Title: The Chief Executive Officer, communication and reputation: What competencies are required?

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Abstract: Organisational messages influence core stakeholders (investors, analysts, media, suppliers, customers, governments and communities) and the Chief Executive Officer has the primary role in developing the messages needed to build and foster organisational reputations with these key stakeholders. Kitchen and Laurence (2003:116) argue that the reputation of the CEO and corporate reputation are 'increasingly intertwined'. CEOs therefore must be as competent in communicating with key stakeholders in the same way they are in their stewardship and management of finance, marketing, production, marketing and personnel matters. The research to date however, does not state what communication competencies a CEO requires to manage this vital task. Communication appears to be a 'given' in management texts, is rarely taught in business schools, and it is only public relations/corporate affairs practitioners who understand the central role of communication in ensuring a two-way dialogue between the CEO and core stakeholders. There is a substantial gap in the management and communication literature on the high level communication attributes required by CEOs to manage reputation relationships with core stakeholders. This paper reviews the literature on CEO communication and reputation and proposes a conceptual framework for assessing which CEO communication attributes would contribute to reputation building.

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INTRODUCTION:

Organisational messages influence core stakeholders (investors, analysts, media, suppliers, customers, governments and communities) and the Chief Executive Officer has the primary role in developing the messages needed to build and foster organisational reputations with these key stakeholders. Kitchen and Laurence (2003:116) argue that the reputation of the CEO and corporate reputation are “increasingly intertwined”. CEOs therefore must be as competent in communicating with key stakeholders in the same way they are in their stewardship and management of finance, marketing, production, marketing and personnel matters. The research to date however, does not state what communication competencies a CEO requires to manage this vital task. Communication appears to be a “given” in management texts, is rarely taught in business schools, and it is only public relations/corporate affairs practitioners who understand the central role of communication in ensuring a two-way dialogue between the CEO and core stakeholders.

There is a substantial gap in the management and communication literature on the high level communication attributes required by CEOs to manage reputation relationships with core stakeholders. This paper reviews the literature on CEO communication and reputation and proposes a conceptual framework for assessing which CEO communication attributes would contribute to reputation building.

CEO RESPONSIBILITY FOR REPUTATION

CEOs are viewed by shareholders as being responsible for the managing the business to ensure steady growth in the value of their investment, therefore their public statements are followed with a high level of attention. CEOs need to be aware of this stakeholder mindset when communicating with this segment of their communication market and ensure that word selection and nuances build on their own reputation and that of the organisation. Financial analysts constantly seek intelligence about organisations as to trends to assist them with their recommendations. When a CEO gives a briefing, every sentence is deconstructed and assessed. CEOs need to understand that their own future and that of the organisation could depend on how effectively they “sell” themselves and their organisation. This involves how they look in front of a television camera, how they speak on radio, and how a print journalist interprets their words. The media therefore, also play a crucial role in creating perceptions of CEOs and organisations and their reputation. Managing this aspect of their leadership mandate can make or break the individual or the organisation.

The former CEO of the Australian National Australia Bank still attracts negative media comment from the business media in Australia, two years after leaving the position for his poor communication skills. Community relationships also contribute to reputation. How well a CEO explains corporate social responsibility programmes may cause members of the public to speak favourably of the organisation which in turn may increase sales, or just maintain a level of goodwill so that if a crisis occurs, the CEO and the organisation can draw on the positive feelings in the community. When dealing with governments CEOs are expected to understand party political nuances and government and opposition policies that might impact their industry. They also need to understand how to maintain a constructive dialogue to protect the organisation's interests and reputation

"Reputation leaders understand that the CEO is the leader of the company's vision and strategy and should therefore is the leader in building corporate reputation," argues Schreiber (2002:209). Kitchen and Laurence (2003:116) support this view: "It is clear that if the organization or its CEO cannot communicate its mission, brands, or values, some other organization, stakeholder, or irate public with the communication capabilities can and will."

