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A Case Study of a Nonprofit Organization

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Nonprofit organizations are being challenged to partner with companies and key publics to solve problems, not support issues (Cone Communications, 2013). Solving complex societal problems such as improving access to clean water, reducing hunger, or increasing educational opportunities requires collaboration among multiple parties and transparency and meaningful communication from nonprofit organizations. Donors and volunteers want and need a say in how solutions are tackled. According to relationship theory (Hon and Grunig, 1999), public relations practitioners can facilitate collaboration among publics and organizations to solve problems through a relationship cultivation strategy called sharing of tasks. This study examines the recent efforts of one nonprofit organization to engage its stakeholders in its planning and programming and to empirically test whether the sharing of tasks strategy positively relates to the relationship theory long-term outcomes of commitment, control mutuality, trust and to the behavioral outcomes of donations and volunteering.

Review of the Literature

Creating and improving relationships are important for organizations of all types, including the government, businesses, agencies, and nonprofit organizations. According to Hon and Gruing (1999), the "fundamental goal of public relations is to build and then enhance on-going or long-term relationships with an organization's key constituencies" (p. 2). Hallahan (2008) defines organization-public relationships as "a routinized, sustained pattern of behavior by an individual in conjunction with his or her involvement with an organization" (p. 49). Nonprofit organizations build and maintain relationships with many publics, including donors, volunteers, employees, corporations, the government, media, and recipients of their services,

among others. There are more than 1.8 million nonprofit organizations in the United States, representing approximately six percent of all U.S. organizations (Sisco, Collins, & Zoch, 2010). The nonprofit sector generates $620 billion in annual revenue, employs 10.2 million workers (Spillan, 2003), and relies upon more than $300 billion dollars of work from volunteers (Bortree & Waters, 2010).

Since the publication of Hon and Grunig's (1999) seminal paper that outlined the foundation of relationship theory, public relations scholars and practitioners have sought to measure and test the quality of relationships between organizations and their strategic publics upon whom their success depends. The quality of an organization-public relationship can be assessed through measurement of the outcomes of trust, commitment, satisfaction, and control mutuality (Hon & Grunig). Moreover, public relations scholars have sought to delineate the value of organizational-public relationship management by examining the impact of positive relationships on publics' attitudes and behaviors (Bruning, DeMiglio, & Embry, 2006; Ledingham, Bruning, & Wilson, 2000; O'Neil, 2007, Park & Rhee, 2010; Waters, 2008, 2009a, 2009b) as well as organizational reputation (Yang, 2007).

The three organizational-public relationship outcomes of particular importance for nonprofit organizations include control mutuality, commitment, and trust. Control mutuality refers to the balance of power between parties (Hon & Grunig, 1999). Although there will be some imbalance in power between organizations and publics at some point in time, all parties need to feel that they have some input into decisions. In Hon and Grunig's interview with a public relations officer at a community college, the officer used the terms input and involvement when describing control mutuality.

Commitment is a concept that marketing relationship scholars have studied extensively (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Marketing scholars define commitment as an "enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship" (Moorman, Zaltman, & Deshpande, 1992, p. 316). Morgan and Hunt go on to explain that "the committed party believes the relationship is worth promoting and savoring to ensure that it endures indefinitely" (p. 23). In a similar vein, public relations scholars define commitment as the degree to which parties believe the relationship is worth the effort to maintain (Hon & Grunig, 1999). Two underlying dimensions of commitment include continuance or behavioral intent, and affective, emotional attachment toward the organization.

Trust is defined as "one party's level of confidence in and willingness to open oneself to the other party" (Hon & Grunig, p. 19). Nonprofit scholars Sargeant and Lee (2004) believe that "trust lies at the heart of charity" (p. 614). By building trust with people, organizations can move beyond the emphasis of securing a one-time transaction to building lifetime value (Duncan, 2000). In the absence of trust, donors may sever a relationship, nonprofits may experience difficulty raising funds, alumni may not recommend a university to friends, and communities may negatively protest, among other behaviors (Ki & Hon, 2007).

Public relations scholars posit that relationship cultivation strategies engender relationship outcomes (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Park and Ree, 2010). Hon and Grunig extended the work of interpersonal scholars Stafford and Canary (1991) in their conceptualization of six relationship cultivation strategies: access, assurances, openness, positivity, networking, and sharing of tasks. In recent years, many public relations scholars have attempted to identify evidence of these relationship strategies in online contexts, including websites (Bortree, 2007; Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Ki & Hon, 2006; Williams & Brunner, 2010), blogs (Kelleher & Miller,

2006), Twitter (Rybaldo & Seltzer, 2010), and Facebook (O'Neil, 2012). For example, Ki and Hon (2006) studied the relationship cultivation strategies present in *Fortune* 500 websites and found that the corporations used the openness strategy most often and the networking strategy the least frequently. In their examination of websites of nonprofit organizations, Williams and Brunner (2010) discovered that nonprofits used positivity most frequently and assurances the least frequently. In her (2012) analysis of *Fortune* 500 companies' and *Philanthropy* 200 nonprofit organizations' relationship cultivation strategies on Facebook, O'Neil found that nonprofits outperformed corporations in their usage of every cultivation strategy except for assurances. Moreover, nonprofit organizations used the sharing of tasks and networking strategies the least often, indicating that they are not showcasing their collaborative efforts on Facebook.

