TWO-WAY SYMMETRICAL COMMUNICATION IN A NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Two-Way Symmetrical Communication in a Non-Profit Organization
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Non-profit organizations have recognized the need to create and maintain relationships with their publics. This goal can be accomplished with the practice of public relations. Public relations programs strive to create and maintain mutually beneficial relationships with key stakeholders. Previously described in the Excellence Study of 1992 as the two-way symmetrical model of public relations, this thesis studied the symmetrical communication dimension of public relations. Symmetrical communication was examined for two different publics, an external public (volunteers) and an internal public (staff). Few researchers have analyzed the simultaneous use of symmetrical communication internally and externally for a non-profit organization. This study analyzed confidential, qualitative, in-depth interviews conducted with stakeholders in a non-profit organization. Interview participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling. Additionally, this study analyzed previously collected, anonymous survey data from the same non-profit organization to supplement the qualitative research. The additional, existing research provided a well-rounded perspective and produced new conclusions between this study and the prior research. This thesis research encourages organizations to re-evaluate their public relations methods of communication. Additionally, it can serve as a method of measurement for other organizations to use in order to evaluate the consistencies and inconsistencies and whether they communicate symmetrically, internally and externally. This research can contribute to existing scholarship on internal and external publics, symmetrical communication, employee communication and communication in non-profit organizations.
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INTRODUCTION

Public relations is an integral part of any organization. With the increase of media clutter and overexposure, organizations have recognized the need to be more strategic when communicating with target publics. Over the years, public relations has emerged as an effective way to counter the problem of oversaturation and manage relationships with key publics. Public relations is “the management function that identifies, establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the various public on whom its success or failure depends” (Broom & Sha, 2013, p. 5). Practitioners have contributed both practical and theoretical knowledge to the study and application of public relations (Botan, 1993).

In 1980s, James Grunig introduced four models of public relations: the press agentry model, the public information model, the two-way symmetrical model, and the two-way asymmetrical model. Evidence of these models dates back to the late 1800s when corporations began hiring external publicity/press agents to assist in public communications (Gower, 2008). Over time public relations scholars have re-conceptualized these four models into either four and sometimes seven dimensions of public relations (Sha, 2007). J. E. Grunig (2001) revised his four models to become four dimensions of symmetrical/asymmetrical, interpersonal/mediated, one-way/two-way, and ethical/unethical. Sha (2007) believed this shift from public relations models to public relations dimensions was inevitable to further enhance strategic planning in programming and building relationships. Sha (2007) identified seven dimensions of public relations as two-way communication, symmetrical communication, ethical communication, conservation, mediated communication, interpersonal communication and social activities (pp. 7-10). Presently, we find evidence of these dimensions being practiced in all types of organizations all over the world, including non-profit organizations.

Non-profit organizations have a particular set of challenges similar to those faced by private and public organizations, including the competition for resources (Broom & Sha, 2013). However, non-profit organizations can benefit from the practice of the public relations dimensions, especially symmetrical communication. Symmetrical communication is the
preferred method of public relations because of the benefit it provides to the organization and the target public. Non-profit organizations must be strategic in determining how to communicate with publics to ensure the methods being used are the most beneficial to and resourceful for the organization. Furthermore, all organizations have a responsibility to communicate accurately and ethically with key stakeholders. Symmetrical communication has been claimed to be the most ethical method of communication (Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig, 1995). Non-profit organizations have an obligation to be ethically responsible, trustworthy, and honest with all stakeholders.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Major theoretical concepts framing this thesis include the Excellence study, symmetrical communication, and rules theory.

**EXCELLENCE STUDY, SYMMETRICAL COMMUNICATION AND RULES THEORY**

The Excellence study has impacted public relations scholarship since results were first published by James Grunig in 1992. The study provided a deeper look into the field of public relations, including answers to several questions that had gone unanswered in this professional field. The Excellence study confirmed that public relations departments must identify key stakeholders and use “. . . symmetrical communication programs to develop and maintain quality relationships with these strategic publics” (L. A. Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002, p. 548). Originally introduced in the 1980s as a model of public relations, symmetrical communication has evolved into a dimension of public relations (Sha, 2007). Organizations utilize symmetrical communication to build mutually beneficial relationships with key publics that require a genuine change on behalf of the organization in order to maintain or improve relationships. Symmetrical communication should be utilized among both external and internal publics. Internal publics include the most important public to any organization--employees.

In conceptualizing symmetrical communication, I found that the study of expectations of key stakeholders needed to be included in this research. After consulting the research of Len-Rios and other scholars, I incorporated rules theory into the theoretical framework of this paper. Rules theory reveals that communication rules, also referred to as expectations,
are created by stakeholders. This theory addresses the need for organizations to identify, meet, and exceed the expectations of key publics. I presume the identification of expectations should become a step in the research process in the practice of symmetrical communication. The use of symmetrical communication should no longer be ignored by organizations because of the success it fosters in building relationships. Based upon this theoretical framework, I assert that organizations have no choice but to practice symmetrical communication, and make sure these practices are meeting/exceeding the communication expectations of key external and internal publics, as these are defined by rules theory.
LITERATURE REVIEW

THE EXCELLENCE STUDY

The Excellence Study was the largest research project conducted up to that time in the field of public relations. “The Excellence study explained the value of public relations in management and identified a set of principles of how PR [public relations] should be organized, managed and practiced to contribute the most value to an organization” (J. E. Grunig & Grunig, 2002, p. 35). The study surveyed 321 organizations from three different nations: Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom. The types of organizations varied and included government agencies and non-profit organizations. The study took 15 years to complete and produced three different books that analyzed the findings and their implications for future research in public relations (J. E. Grunig & Grunig, 2002).