There are many recent instances internationally, and within Australia, where CEO's have been irresponsible in their management of theirs and the organisation's reputation.

The Australian Wheat Board sold wheat to Iraq in violation of United Nations sanctions. "The AWH has lost its reputation" reported Commissioner Cole in November, 2006. The Commissioner went also on to state (Cole, 2006:12):"The Board and management failed to create, instill or maintain a culture of ethical dealing."

The CEO of Australian reinsurer HIH was sent to prison for destroying the reputation of the company and forcing it into liquidation. Peter Macdonald, the CEO of James Hardie Industries was found by a New South Government Inquiry in 2004 to have been dishonest and deceptive, and this caused a plunge in share value and a constant stream of highly negative media coverage, such as this comment: "One of the ugliest episodes in Australia's corporate history (Ackland, 2004). In a book on the James Hardie issue, it stated that Macdonald was “oblivious to the potentialities of public opinion (Haigh, 2005:328).

A more positive example Australian example was the biscuit manufacturer Arnotts which promptly recalled all its products in 1966 following an extortion threat. This action was lauded for its promptness and enhanced Arnotts reputation and goodwill (positive media comment and a no disruption to its sales growth, Jackson, 1997)). This can be contrasted with Garibaldi Meats who were criticised by a coroner in 1996 for being deliberately slow in communicating with the market after a person died from eating contaminated meat and the company was forced into liquidation.

One of Australia’s largest banks also suffered severe damage to its reputation and share price following a currency trading scandal that brought down the CEO, principally due to inaction in communicating with shareholders and analysts. Maiden (2004) wrote there was a focus on suppressing any bad news instead of engaging in a full and frank dialogue and “Had Cicutto faced the music, told it all and told it fast, there may have been a lot less to tell, and he might still be the CEO.NAB would have made some progress toward reestablishing its credibility had it addressed the real issue,” Fragiacomo (2004).

The CEOs of Enron and top-four accounting firm Arthur Anderson & Co also failed to appreciate the reputational impact of their decisions, which resulted in their organisations being destroyed.

COMMUNICATION AN ESSENTIAL MANAGERIAL SKILL

Alexander (2006) identified a group of management writers (Pincus and deBonis, 1994; Puth, 2002; Mai and Akerson, 2003 and Barrett, 2006) that have commented that communication can materially affect relationships between CEOs and shareholders, suppliers, customers, governments and communities. A United States CEO, Ray Hawley, quoted by Pincus (1994, p116) says, “Our ability (*as CEOs)* to communicate effectively, as opposed to just communicating, makes a big difference in results - and that’s true internally as well as externally”.

CEO’s should have knowledge of, and a high level of understanding of the impact that key external stakeholders can have on the organisation and must have specific communicative competencies to effectively manage that interaction. CEOs must be highly competent in all their communications and take regular soundings of the views of analysts, media, governments, shareholders and communities.

However, it is argued here, that essential communication competencies, such as listening and the appropriate use of language, as well as understanding the importance of reputation, is not a core subject of many business and management curricula (Murphy 1996).

THE CASE FOR CEO SPECIFIC COMMUNICATION COMPETENCIES

Pincus (1994: 16) makes a case for the CEO as Chief Communication Officer (CCO) being the principal communication strategist “who grasps and relies on the communication process” and who is a communication tactician “who knows how and when to employ different types of communication.” Lachotzki and Noteboom (2005:128), refer to the need for a CEO to also be the prime communicator. ”As the CEO is also the person responsible for sustaining the corporate dialogue, he must convince his (outside) board as well as any stakeholders that he feels responsible for guaranteeing the company's integrity and transparency."

Leaders, states Puth (2002:12), see communication as one of a number of functions; yet, there still remains a difficulty for leaders to communicate effectively and to ensure that meaning is shared. "Good leaders are inclined to have a better understanding of communication and an ability to communicate well in interpersonal and group situations." Puth also argues that if people and leaders are inept communicators, "the general level of communication will remain poor." These comments also apply to CEO's.