Sharing of tasks is the relationship cultivation strategy of interest in this study. This is because nonprofit organizations need to involve their stakeholder to solve problems, both from a fundraising and volunteer perspective. Sharing of tasks occurs when an organization works with its publics to achieve goals that are important to all parties involved (Ki & Hon, 2009). Examples of sharing of tasks include a carpool initiative to reduce air pollution or a collaborative effort among volunteers and nonprofit employees to reduce crime in a neighborhood. Nonprofit communicator Beth Kanter (2012) says that "stakeholders want more involvement" with their nonprofit. She explains that effective nonprofit management centers on maintaining effective networks with stakeholders through listening, participation, and collaboration. Eisner, Grimm, Maynard, and Washburn (2009) believe that some nonprofits lose volunteers because they don't effectively invest in their volunteers to provide them with meaningful opportunities.

This study seeks to analyze how the sharing of tasks relationship cultivation strategy functions at one nonprofit organization. The following research questions and hypotheses are presented:

RQ1: How can nonprofits involve their stakeholders through the sharing of tasks cultivation strategy?

H1: The sharing of tasks cultivation strategy will be positively related to the relationship outcomes of control mutuality, commitment, and trust.

H2: The sharing of tasks cultivation strategy will be positively related to donations and volunteering.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants in this study were stakeholders of Streams and Valleys, a nonprofit that "plans and coordinates recreation enhancements, beautification efforts and public recognition of the Trinity River and its tributaries in Fort Worth and Tarrant County through volunteer recruiting, fundraising, development and event programming" (http://streamsandvalleys.org/fw-trinity-river/trinity-river/mission, retrieved September 7, 2012). This nonprofit was selected due to its expressed interest in strengthening its communication and relationship with volunteers and donors. Participants surveyed included members, donors, volunteers, neighborhood association officers, event attendees, city officials and others who had voluntarily added themselves to the mailing list through Streams and Valleys' website and Facebook page. Together, these contacts represent a cross-section of the various constituent groups of Streams and Valleys.

The executive director of Streams and Valleys sent an email with a link to the online survey to 1,978 constituents of Streams and Valleys in October 2011. An email reminder was

sent to non-respondents three days after the initial notification. Respondents were entered into a drawing to win one of 10 Streams and Valleys' t-shirts.

Instrument

A survey instrument was developed based upon relationship theory (Hon & Grunig, 1999) and multiple conversations with seasoned public relations practitioners and the executive director of Streams and Valleys. The survey instrument was composed of (a) three items to measure sharing of tasks, (b) three items to measure control mutuality, (c) three items to measure trust, (d) three items to measure commitment, (e) two questions to measure donation and volunteer history, and (f) a series of demographic questions. The 12 relationship questions asked participants to respond to a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 to 7, with 1 representing "Strongly Disagree," to 7 representing "Strongly Agree." These items were randomly ordered in the survey instrument. The questionnaire items measuring the four scales are included in Table 1. The donation and volunteer questions included, "Have you volunteered at Streams and Valleys in the last two years?" and "Have you donated to Streams and Valleys in the last two years?" Response options to these two questions included "Yes" and "No."

The survey was pretested with 90 donors of Streams and Valleys to test for question clarity. Based upon that feedback, a few minor changes were made to the questionnaire. The Institutional Review Board of the university where the researchers work then approved the study.

Cronbach's alphas for all scales were conducted and found to be acceptable: control mutuality (.881), trust (.866), commitment (.813), and sharing of tasks (.918).

Results

Two hundred and fifteen respondents completed the questionnaire, for a response rate of 10.9 percent. More than half of the respondents were male (56 percent) and Caucasian (88

percent). More than half (58 percent) were between the ages of 45 and 65 and nearly half (44 percent) reported a household income of $100,000 or more. In the last two years, 49 percent of respondents donated to Streams and Valleys and 33 percent volunteered at a Streams and Valleys' event. Less than one-third (29 percent) are Streams and Valleys' members.

Research question one sought to address how nonprofits can involve stakeholders in more meaningful ways with their mission and operations. Constituents here provided many interesting insights when asked for their feedback about how to improve Streams and Valleys. First, stakeholders recommended that Streams and Valleys improve their communication about the nonprofit's mission and community activities. Here are a sampling of comments: "Become a little more visible in the community; "create a better presence in the young community to explain the work and mission of the organization;" use a "mail-out campaign which raises awareness of and explains the purpose of the organization," and "publicize trail improvement projects and plans along the trails." A second major theme that emerged was stakeholders' recommendations that Streams and Valleys endeavor to "engage more with the community," "to maintain the great rapport with the community," and to work harder at "getting people involved with volunteer efforts." The following recommendations more fully elucidate constituents' feedback that Streams and Valleys involve stakeholders in their mission.

"Continue working and having a strong presence in the community while creating new ways to engage the community in fun ways to use the river and trails. Working with area students to enhance, preserve, and conserve the Trinity Trails will increase awareness and knowledge of the trails and river while improving sustainability."