The theoretical principles in the Excellence study created a “benchmark for auditing the quality of a public relations unit” (J. E. Grunig & Grunig, 2002, p. 34). The authors and their research team extensively examined the variables, factors, and professional practices that contribute to an excellent public relations program. The Excellence study was arguably the missing link public relations professionals needed to audit the value of public relations within and/or for organizations. Contrary to what some may believe, strategic public relations programs can increase revenue for organizations. Therefore, whether this new benchmark was to be used by new professionals just entering the field of public relations or veteran public relations practitioners, the Excellence study provided public relations professionals everywhere with a method of evaluation to determine the excellence of their public relations programs.

The Excellence study organized the measures of excellence within three spheres existing within one another (Dozier et al., 1995). The core of the sphere is the knowledge base of the communication department. The outer shell of this sphere is of shared expectations and the outermost shell is organizational culture. The core of the Excellence sphere, the knowledge base of the communication department, refers to the abilities and expertise of the practitioners in the public relations department. Expertise can be distinguished through the strategies employed by the department, which are often identified
as one-way or two-way communication practices (Dozier et al., 1995). One-way communication can be described as the flow of information solely in one direction, usually from the organization to the public. On the other hand, two-way communication is the exchange of information both ways, between the organization and the public. “Most forms of two-way communication involve specialized knowledge about formal and informal research” (Dozier et al., 1995, p. 12).

Two-way communication can also be asymmetrical or symmetrical. Dozier et al. (1995) used the word ‘persuasion’ to describe asymmetrical communication and the word ‘compromise’ to describe symmetrical communication (pp. 12-13). Asymmetrical communication is used to persuade publics for the best interest of the organization. Symmetrical communication is the use of strategic research to change the opinions and actions of both the public and the organization itself. Two-way communication is not always equivalent to symmetrical communication. Public relations departments must have the knowledge and expertise to utilize both asymmetrical and symmetrical communication to achieve the goals and objectives of their communication plans. The use of both types of communication is referred to as the “contingency model” of public relations (Dozier et al., 1995; Sha, 2007). Furthermore, public relations professionals must act as managers and strategic communicators incorporating this level of knowledge. “The core knowledge base that distinguishes excellent from less-than-excellent communication involves management role playing, especially strategic management” (Dozier et al., 1995, p. 11). This research implies that practitioners must be able to strategize goals and objectives for communication plans that are found through thorough research and identification of key publics, problems, and solutions facing the organization.

Shared expectations surround the core of the sphere of excellence described in the Excellence Study. To achieve communication excellence, shared expectations must involve the communication department and top management. The powerful group of individuals in an organization is referred to as the dominant coalition (Dozier et al., 1995, p. 14). The dominant coalition should value the communication department and trust in the expertise of the information given when making key decisions for the organization. Additionally, expectations in communication practices and channels need to be consistent in order for organizations to engage in excellent communication practices. Thus, two-way
communication is the precursor to success even within the organization. “Excellent communication is more likely to occur when dominant coalitions demand two-way practices. Of course, top communicators must understand these demands and deliver” (Dozier et al., 1995, p. 104).

The culture of an organization is the outermost sphere of excellence. “Organizational culture is the sum total of shared values, symbols, meanings, beliefs, assumptions, and expectations that organize and integrate a group of people who work together” (Dozier et al., 1995, p. 135). Typically, the culture of an organization is either authoritarian or participatory. Authoritarian cultures do not allow for open communication channels and are typically not a collaborative environment conducive for dialogue and feedback (Dozier et al., 1995). In this type of environment, the dominant coalition is not likely to engage in two-way communication with the communication department, making it difficult for the communication department to operate successfully and efficiently. In contrast, a participatory culture is one that is collaborative, and opinions are encouraged to be shared and considered. Employees often work as a team to achieve the goals of an organization (Dozier et al., 1995). A participative culture is a fundamental part of the framework that fosters communication excellence. Organizations that value open communication and constructive feedback are more likely to succeed and progress over time. The culture of an organization is an integral part of employee relations.

**Symmetrical Communication**

Briefly described above in the knowledge core sphere of excellence are two-way asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical practices. The “cohesion” of these models of communication can create communication excellence (Dozier et al., 1995). However, excellent public relations departments have a goal to create a dialogue with publics in an attempt to learn and take action to balance the interests of the publics and organization (J. E. Grunig & Grunig, 2002). Relationships cannot be created, let alone maintained, if the two parties involved do not understand and are not willing to take action to improve the relationship. The Excellence study identified the importance of symmetrical communication as part of two-way communication practices.
The two-way symmetrical model of public relations is arguably the most important factor determining the success and continued success of an excellent organization. “The four models of public relations, and especially the two-way symmetrical model, have been the most controversial and the most debated component of the Excellence theory since our theory book was published” (L. A. Grunig et al., 2002, p. 307). First developed by James Grunig in the 1980s, the symmetrical model of public relations is the most important form of public relations communication practice. The two-way symmetrical model has evolved with time and now scholars refer to it as a dimension called symmetrical communication (Sha, 2007). Symmetrical communication emphasizes the importance of negotiating and listening, with a willingness to make an internal change (Dozier et al., 1995). This form of communication presents the opportunity for those making decisions in the organization to hear from a public they typically would not. However, two-way symmetrical communication must begin with strategic research.

Strategic research enlists several components. The communication department must identify who the key publics are that affect the organization. With that acquired information, the communication department will then be able to use informal and/or formal research techniques to gather the necessary information from these publics (Dozier et al., 1995). Key publics include internal and external groups of individuals. Communication departments will use environmental scanning to routinely evaluate their publics and/or other organizations that may have the potential to negatively or positively affect the organization. Other types of research include surveys, phone calls, and personnel updates (Dozier et al., 1995). Additionally, the communication department must be able to interpret and apply information collected through research in a form beneficial to both the organization and the key publics (Dozier et al., 1995). Furthermore, this type of insight is valuable information the communication department can share with senior management in the organization.