Hart and Quinn (1993) quote Mintzberg (1973,1975) who identified 10 executive leadership roles, of which four were communication centered: liaison (networking with internal and external contacts), monitoring (scanning the environment), disseminator (information transfer) and spokesman (communication to outside parties), and observed that leader effectiveness was dependent on all roles being implemented simultaneously. There are no references in the paper how these communicative roles should be assessed as a core CEO competency.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a growing body of literature that analyses the relationship between reputation and financial performance (Fombrun and Shanley, 1990;Waldman, Ramirez, House and

Puranam, 2001;Roberts and Dowling, 2002; Sabate and Puente, 2003; Dowling, 2006). Forman and Argenti (2005) explored a relationship between corporate communication and reputation (and the corporate brand). Fombrun, Gardberg and Barnett (2000) discuss the concept of reputational capital. If organisation's fail to deliver valued outcomes, the damage to reputation causes lowered revenues, decreased ability to raise capital and becomes a less desirable employer. The authors state the CEO has ultimate responsibility for overseeing an organisation's reputation and their stewardship of this task further reflects on their own reputation. They need to understand the complexity of all external relationships that impact on reputation and only approve those engagements that contribute to lowering the risk potential (promising value to investors, effective media relations, community programmes, communicating with activists, and seeking favourable government regulation).

Schreiber (2001) ostensibly examines "why CEOs often misunderstand and therefore mismanage the reputations of their companies" (p209) but offers very little supporting evidence of the actual role of the CEO in creating and maintaining an organisation's reputation. Basedo, Smith, Grimm, Rindova and Derfus (2006), refer to the role of strategic communications in constructing reputations.

"The CEO is the key communicator in the management of the corporate reputation," states Kitchen and Laurence (2003:116) and Watson (2006) assessed CEOs and reputation management in the context of corporate governance, stressing there was a direct linkage between the two.

In their review of what comprises reputation determinants, Fombrun and Shanley (2001) refer to the role of analysts, investors, social responsibility programmes, media visibility and strategy signals. They conclude that "publics appear to construct reputations from a mix of signals derived from accounting and market information, media reports, and other noneconomic clues” (p252).

This paper proposes that CEO communication attributes should be one new variable that is considered when assessing reputation due to the weight of evidence of the importance of communicating with key publics.

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DEVELOPING A RESEARCH CONSTRUCT

A conceptual framework is required that will assist those responsible for business and management school curiccula, executive leadership programmes, and CEO selection committees to assess the effective communication competencies of prospective and current CEOs.

Alexander (2006) investigated a concept developed by Bolman and Deal (1997) where four frameworks for management attributes were developed. Bolman and Deal divided theories of organisations into four conceptual perspectives (or frames), which they defined as structural (based on organisational goals, roles and technology), human resources (interdependence between people and organisations), political (power, conflict and the distribution of scarce resources), and symbolic (problems of meaning). Alexander (2006) researched the literature on effective CEO communicative behaviours and found the following attributes were consistently quoted: dialogic, listening, openness, trust, honesty, relationship management, and communicating a vision.

Alexander then tested these behaviours against the Bolman and Deal concepts for effective communication.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Alexander's (2006) research into the attributes of effective CEO communicators started with a thematic analysis to identify the key attributes of communicative success when dealing with the external environment. Attributes were recorded from a wide range of documents that included media reports, transcripts of CEO interviews, and organisational literature. Five communication behaviours were assessed as being the most significant effective predictors of effective reputation management and it is argued should therefore should be included as core CEO communication competencies. They are:

DIALOGUE:

Successful CEOs are great communicators with a vision that they can translate into a common cause according to Lachotzki and Noteboom (2005:18). "This is where dialogue fits in. Dialogue is the vehicle that creates focus and turns fear into shared uncertainty." Moore and Sonsino (2003:76) support this view: "To be an effective leader ….requires the desire to communicate and the skill to engage in dialogue" and that "very few people are explicitly taught how to talk, persuade or listen (p4)." The same authors also quote Bijur from Dauphinais (2000:76) "to be an effective leader... requires the desire to communicate and the skill to engage in dialogue." And Fairhurst and Starr (1996:226) wrote: "Leadership is about taking the risk of managing meaning. We assume a leadership role, indeed we become leaders, through our ability to decipher and communicate meanings of complex and confusing situations. Our communications actually do the work of leadership; our talk is the resource we use to get others to act."