"Architect and engineer contracting is too limited to a small number of A/E firms. It should be broadened. Expanding M/WBE contracting is one step, but there are many non M/WBE firms in the Fort Worth area who would like to contribute to the river's success as well."

"Invite open discussions as they have in the past annually for feedback even when there is not a new project up and coming. For example - the newer entrance to the trail on the East side of

University at a curve is VERY dangerous and now a blind curve. They did lower the bricks, but it still remains an accident waiting to happen. This needs to be addressed as cyclists are very concerned, but most won't take the initiative to write or call - only talk among themselves. An open forum would help this."

Hypothesis one predicted that the sharing of tasks cultivation strategy would be positively related to the relationship outcomes of control mutuality, commitment, and trust. Table 1 indicates descriptive information on the sharing of tasks cultivation strategy and the three relationship outcomes. Descriptive statistics indicate that constituents consider their relationship with Streams and Valleys to be positive. The lowest mean score was 5.37, for the statement: "Compared to other organizations, I value my relationship with Streams and Valleys more," and the highest mean score was 6.31, with nearly one-half (48%) of respondents answering "Strongly Agree" to the statement: "I feel that Streams and Valleys is trying to maintain a long-term commitment to people like me." Both of these statements were among those measuring commitment and the average of the three mean scores was approximately 5.95, which is strong. Statements measuring sharing of tasks received the highest and most positive overall response.

To test hypothesis one, *Pearson product-moment correlations* were calculated to test the relationships among sharing of tasks, control mutuality, commitment, and trust. Strong positive relationships exist between sharing of tasks and control mutuality (r=.865, p=.000), between sharing of tasks and commitment (r = .831, p=.000), and between sharing of tasks and trust (r=.902, p =.000). Hypothesis one is supported. Next, *Pearson product-moment correlations* were conducted between sharing of tasks and volunteer history and donation history. Weak, positive relationships exist between sharing of tasks and donations (r = .179, p = .012) and between sharing of tasks and volunteering (r=.157, p =.035). Hypothesis two is thus also supported.

Discussion and Implications

Despite the fact that this research examined only one organization, the sharing of tasks cultivation strategy is important for nonprofit organizations of all types. In the open-ended question, stakeholders recommended that Streams and Valleys more clearly define and communicate its message and purpose. Next, respondents articulated the need for Streams and Valleys to elicit feedback from stakeholders and to more fully involve the community in its mission. The fact that Streams and Valleys' stakeholders recommended even broader community support is telling. Stakeholders who already have a connection with the nonprofit organization are recommending that Streams and Valleys involve an even broader concentric circle of supporters.

The results of this research suggest that communicators working at nonprofit organizations should identify ways to connect and listen to stakeholders. Communicators could host face-to-face forums with stakeholders, identify and initiate meaningful participation and leadership opportunities based upon stakeholders' expertise and talents, and ask for feedback and ideas in social media through discussion boards and crowdsourcing. Public relations practitioners should also be diligent in communicating these processes in timely and transparent communication.

As predicted by relationship theory and demonstrated in other research (O'Neil, 2008; Park & Rhee, 2010), sharing of tasks is positively related to the relationship outcomes of commitment, control mutuality, and satisfaction. These findings reinforce prior research, thereby giving us greater confidence in the tenets of relationship theory. Equally important is that sharing of tasks is positively, albeit weakly, related to donation history and volunteering.

Future research should include in-depth interviews with stakeholders of all types—volunteers, Board of Director members, and donors—to more fully understand ways that nonprofits seek to involve stakeholders to solve problems of mutual concern. Qualitative insight

gained from such research will help to elucidate the why and how behind the fair amount of empirical research that shows that the sharing of tasks cultivation strategy→relationship outcomes→ behavioral change.

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Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for Sharing of Tasks and Relationship Outcomes

Items	Mean (*S.D.*)
Sharing of tasks	6.04
Streams and Valleys effectively seeks opportunities to enhance the community.	6.21 (.94)
Streams and Valleys manages community issues that people care about.	5.99 (1.08)
Streams and Valleys works with people like me to develop solutions to problems that benefit our community.	5.93 (1.10)
Commitment	5.95
I feel that Streams and Valleys is trying to maintain a long-term commitment to people like me.	6.31 (.86)
I can see that Streams and Valleys wants to maintain a relationship with people like me.	6.16 (.94)
Compared to other organizations, I value my relationship with Streams and Valleys more.	5.37 (1.27)
Trust	5.89
Streams and Valleys can be relied on to keep its promises.	6.01 (1.12)
Streams and Valleys has the ability to accomplish what it says it will do.	5.91 (1.05)
I believe Streams and Valleys takes the opinions of people like me into account when making decisions.	5.76 (1.13)
Control Mutuality	5.88
Streams and Valleys and people like me are attentive to what each other have to say.	5.97 (1.05)
Streams and Valleys believes the opinions of people like me are legitimate.	5.87 (1.09)
Streams and Valleys makes an effort to ask for the opinions of people like me.	5.81 (1.12)