationships scale (Hon & Grunig, 1999), the OPRA Organization-Public Relationship Assessment scale (Huang, 2001), the OPDC Organization-Public Dialogical Communication scale (Yang, Kang, & Cha, 2015) and the GAP VIII Canada national data – 2014 benchmarks (Thurlow et al., 2014). The Worldviews scale is a validated measurement tool which asserts that symmetrical and asymmetrical worldviews may be measured within a public relations context (Deatherage & Hazleton, 1998), and it was derived from the scholarship of Grunig (1992) on excellence theory. The Measurement of Relationships scales consist of separate subscales, measuring relationship satisfaction, exchange relationships and communal relationships (Hon & Grunig, 1999). The Organization-Public Relationship Assessment (OPRA) scale was developed to examine the cross-cultural comparability of organization-public relationship within an organizational context (Huang, 2001). The Organization-Public Dialogical Communication (OPDC) scale measures the dialogue and trust/distrust relationships between organizations and their publics (Yang et al., 2015). In short, the existing literature provided previously tested scales, which could be adapted to our specific research questions and context.

### 2.2. Grunig's model of excellence

Over the past three decades, public relations scholars have endeavoured to develop discipline-specific theories that represent a theoretically-based body of knowledge representative of a scholarly profession. One key focus in this work has been the need for relevant and insightful methods of evaluation related to public relations practice and its organizational value. Although an evaluation of excellence has been elusive to date, the work in this area has been defined by excellence theory, introduced by Grunig and Hunt (1984). Excellence theory is normative in nature and prescribes how to do public relations in an ideal situation (Pompper, 2004). Fundamental to this theory is an articulation of evolution of public relations from asymmetrical (focused on organizational goals and one-way communication) to symmetrical (respecting both organizational goals and those of other stakeholders) two-way communication.

Consistent with the literature on public relations excellence, we started from the position that an organizational culture which encourages two-way symmetrical patterns of communication facilitates the excellence model and enhances public

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