In addition, the two-way symmetrical model is considered to be an ethical and more socially responsible way to behave and communicate (Dozier et al., 1995). In comparison to asymmetrical communication, symmetrical communication requires a change in behavior of the organization to adapt to the needs of the key publics and the organization itself. Organizations should not just change their behavior to appease the public for a certain period of time to achieve a personal goal. Symmetrical communication also urges organizations to
become active listeners and create balanced relationships with their publics (Dozier et al., 1995). It identifies the need for organizations to ‘relinquish control’ and learn to talk with their publics, not just at their publics (Theunissen & Wan Nordin, 2012). Although symmetrical communication requires a greater investment of time and resources, it induces a more genuine approach to communication, which in turn will generate longer, lasting relationships with key publics.

In the past, organizations focused solely on external stakeholders, such as consumers, investors, and/or potential clients. However, employee communication has emerged as an important focus for public relations practitioners. It is now mandatory to acknowledge the significance of this stakeholder group and why symmetrical communication must be applied to this once neglected public.

**EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATION**

Employees are one of the most important publics for any organization because they directly interact with the external public (Kim & Rhee, 2011). According to Kim and Rhee (2011), employees are informal public relations practitioners, often perceived to deliver a more “neutral” message than the message from the actual public relations team (p. 244). In the last two decades, employees have become an important stakeholder group for public relations departments due to organizational changes that occurred in corporations (Meng & Pan, 2012). Corporate mergers, reengineering, downsizing, and other factors have led to an increase of importance in ensuring employee loyalty and a sense of community (Stein, 2006). Internal public relations departments are now tasked to “reduce this organizational uncertainty and ambiguity” (Stein, 2006, p. 250). The purpose of employee relations is “to establish and maintain mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the employees on whom its success or failure depends” (Broom & Sha, 2013, p. 190).

Sanchez (1999) described the challenges organizations face when trying to effectively communicate with employees. He described it as a competition for attention because employees are bombarded with messages within and outside the workplace. Organizations are often challenged when they have to create processes and strategies to manage internal communication in a way that effectively targets employees and also serves the interests of the organization. Employee engagement should be integrated as part of an internal
communications strategy. This can be developed with dialogue and understanding (Kurda, 2012). In PwC’s 16th Annual Global CEO Survey, “[f]ifty-one percent of CEOs indicated that they will make at least some change in strengthening their engagement programs with employees” (Smith, 2013, p. 25). To meet employee communication challenges, “. . . communicators and senior managers must work together to establish proactive, well-defined communication strategies that engage and align employees with the organization's business goals” (Sanchez, 1999, p. 9) Internal communication has to be deliberate, dynamic, constant and clear (Saini & Plowman, 2007).

**Employee Communication Study**

Watson Wyatt Worldwide with the IABC Research Foundation conducted a study on 913 organizations to analyze employee communication. The study examined communication structures, processes, and strategies (Sanchez, 1999). Sanchez (1999) found that the responsibility of employee communication was gradually transitioning from the human resource department into the hands of the communication department. Forty-six percent of all respondents in the IABC study named their corporate communication department as the department responsible for the communication functions of the organization (Sanchez, 1999). More importantly, employees have become a key public for public relations departments. Broom and Sha (2013) confirmed that public relations departments have become managers of employee communications because of the “communication knowledge and skills” of public relations practitioners (pp. 189-190). “Forty-three percent of senior executives in high-performing organizations view their communication professionals as strategic business planners and consult their communication professionals before major decisions are made” (Sanchez, 1999, p. 11). The high performing organizations from the IABC study used communication professionals to implement their communication strategies and play a strategic role in the organization (Sanchez, 1999).

**Employee Communication Practices**

The IABC employee communication study also researched the use of two-way communication through upward and downward communication practices. Upward communication represents open channels of communication that encourage upper management to listen to employees. The measurement of two-way communication was
analyzed in high performing organizations for the IABC study. It was uncovered that 38 percent of organizations scored their ability to engage in upward communication as excellent and 33 percent of organizations felt that their feedback was taken into consideration when decisions were made in the organization (Sanchez, 1999). Upward communication occurs within organizations that engage in face-to-face conversations with employees and support an open door policy to listen to employee concerns, opinions, and/or suggestions (Broom & Sha, 2013, p. 190).

Downward communication, on the other hand, is information being passed from the top down. Also referred to as the top-down approach, this assesses the management's ability to pass information to employees. Downward communication highlights the importance of timing, understanding, and education. In the IABC study, high performing organizations emphasized the importance of delivering messages to employees in large scale and personalized formats (Sanchez, 1999). In measuring downward communication, 77 percent of respondents from high performing organizations felt strongly about wanting employees to thoroughly understand the organization's business. Additionally, 65 percent of high performing organizations found it important to educate employees about organizational values/cultures and to share the organization's progress toward business objectives with their employees (Sanchez, 1999, p. 12).

Several other internal communication practices have also been analyzed to identify the best ways to communicate with employees. Scholars have researched the channels most effective for communicating with employees (Center, Jackson, Smith, & Stansberry, 2013; Stein, 2006). Stein (2006) measured whether a sense of community in an organization was created by the use of specific communication tools based on the “information richness theory.” Those results indicated that face-to-face meetings, emails, and corporate intranet were the preferred methods of communication to foster a sense of community among employees (Stein, 2006). In addition, Kurda (2012) found that “direct communication from a superior is still the best internal communication tool” (p. 39). Generally, researchers found that face-to-face meetings and small group meetings were the top two preferred methods of communication with employees (Broom & Sha, 2013; Center et al., 2013; Stein, 2006).