LISTENING

Hackman and Johnson (2004) assess communication attributes as seeking feedback, having listening as a primary skill, creating and maintaining satisfying relationships with internal and external groupings, engendering a trusting work environment and being collaborative. Further reinforcement on the need for effective listening is provided by Moore and Sonsino (2003:28) where they state "listening is different from hearing" and that it requires the seeking of common ground and the building of meaning through conversation. The authors write that the criticism most often levelled at senior executives is that they don't listen. Lachotzki and Noteboom (2005:128-129) refer to CEO's making a difference by embracing the corporate dialogue which includes, "listening intently to what people within his company think- about the strategy, about execution and maybe about themselves."

OPENNESS/HONESTY/TRUST

Lachotzki and Noteboom (2005:142) state modern CEOs need to "communicate in a language suited to the company's values and norms, a language that represents a culture of openness and integrity, of checks and balances, and not one of sweeping things under the carpet." and "The CEO must accept that openness, honesty and transparency are part of his responsibility."(p125).

Effective leadership is based on relationship building, engagement, high trust levels, information being freely shared, mutual education and feedback according to Mai and Akerson (2003). They also refer to the role of trust and of leaders being open, honest and fair. Mai and Akerson also refer to the Enron example where trust was eroded with substantial damage to the reputation of the organisation and the consequent disappearance of Arthur Andersen, one of the world's largest accounting firms, which was caught in the scandal. "How leaders communicate with their people is clearly key to how trustworthy they appear and well they in turn extend trust to employees (p23)."

RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT

Bolman and Deal (1997:294) state leadership "exists only in relationships and in the imagination and perception of the engaged parties." Other behaviours, according to the authors, are to persuade or inspire, “get things done” and produce cooperative efforts.

Kotter (1988) also views leadership as building relationships and Gardner (1989), quoted by Bolman and Deal (1997) refers to long -term thinking, looking outside as well as inside and dealing with multiple constituencies.

COMMUNICATING A VISION

A core attribute of an effective CEO as discussed by Bass (1985) and Bolman and Deal (1997) is the ability to communicate a vision for the organisation.

Bass (1985:55) also quotes Bennis (1982) who concluded from a study of 80 CEOs and innovative organisational leaders that a core characteristic was ‘the capacity to create and communicate a compelling vision of a desired state of affairs.” CEOs could communicate their vision to clarify it and induce the commitment of their multiple constituencies to maintaining the organization's course.

SUMMARY OF COMMUNICATIVE BEHAVIOURS.

The key concepts, therefore, to emerge from this analysis are:

- Dialogue
- Listening
- Trust
- Openness/transparency
- Relationship management
- Visionary

These terms were then be tested within the Bolman and Deal (1997) effective leadership framework.

FRAMING EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION

"Because the world of human experience is so complex and ambiguous, frames of reference shape how situations are defined and determine what actions are taken, state Bolman and Deal (1991:510).

Framing is a technique used to structure disparate pieces of information into a meaningful structure (Patel and Xavier, 2005; Goffman, 1974; Simon and Xenos, 2000).

Bolman and Deal (1997) follow Goffman and use frames to consolidate schools of organisational thought into four perspectives. They argue frames create a mental model to assist managers to gather information, make judgments and determine how best to get things done. Nelson and Kinder (1996:1057) state, “frames are constructions of the issue: they spell out the essence of the problem, suggest how it should be thought about, and may go so far as to recommend what (if anything) should be done.”

