

Turning Discernment Inward

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Communication Arts

Miscommunications occur frequently in our complex, multi-media world. One of the important functions of a public relations practitioner is to identify potential for miscommunication and attempt to address and rectify what can be a very detrimental situation. As an educator of future PR practitioners, I spend a great deal of time training students to recognize these mistakes in communication, analyze and research them, and figure out how to rectify them.

Communication is a complicated process. Lasswell (1948) defined communication as “*who says what to whom in which channel with what effect*” (emphasis added). The complicated nature of humans as communicators often complicates this process, as does the recent explosion of new computer-mediated channels by which communication can take place. Quite simply, it is difficult to effectively communicate a message from one party to another and have the recipient process the message in the way that was intended by the sender.

Public relations attempts to improve this process in several ways. PR functions best by identifying specific groups of people with some common characteristic, known as publics, to whom a company or organization might communicate its messages. Narrowing the “whom” in Lasswell’s model allows the sender to tailor a message based on the public’s relationship to the organization and its stake in the organization’s success.

Public relations practitioners also employ research to best understand the public and design messages that would have the best effect its members. Tools like surveys and focus groups can aide practitioners in more effectively communicating with important publics. Students of public relations learn how to design research questions and research instruments that will help them collect the information they need to communicate effectively.

Above all, public relations is strategic. Practitioners use persuasive strategies that they feel will be most effective in convincing a public to become aware, change an attitude, or enact a behavior. Public relations involves a strategic planning process through which persuasive strategies are supplemented by detailed instructions on how to enact these strategies, which are known as tactics. Strategies and tactics are best when informed by the type of research previously mentioned.

I find that students learn better when given concrete, real-world examples of communication to work with rather than some sort of fabricated example. So when I saw the reaction to the university’s attempts to communicate the new financial plan to the faculty, I thought that this might be a great example to use with my students.

I thought this example to be especially appropriate given the importance of discernment and reflection in the Ignatian pedagogy. These principles connect very closely with my personal values. They align with my perspective as an academic and a seeker of truth that we must question everything in order to truly have conviction in our beliefs. It is in the spirit of those two principles that the project presented here was undertaken.

Method

1. A junior-level public relations class was briefed about the University's recent communication to faculty regarding the draft financial plan.
2. Class members examined emails sent to faculty regarding this matter.
3. The class discussed potential benefits of research to inform future practice.
4. Members joined one of five teams to work on:
 1. Evaluation and critique of the existing messages
 2. A survey to be sent to faculty to gather more information/feedback
 3. A questioning route for a focus group to be held with faculty members
 4. Strategies/key messages to be used in future communication
 5. Possible future communication tactics

Results

The five teams identified above presented the following results:

- **CRITIQUE OF MESSAGES**
 - Timing of initial email (Friday of Spring Break) seemed designed to "hide" announcement
 - "Do Not Reply" in email's from-address suggested that feedback was unwelcome
 - Tone of email may have come across as condescending and impersonal
 - Although email came from Fr. Graham, he would not be present at scheduled forums
 - Jargon (UPRC, FY14) was inaccessible and unclear to audience
- **FURTHER RESEARCH NEEDED**
 - Qualitative and quantitative research should be used to answer the question, "How could Xavier better communicate these changes to faculty?"
 - Focus groups could allow for a deeper understanding of how faculty view these changes and their role at Xavier
 - Survey could address issues such as faculty perceptions of proposed changes and preferred methods of communication on important issues (e-mail, forums, etc.)
- **SUGGESTED STRATEGIES AND TACTICS**
 - Key messages
 - Faculty involvement is encouraged
 - Faculty input is valued and considered
 - Strategies
 - Provide clear information to faculty
 - Increase faculty input throughout process
 - Communication tactics
 - Enable online feedback loop
 - Faculty teach during forum times
 - Avoid lengthy email communication
 - Make communication more personal

Conclusion

Students in this class responded very positively to the opportunity to offer feedback and critique of the university's communication with faculty. Students utilized traditional public relations techniques such as the analysis of communication messages and the use of both qualitative and quantitative research to better understand message recipients, generating ideas for improving the quality and effectiveness of communication between the university and members of the faculty. Their success in generating alternative methods of communication based on strategic planning principles suggests that the university would be well-served to employ such methods in future communication and supports a notion that traditional Ignatian principles of discernment and reflection are valuable at every level of the university.