Additionally, employee communication is changing due to shifts in digital media. Organizations have embraced digital media to communicate with their internal publics with
tools such as podcasts, blogs, and social networks (Broom & Sha, 2013, p. 205). “Social media and networking clearly opens an opportunity for dialogue, rapidly integrating employees into the company culture and to create a sense of community” (Towers, 2011). Online communication among employees can help “create communities within your organization” (Ewing, 2007, p. 12). It is a way for global organizations to communicate across continents and reach employees all over the world. Digital media tools have created opportunities for organizations to communicate with employees in a social, and often more comfortable, environment.

**Symmetrical Communication Among Employees**

As previously mentioned, two-way communication is important for employee relations. However, in addition to two-way communication, organizations must also practice symmetrical communication not only externally, but also internally with employees. Organizations that engage in symmetrical communication listen to their employees with the willingness to change and negotiate to meet their employees’ needs. The Excellence study found that excellent organizations use symmetrical communication when communicating with their publics, including employees. Related research on employee communication practiced in startup organizations found that the “two-way symmetrical communication model, provides employees with comfortable discussion with management where differences in opinion are encouraged” (Saini & Plowman, 2007, p. 206). Employees should be allowed responsibly that extends beyond their typical job duties. Organizations must strive to engage employees with the freedom to exercise passionate ideas and creativity (Kurda, 2012).

Employees in the high performing organizations of the IABC Employee Communication study understood the overall goals of their organization and also recognized how their individual performance played a role in achieving those goals (Sanchez, 1999). Employees need to understand the organization's goals and what is expected of the employee in order to achieve those goals (Kurda, 2012). Additionally, collaboration in decision making increases employee motivation, response, and willingness to adapt to new information or processes (Saini & Plowman, 2007). Employees feel a greater sense of ownership and commitment toward their organization and recognize when their opinions are genuinely used as a contribution to the organization.
Broom and Sha (2013) used systems theory to apply a symmetrical worldview to employee relations. The systems theory is used by public relations scholars to evaluate organizations and the relationships between the organization and its publics. Organizations must have an ‘open-system’ for symmetrical communication to occur (Broom & Sha, 2013). Organizations with open systems encourage dialogue and feedback in order to make changes within the organization. Concepts such as “negotiation, conflict resolution, and compromise” are all incorporated into an organization’s symmetrical worldview in an open system (Broom & Sha, 2013, p. 192).

Systems theory is an efficient indicator to analyze whether organizations are in the right state to practice symmetrical communication. However, I believe that expectations contribute to stakeholder communication. Organizations must identify and manage expectations of their publics when communicating symmetrically.

**RULES THEORY**

Organizations are in constant competition for the attention of their key stakeholders. Consequently, creating and maintaining relationships with key stakeholders is no longer an option, but a necessity. Research has assured public relations practitioners that symmetrical communication is the most effective and strategic method of communication, and I believe the tactics of symmetrical communication have become part of communication expectations for organizations. Organizations now must practice symmetrical communication in order to meet the communication expectations of their stakeholders. Expectations can be analyzed with rules theory. According to Len-Ríos (2013), rules theory:

> addresses the cultural and societal prescriptions and proscriptions for communicating specific cultural contexts, with the idea that following and surpassing expectations for communication rules will lead to more favorable communication outcomes. (p. 810)

Shimanoff (1980) simplified the theory and wrote, “The force of rules is related to obtaining favorable evaluations or avoiding unfavorable evaluations” (p.44). Developed by Ludwig Wittgenstein, rules theory was initially created to learn how communication creates meaning and fulfills goals (Len-Ríos, 2013). Human communication socially constructs rules depending on the situation, whether the rules are organizational, mass-mediated, or interpersonal (Len-Ríos, 2013). Therefore, for rules to be applicable, they have to be shared between communicators, which could be the organization and its stakeholders (Len-Ríos,
2013). If the rules are not followed, a conflict may emerge between parties involved causing a current relationship to weaken.

For public relations, this theory can explain communication expectations held by external and internal publics. Public relations departments are continuously trying to create positive relationships and messages (Len-Ríos, 2013). Rules Theory guides how organizations communicate with their publics to achieve the goals of their public relations plans (Len-Ríos, 2013). Organizations have the ability to lessen or eliminate negative perceptions. Len-Ríos, Hinnant, and Park (2009) found that rules theory identified “expectations for communication between an organization and its key stakeholders” (p. 58). Expectations are behavioral and they are evaluated on a continuum of expectations (Len-Ríos et al., 2009, p. 59). Stakeholder perceptions would change if the expectations were not met (Len-Ríos et al., 2009). For public relations departments, this theory helps to explain publics’ expectations of organizations when the latter are communicating symmetrically. The need for organizations to learn how to manage the expectations related to symmetrical communication both externally and internally will eventually contribute to the relationships created with key publics and the overall success of the organization.
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study seeks answers to the following questions:

RQ1: Through what channels does a non-profit organization communicate with internal and external stakeholders?

RQ2: Does this non-profit organization use symmetrical communication internally and externally?

RQ3: How do the staff and volunteers evaluate the communication efforts of this organization?

The non-profit organization chosen for this study was founded in 1950. The organization currently has 500 employees and more than 10,000 active volunteers per year. In 2013, the organization served 15,182 clients. Stakeholders strongly identified with the founder of this organization, who retired in 2011. The name of this non-profit organization remained confidential in this study because of this organization’s reputation and prominence in Southern California.
METHOD

The method chosen for the qualitative portion of this study was one-on-one interviewing. The existing, quantitative data was collected through an online survey.

INTERVIEW GUIDE

The interview guide (Appendix) consisted of 20 questions for participants to answer. Questions varied in content, but all questions were created to answer one or more of the research questions. Interview questions were divided into five sections: background, communication with stakeholders, symmetrical communication, evaluation and other.