Bolman and Deal (1984, 1991), as stated earlier, divided theories of organisations into four conceptual perspectives (or frames), which are defined as structural (based on organisational goals, roles and technology), human resources (interdependence between people and organisations), political (power, conflict and the distribution of scarce resources), and symbolic (problems of meaning). The authors, and other reviewers (Scarselletta, 2004), state that framing theory provides a systematic viewpoint for “managers to understand and combat the various problems they encounter at work from a variety of different perspectives” (Scarselletta, p342)

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CASE STUDY- JAMES HARDIE INDUSTRIES CEO

James Hardie Industries was a miner and manufacturer of asbestos products in Australia from 1917 to 1987 (Watson, 2006). It was found that asbestos is one of the causes of the lung disease mesothelioma and increasing quantities of negative publicity about James Hardie Industries and its CEO started to be published in late 2003. There were attempts by the organisation to evade responsibility for its asbestos history. This involved the company seeking to close its Australian operations and relocate its head office to the Netherlands, for the purpose, it transpired, to quarantine its financial obligations under Australian law to compensate asbestos victims. The company also created the Medical Research and Compensation Foundation which was to have future responsibility for funding medical claims from asbestos victims.

Organisational reputation issues such as Herron Pharmaceutical (alleged tampering with tablets), Arnott's (alleged tampering with biscuits) and Ansett Industries (aircraft being grounded by the authorities because of missed maintenance) were directly linked to the brand and how senior management handled them. In the Herron and Arnott's cases, the CEOs very quickly went public and took steps to remove products from the public. For Ansett, the CEO failed to appear before the media to answer to questions about the organisation's response (Watson, 2006).

In the James Hardie situation it was apparent the CEOs non-communication with media, shareholders, and the community was creating significant negative responses from the New South Wales State Government, the Australian Federal Government, all sections of the media, not just the financial specialists, and the wider community.

As a consequence of this research into the core attributes of an effective CEO communicator, the literature on framing appeared to offer one methodology for assessing the communication behaviour of the James Hardie Industries CEO.

Peter Donald Macdonald commenced as CEO of James Hardie Industries on 31 October, 1999 and resigned in late 2004 following the report of the New South Wales Government's Jackson Commission (The Special Commission of Inquiry into the Medical Research and Compensation Foundation, September, 2004).

METHODOLOGY

A content analysis was chosen as the most appropriate social science method for systematically mapping large bodies of text to find the key concepts identified from the thematic analysis and study of the Bolman and Deal (1984, 1991) framework (Hansen, Cottle, Negrine and Newbold, 1988).

Two sources were identified as containing substantial records of Peter Macdonald's own words from board papers, internal correspondence, interviews with staff and his own evidence. The transcript of the Report of the Special Commission of Inquiry into the Medical Research and Compensation Foundation, September 2004 was one, and Haigh's (2005) book *Asbestos House: The secret history of James Hardie*

Industries, was the other. A content analysis was used to assess the terminology used to describe how the CEO, Peter Donald Macdonald, publicly and communicatively managed the issue with key external publics/stakeholders (as one of the key functions of a CEO is to represent the organisation) over the period October 1999 to 2004.

"What are the dimensions chosen for analysis? Identify and count the occurrence of specific characteristics or dimensions of texts, and through this to, to be able to say something about the messages, representations of such texts and their wider social significance (Hansen, Cottle, Negrine and Newbold, 1998, p95).

Based on the research described above, the characteristics which were singled out for analysis related directly to the overall research questions that prompted the choice of content analysis in the first place

The concepts extracted from the thematic analysis were listed alongside the descriptions used by Bolman and Deal (1997) to describe effective and ineffective leadership characteristics. Table One lists those concepts identified from the thematic analysis and the Bolman and Deal (1997, 1991) framework.