The background section was designed to learn more about the participants and the details regarding their position at this particular non-profit organization. Questions from this section included: (1) Please tell me a little about yourself: age, educational background, current employment other than this non-profit organization. (2) How are you affiliated with this organization? (3) How long have you been working at this organization? (4) Have you worked with other non-profits before this one? (5) How much time do you dedicate to your position at this organization?

The second section of the interview guide included three questions to learn more about the public relations tactics of this organization. Questions included: (6) Please describe how this organization communicates with you. What are your typical communication interactions with this non-profit? (7) What methods does this organization use: email, face-to-face, company intranet, telephone, etc. (8) What group of stakeholders do you feel is the most important to this organization?

The third section of the interview guide asked five questions relating to symmetrical communication. Questions from this section included: (9) Please describe any instances in which this organization has taken your opinion into consideration or the opinion of those around you? (10) Are there any situations you can recall in which this organization has asked for your personal perspective or the perspective of those around you? (11) In the time that you have been affiliated with this organization, have any problems arisen? If so, what were these problems and how did those problems get resolved? How responsive was the
management? (12) What are your goals as far as working in this position at this organization? Do you think any of your goals align with the goals of this organization? (13) Can you recall any instances where you felt this organization did not provide you with accurate information?

The fourth section included questions designed to evaluate the communication methods of the organization. Questions from this section were: (14) How would you rate the effectiveness of their methods of communication and why? (15) Do you have expectations of how you feel any organization should communicate with its stakeholders (i.e., staff, volunteers, clients, etc). If so, what are they? (16) Does the way in which this organization communicate with you meet your expectations of how you expect this organization to communicate with you? Why or why not? (17) Has this organization done anything to appreciate you or your peers? If so, what did they do? Is this something that occurs frequently or not? (18) How important do you feel communication is to this organization with their stakeholders?

The fifth and final section of this interview guide encouraged participants to share any additional information the interviewer did not previously ask for specifically. The final two questions were: (19) Is there anything else about this organization’s communication methods that you would like to share? (20) Is there anything else related to the things we have discussed today that you feel I should have asked and you would like to share? If so, what?

**Survey**

The survey consisted of approximately 60 questions. The survey was arranged into multiple sections. Sections were divided in order to collect data on topics related to the organization, including categories about: the mission of the non-profit, the leader of the non-profit, the non-profit as an organization, the respondent’s personal connection to the non-profit, the respondent’s views on the non-profit’s communication efforts, and demographics. Additional questions included a section for volunteers, staff, and donors to answer more stakeholder-specific questions.
SELECTION CRITERIA, RECRUITMENT, AND DATA COLLECTION

Selection criteria, recruitment, data collection, and data analysis differed between the interview data and survey data.

Interview Data

Twenty interviews were conducted for this study. Participants had to be currently affiliated with the organization as either a volunteer or staff member. I used snowball and purposive sampling to recruit participants for this study. Participants were recruited through a personal contact at the organization. The organization requested that I submit an internal Research Application for the Institutional Review Board in order to study this organization. Once approval was granted, I worked with a contact at the organization to recruit participants for this study. My contact sent a blast email with details of this study to members in the organization. Interested participants emailed the contact and information of these interested candidates were forwarded to me to contact and schedule interviews.

Interested participants were given the opportunity to participate in an interview in-person, via email, or via telephone based upon their preference and convenience. Fifteen interviews occurred via email, and 5 interviews occurred in person. The in-person interviews were all conducted at the headquarters of the organization during scheduled times of the participants’ choosing in April 2014. I began each interview by asking casual questions about the participants in order to elicit a sense of comfort. The in-person interviews followed the structure of the interview guide while I attempted to ensure the comfort of the participant throughout the interview. Questions I felt the participants enjoyed answering were followed by impromptu follow-up questions to gain more insight on any favored topic.

The interview data were analyzed with a thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is the viewing of data to identify patterns and themes (Vaterlaus & Higginbotham, 2011). Interview answers were transcribed into a database and separated into categories reflecting the concepts being researched in this study. I analyzed every answer individually and collectively to find any emerging patterns. I made note of word repetitions and of responses that were divergent from the rest.
**Survey Data**

The pre-existing survey data had been collected from April to May 2011 by Dr. Bey-Ling Sha. Survey solicitations were submitted via email to a list of 4,000 randomly selected people from a total list of 28,845 volunteers, staff, donors and clients. The list was provided by the non-profit organization. The survey yielded a 6.2% response rate with a total of 248 surveys answered. Respondents included a mixture of volunteers, staff, donors, clients and service providers, although only the results from staff and volunteers are reported in this thesis. The study used a 5-point Likert scale that asked how much the respondent agreed or disagreed with provided statements, with: 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Somewhat Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Somewhat Agree, 5=Strongly Agree. Total responses from the 13 staff and 44 volunteers have been analyzed from the existing survey data to complement interview results in this study.

The survey data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. Only survey responses applicable to the concepts in this thesis were analyzed. I divided the survey results into two categories: staff and volunteers. Percentages were calculated that grouped the data in various ways including those respondents that agreed and strongly agreed and/or those respondents that strongly disagreed or disagreed. Additionally, in order to use the survey data to complement the interview data, I aggregated certain survey data to reflect similar questions asked in the interviews.
FINDINGS

The findings of this thesis were guided by the three research questions of this study. Survey data are incorporated into this section when applicable.

**RQ1: THROUGH WHAT CHANNELS DOES A NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION COMMUNICATE WITH INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS?**

The most common form of communication used by both internal and external stakeholders was email. Email was the method used by the organization to communicate with staff and volunteers. The staff in particular said this organization participated in group meetings and face to face communication. Several participants acknowledged that this organization used a mixture of email, face to face, and telephone for communication. Digital media was not studied in this organization. However, email can be perceived as digital media because often non-profit organizations are still using snail mail and newsletters for communication.