TABLE ONE:

In table form the words included in the analysis, their source, and antonyms were:

Concept	Source	Antonym
Dialogue	Thematic analysis	Closed/uncommunicative
Listening	Thematic analysis	Shun/neglect
Honest	Thematic analysis	Dishonest/deceptive/manipulative
Open	Thematic analysis	Closed
Trust	Thematic analysis	Distrust
Visionary/prophet	Thematic analysis/Bolman & Deal	Realist
Relationship management	Thematic analysis	Defensive/closed
Fraud	Bolman & Deal	Truth/honest/integrity
Petty/trivial	Bolman & Deal	Important
Weak	Bolman & Deal	Strong
Fanatic	Bolman & Deal	Conservative
Architect	Bolman & Deal	Destructive
Catalyst	Bolman & Deal	Obstructive/defensive

These words were then recorded on a spreadsheet and every instance of them being used in both the Commission's findings and the Haigh book was entered.

CONTENT ANALYSIS

The content analysis highlighted the following points:

- There were no references to dialogue (in either the thematic analysis or the content analysis) but there were 11 references to "closed" communication behaviour, such as "resisted communication attempts," Commission (2004: 482); "very insular" Haigh (2006:281); "he had a flair for secrecy", Haigh (2005:208); "oyster-like on matters of corporate deliberation" Haigh (2005:345) and " no communication with Medical Research and Compensation Foundation for now," Commission (2004:519).
- There were no references to listening or trust. But the content analysis identified seven instances of behaviours which could be labelled as obfuscatory and five which were ambiguous. Neither of these are conducive to effective communication (Mohan et al,2004)
- There were 11 references to dishonest behaviour, and 11 separate references to deceptive behaviour. Examples were, "breached their duties as officers of JHI," Commission (2004:420); "false in material particulars and materially misleading" Haigh (2006:363).

- There were three references to weak behaviours and none to strong or leadership characteristics.
- In respect to relationship management, the only reference is a negative one in Haigh's (2006:328) book where the author states that Macdonald was "oblivious to the potentialities of public opinion."

CONCLUSIONS

All the Bolman and Deal (1997) references to effective and ineffective leadership from which the terms fraud, petty, weak, fanatic, architect and catalyst were drawn, appear to suggest that communicative behaviours are not deemed to be very relevant to reframing effective leadership.

Based on this analysis of the literature and Bolman and Deal's framework, it is posited that a new framework for measuring effective CEO communicative behaviour is required when dealing with reputation issues..

The dimensions need to account for factors such as apathy, insularity, obfuscation (seven references), defensiveness (six references) and ambiguity (six references). On the positive axis, concepts such as dialogue, listening, honesty, openness, trust and relationship management are primary variable by which effective CEO communicators can be identified.

It is suggested that an extra frame be considered, that of communication. Under effective leadership would be listed attributes of ‘dialogic, listener’, and listed under leadership process would be behaviours of ‘honesty, openness and trust.’ Under ineffective leadership, the descriptor would be ‘insular’ and the leadership processes, ‘defensive, dishonest and obfuscatory.’

It is apparent from this analysis the James Hardie CEO had not been aware of the negative consequences of the following actions:

- agreeing to a media release which the Commission found was untrue (dishonest);
- tried to hide the real reasons for taking the company offshore and escape liability for future asbestos claims (deceptive);
- being uncommunicative with the Medical Research and Compensation Foundation which was created by James Hardie Industries to fund future Australian asbestos victims (closed).

Macdonald’s personal reputation and that of the organisation would not have been subjected to a New South Wales State Government review, investigation of the Australian Securities and Investment Commission for possible jail able offences (Higgins, 2005) and intense negative media commentary if they had been aware of the massive negative consequences flowing from his behaviours.

Future research in this field is required that will be based on a matrix of effective behaviours (as drawn from the thematic analysis such as truthfulness, open communication, trusting and participative). It is planned to interview a series of Australian CEO's to test how these attributes contribute to their communicative and organisational effectiveness.

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