Respondents highlighted the organization's regular staff group meetings as a particularly prevalent method of communication between the organization and staff members: “I participate in weekly supervision with my supervisors and attend weekly and monthly meetings with my staff and leadership team” (Participant 19). Meetings generally discussed announcements or updates on a policy or procedure. However, volunteers rarely mentioned the use of any communication methods besides email. Email was the most common form of communication used between the volunteers and the organization, in addition to some interviewees who also mentioned telephone. Only one volunteer said communication occurred “mostly over the phone with whoever has an assignment for me. Follow up can be done by email” (Participant 5).

Survey results are not presented for this research question because no relevant data were available.
RQ2: Does This Non-Profit Organization Use Symmetrical Communication Internally and Externally?

Organizational change is a critical part of symmetrical communication. It is the organization's desire to actively listen to stakeholders with the willingness to make a change based on the information being received. Organizational change was measured in the interview questions through feedback and the organization’s ability to listen and change during a problem. The organization only demonstrated symmetrical communication by seeking feedback and actively listening to initiate organizational change. In this section, I also highlighted this organization’s use of shared goals because I found this to be an important consideration for the study of communication in this non-profit organization.

Organizational Change from Feedback

Interviewed internal and external stakeholders – i.e., staff and volunteers, respectively – felt that their opinions were taken into consideration by the organization. The staff and volunteers shared several cases that involved the organization's willingness to hear and implement new ideas that they presented, providing examples of this organization’s use of symmetrical communication. One staff member said, “I feel that my input is valuable, and I get weekly opportunities in meetings to voice my opinions” (Participant 6). A volunteer respondent mentioned a time when she wanted to implement a new kind of meditation/athletic class. The organization listened and decided to give her the tools she needed to make this class a reality (Participant 9). The staff and volunteers also described instances in which the organization had asked for their personal opinions. A staff participant described an instance when the organization asked for his personal opinion regarding a particular team because that participant had worked on that team in the past (Participant 19). Similarly, a volunteer respondent described a case in which the organization asked for her professional opinion on health-related questions for a target public because of her past education and work experience (Participant 11). These answers signified that this organization often asked for the opinions of the staff members on issues relating to their personal departments or jobs. There was only one case described in which the organization asked for the opinions of stakeholders that was outside the immediate department with which that person was affiliated. A staff respondent shared that the organization spent time sharing
the year-end goal/program recap with everyone in the organization, both senior and entry-
level staff members, to gather feedback and input for future opportunities (Participant 13). In
contrast to that instance, no other respondents mentioned instances of their opinions being
asked on topics outside the boundaries of their immediate positions.

Furthermore, a majority of respondents in the interviews shared examples of this
organization providing feedback through appreciation. Respondents described cases of
quarterly and yearly appreciation events, in addition to thank you letters, luncheons and other
appreciation activities.

Survey results are not presented for this research question because no relevant data
were available.

**Organizational Change from a Problem**

Organizational change was measured in the interview questions by the organization’s
ability to listen and change during a problem. Survey results did not indicate any substantial
presence of active listening in this organization. Forty-two percent of volunteers remained
neutral on this question. A low 35% of volunteers agreed that the organization had tried to
change behavior after the contribution of personal opinions. Interview results of the
volunteers revealed only one case of the organization changing after active listening. A
volunteer member described an instance when she notified the organization of a particular
public that was being ignored and with her information the organization devised a plan to
address the issue (Participant 13).

In the survey results for the staff respondents, 16% disagreed, 5% remained neutral,
and 33% agreed, that the organization had changed behavior in the past after the contribution
of personal opinions. The remaining percentage of survey respondents remained neutral on
this topic. The staff interview data did not reveal any examples of substantive change by the
organization. One staff member shared: “Many issues have arisen. I feel that, in most cases,
my input didn’t matter. That they were going to do what worked best for them” (Participant
16). Three other respondents mentioned a case of problems arising at this organization due to
lay-offs and the low pay rate, but no organizational change was initiated (Participants 10, 14,
and 19). Due to the fairly neutral survey data and mixed results of the interview data, it is
difficult to accurately conclude whether this organization is or is not engaging in organizational change in regards to a problem.

**Shared Goals**

Although shared goals are not necessarily a factor of symmetrical communication, I found this necessary to measure because the non-profit organization in this study was so passionately defined by its mission. The data revealed very positive responses of the shared goals between the internal and external stakeholders. Quantitative data showed that 88% of volunteers agreed or strongly agreed that the mission of the organization was aligned with their own. Qualitative data reflected similar results. Interviewed volunteers felt that their goals aligned with the goals of the organization. “My biggest goal is making a difference and I would say that is their goal too” (Participant 17). Another participant said, “I volunteer because I agree with the mission to help people achieve their potential” (Participant 1).

The volunteer data from the survey and from the interviews corresponded to the results found among staff. Quantitative results from the staff showed that 91% agreed or strongly agreed they shared the goals of the organization. Interview responses reflected comparable answers: “My goal is to help the people to have a better life. This goal aligns with the goals [of this organization]” (Participant 2). Other respondents answered similarly with job specific goals that also aligned with the goals of this organization. The analysis of shared goals is important to highlight because both internal and external respondents recognized the goal/mission of the organization and in some way felt they were contributing to the organization's goal.

**RQ3: HOW DO THE STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS EVALUATE THE COMMUNICATION EFFORTS OF THIS ORGANIZATION?**

Survey results showed that 70% of the volunteers either agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied with how the organization communicated with them. Of the remaining volunteer respondents, 25% remained neutral and 5% disagreed, meaning that they felt dissatisfied In the qualitative data, I found that more than half of volunteers rated the communication efforts of this organization as being good, effective or very effective. Words that were used to describe the organization’s communication were *open* and *accommodating*. 
One participant said “it is absolutely vital in terms of financial liability to be communicating with all its [the organization's] stakeholders (Participant 9). Thus, survey and interview results indicate that volunteers rate the communication efforts of this organization positively. However, the qualitative research also revealed that the volunteers had little to no interaction with higher management of the organization. Therefore the evaluations of the communication efforts of this organization are direct reflections of the communication tactics of immediate supervisors, rather than those of the higher levels of organizational management. Furthermore, even with the limited interactions between the volunteers and higher management in the organization, a majority of volunteers felt that communication with stakeholders was very important to this organization. Volunteers rated as effective the communication interaction facilitated by the direct supervisors to the volunteers.

Quantitative and qualitative data reveal different results for the staff compared to those found for the volunteers. Forty-six percent of surveyed staff either agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied with the how the organization communicated with them. Thirty-percent of surveyed staff disagreed and strongly disagreed in their satisfaction rating, and 23% of staff remained neutral on the topic. Similarly to the survey results, the interview results indicated that most staff members rated the communication efforts of this organization as either good or okay. One staff member said, “I would rate the method of communication okay. I am informed about things that I need to know about at the right time” (Participant 3). In contrast to the responses of the volunteers, the staff members collectively rated communication as average. This could be due to the fact that internal stakeholders have higher expectations of this organization. However, when the staff members were asked to share their opinions on how the organization itself rated communication, they had positive responses. For example, one interviewee said, “the agency cannot continue to function without it. It is vital to our mission, getting our message out, encouraging donations and support and clarifying the extent of our services and goals” (Participant 19). Thus, the staff members recognized that this organization knew the importance of effective communication, but they did not feel the organization was communicating effectively with them. Additionally, staff members highlighted the need for the organization to communicate with consistency and accuracy for all new programs and initiatives by the organization.
As outlined in rules theory, the topic of communication expectations was discussed in each interview in order to identify if the stakeholders had communication expectations that were or that were not being met. The volunteers and staff used several words to describe their expectations. Volunteers commonly used timely and accurate to describe their communication expectations for the organization. “Communication should be professional, accurate, timely and appropriate to the audience,” said Participant 1. Another volunteer said, “Face-to-face communication is always the most effective form of communication” (Participant 5). In an earlier question in the interview, this same participant said that the organization mostly communicated with him over the phone or through email.

In comparison, staff members described their communication exceptions to be open, transparent, and face-to-face whenever possible. “I feel that the communication should always be clear and understandable,” said Participant 3. Another staff member said, “There should always be an open line of communication—with follow up. Also, tell the truth. Say what you mean and mean what you say” (Participant 16). When asked to answer if volunteers and staff felt that this organization met their communication expectations, few respondents said “no,” but a majority of respondents said “yes.”
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The goal of this thesis was to analyze communication in a non-profit organization. The symmetrical communication dimension was reviewed in its application to both internal and external publics.

I asked respondents to share the types of communication channels utilized by the organization in order to understand the network of how communication traveled in this non-profit. The channels of communication were the precursor to establishing symmetrical communication within this organization. Email was the primary communication channel utilized. Email appeared to be an effective way for communication to travel in this organization, especially to the external public that was not regularly on the premises. Past research found email to be one of the most common forms of communication, but it is not the most excellent way for organizations to communicate with their stakeholders, in comparison to face to face communication and small group meetings (Broom & Sha, 2013; Center et al., 2013; Stein, 2006). Based upon my initial findings of these communication channels, I suspected that this organization had a limited chance of practicing symmetrical communication with its external public because the channel of communication was limited to email. However, that suspicion turned out to be incorrect because even with the limited channels of communication, external stakeholders, in addition to internal stakeholders, shared cases of symmetrical behavior by this organization.

I found evidence of symmetrical communication between both the internal and external publics through organizational that occurred from stakeholder feedback. Both stakeholder groups in this thesis stated that the organization was willing to listen to new ideas and offered the resources needed to implement the new suggestions. I suggest that this is related to results found regarding the shared goals of this organization with their stakeholders. The data overwhelmingly suggested that both internal and external publics felt they shared the goals of the organization, and with a passion. According to Kurda (2012), organizations should strive to engage employees in a way that allows them to exercise their passionate ideas and creativity. I believe that the organization's willingness to listen and to implement new ideas from stakeholder groups is related to the shared goals of the
stakeholder groups and the organization, because the organization and the stakeholder groups are operating with the same intentions. Perhaps this organization is willing to listen and act on new ideas presented by both internal and external stakeholders because the ideas accurately align with the overall goal of the organization.

This study uncovered the communication expectations of both internal and external stakeholders. Stakeholders in this organization expected communication to be timely, accurate, consistent, transparent, face-to-face, and open. According to rules theory, organizations should use expectations to guide how communication occurs with stakeholder groups in order to maintain positive relationships (see Len-Ríos, 2013). This organization was only meeting a few stakeholder communication expectations. For example, although external stakeholders rated the organization quite positively on its communication channels (this was primarily email), when asked to name communication expectations, face-to-face communication was a common expectation. Internal stakeholders rated the organization’s communication efforts as average or good, and I believe the stakeholders evaluated the organization in this way because the organization was not consistently communicating in the timely, accurate, and consistent manner expected. Therefore, by striving to integrate these specific communication expectations, this non-profit organization will lessen the chance of conflict (see Len-Ríos, 2013). Expectations will contribute to the organizational goal of managing and maintaining relationship with stakeholders.

**Implications for Public Relations Theory**

Findings from this study revealed that symmetrical communication is the most effective method of communication desired by both internal and external stakeholders. Symmetrical communication tactics have become part of the stakeholder communication expectations for organizations. Stakeholders rated the organization highly only when symmetrical communication occurred. Guided by rules theory, meeting and exceeding communication expectations will only improve communication effectiveness among these stakeholders groups and throughout the organization. In addition, the analysis of this non-profit organization uncovered communication advantages and opportunities of this organization, as noted in the discussion section. Contrary to much past research, symmetrical communication is not always the primary goal of all organizations. Non-profit organization
must first establish, reinforce, and abide by the mission and goals of the organization. After analyzing this particular organization, I found that although it was not practicing symmetrical communication effectively, it was the largest non-profit organization in the area and the stakeholders truly loved being affiliated with it. Therefore, similar to this organization, non-profit organizations must most importantly communicate the goals of the organization and have stakeholders who also strive for the same goals. From that point, the concept of symmetrical communication should be integrated into the organization’s communication goals. Success of a non-profit organization will be most effective and efficient with these two factors working hand in hand, and ultimately the organization will be able to manage and maintain longer-lasting relationship with their stakeholders, increasing the success of the organization.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE**

One practical implication from this study is that non-profit organizations and even for-profit organizations must take the time to invest in their stakeholders, no matter what level in the hierarchy these stakeholders are found, paid or unpaid. Interview participants in the organization studied in this thesis mentioned the high turnover rate and limited resources in regard to pay for staff. One potential way to fix this problem would be to invest in building and maintaining relationships with all stakeholders. Organizations should spend more time developing relationships with stakeholders in the beginning and consistently throughout their affiliation. The implementation of symmetrical communication would decrease the time and resources spent hiring and re-interviewing personnel because stakeholders would feel more valued and involved, potentially increasing their time spent at the organization, and thus decreasing the turnover rate. Employees are one of any organization's biggest stakeholder groups, and symmetrical communication should be used with this group and any external group in order for any type of organization to remain efficient and effective.

**LIMITATIONS**

This study has four known limitations. First, the sample size of interviewed respondents was small, with only 20 participants. With a limited sample, the results found are scientifically harder to generalize to other organizations, thus decreasing the external validity of this study. Secondly, the interview respondents in this study were recruited through a
personal contact at the organization. Although the ratio of volunteers to staff interviewed was equal, recruitment was organized through one personal contact at the organization. This could have limited the inclusion of participants that were not asked to participate because of my contact’s preexisting relationships. Additionally, the interviewed participants may not have accurately reflected the diversity of organizational stakeholders because a majority of these participants were over the age of 50. Thirdly, even though some of the concepts studied in the existing survey data complemented the new interview data collected, there were some theoretical concepts that did not have survey data to be analyzed, thus decreasing opportunities to reinforce the interview results. Lastly, a major limitation is that the data sets being compared had a three year time difference from when each was collected. The survey data was collected in 2011, while the interview data was collected in 2014. The time difference between the data sets could also explain differences in data results.

**Future Research**

Future research could study the symmetrical communication dimension in addition to communication expectations in another non-profit organization to see if the results from the study of this organization are relatable. In addition, the concepts in this study could be used to examine public relations dimensions in a for-profit organization. The comparison of symmetrical communication between internal and external stakeholders has had limited published research. Therefore, there is a great opportunity for researchers to learn more about the differences and similarities between stakeholder groups of this nature and how symmetrical communication and expectations are being or should be integrated into the communication efforts of organizations.

**Conclusion**

This thesis studied the presence of symmetrical communication among internal and external stakeholders in a non-profit organization. Quantitative data was used to supplement qualitative data collected from key internal and external publics. Results indicated similarities and differences between the external and internal publics on the topics of feedback, organizational change, communication goals, and evaluation of communication efforts. Ultimately, it was found that this organization practiced symmetrical communication through its willingness to listen and take action based upon feedback/sharing of opinions.
Additionally, the data indicated shared goals as one important precursor to the success of this non-profit organization. This study incorporated rules theory as a step in the research process to practice symmetrical communication to achieve the goal of establishing and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships with stakeholders.
REFERENCES


| **Background** | 1. Please tell me a little about yourself
   a. Probes: Age, educational background, where did you grow up, current employment other than this?
   How are you affiliated with this organization?
   How long have you been working with/for this organization?
   How much time do you dedicate to your position at this organization? |
| **Communication with stakeholders** | 5. Please describe how this organization communicates with you. What are your typical communication interactions with this non-profit?
6. What methods does this organization use?
   Probes: Email, face-to-face, company intranet, telephone etc.
7. What group of stakeholders do you feel is the most important to this organization? |
| **Symmetrical communication** | 8. Please describe any instances in which this organization has taken your opinion into consideration or the opinion of those around you?
9. Are there any situations you can recall in which this organization has asked for your personal perspective or the perspective of those around you?
10. In the time that you have been affiliated with this organization, have any problems arisen? If so, what were these problems and how did those problems get resolved? How responsive was management?
11. What are your goals as far as working in this position at this organization? Do you think any of your goals align with the goals of this organization?
12. Can you recall any instances where you feel this organization has or has not provided you with accurate information? |
| **Evaluation** | 13. How would you rate the effectiveness of their methods of communication and why?
14. Do you have expectations of how you feel any organization should communicate with its stakeholders?
15. Does the way in which this organization communicates with you, meet your expectations of how you expect this organization to commutate with you? Why or why not?
16. Has this organization done anything to appreciate you or your peers? If so, what did they do? Is this something that occurs frequently or not?
17. How important do you feel communication is to this organization with their stakeholders? |
| **Other** | 18. Is there anything else about this organization's communication methods that you would like to share?
19. Is there anything else related to the things we have discussed today that you feel I should have asked and you would like to share? If so, what? |