
Commentary: The internal dimension of issues management practice; Conflict, or collaboration and consensus?

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This article is offered as a discussion starter. It is intended to identify an area for future research, and tentatively outline some possible approaches to that research. The area in question is the intersection of public relations specialists with other specialists such as legal advisors in the formation of issues management teams, and the impact of how those relationships are managed on issues management as a legitimate practice. Issues management is a relatively new discipline that is still searching for acceptance amongst senior management. Two recommendations included in this article -- reviewing teaching practices and codifying the practice in corporate governance guidelines -- may offer a way forward. These recommendations offer further opportunities for research and inquiry.

Early issues management advocates saw an opportunity to break with the past; to distance issues management from tactical public relations functions such as media relations, event management, and promotion. They envisaged issues management as a strategic management function providing the chance for practitioners to engage with senior management as equals and to deliver knowledge and information that had previously been seen as the preserve of strategic planners and senior management advisors. This had always been the dream of the communications professional in corporations (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). With the advent of calls for corporate social responsibility in the 1960s and 70s, and subsequent development of a theoretical issues management framework that included social exchange theory, systems theory, and rhetoric (Heath, 1999), it now appeared to be within grasp.

But a number of key questions remained. How willing were senior executives to look outside the organization and engage with stakeholders? Could practitioners position themselves internally to control the issues management process? How could the practice be developed alongside other strategic management practices that impinged on issues management? Chase (1982, cited in Ewing, 1997), who coined the phrase 'issues management' in the late 1970s, predicted the struggle for acceptance when he stated:

If we in the public relations profession don't make a major effort to study this new management development and shape our skills and techniques to serve it, we will be squeezed out by economists, public affairs specialists and, especially, the public policy analysts from the nation's think tanks (Ewing, 1997, p. 186).

The early pioneers thus saw the main challenge as gaining acceptance for the process of issues management as a method to engage external stakeholders, and worked to establish the practice by introducing the concept to executives through business and management journals. In some senses this ignored the importance of establishing guidelines for internal stakeholders, the advisors who make up the issues management team, and how they are to act together in framing policy. Internal considerations of this type took a minor role in a wider discussion about meeting the demands of external stakeholders and engaging in public policy development. The result is an ongoing divide between issues management theory and practice. And, despite the efforts of its

proponents, issues management has not gained acceptance for the communications counsellor at the boardroom table with the speed, or to the extent, that its early advocates imagined (Clarkson, 1993).

The time is ripe for change. The recent corporate collapses in the US (for example, Enron) have piqued public interest in business practices and outcomes (ABC Radio National, 2002). Communities are once again becoming distrustful of large corporate concerns; witness hostility levels at recent World Trade Organization meetings where protesters voiced vehement opposition to big business (see for example protest material from the Seattle WTO demonstrations archived at Seattle Independent Media Center, 2003).

Transparency in business dealings is once again under intense scrutiny from government regulators and social commentators. The stakes in issues management have never been higher.

Issues management policy making is a group practice and as such it is naïve to suggest that public affairs practitioners can dominate the process. Who controls the process is the concern evident in the discourse, but collaboration between the disciplines, in particular lawyers and public affairs advisors, offers an opportunity to develop the practice through an interdisciplinary approach.

Influence in issues management policy-making

Issues management policy is developed by public affairs advisors in association with other corporate advisors; accountants, lawyers, sales and marketing managers, as well as senior management. The agenda that each brings to the issues management team is understandably different. The desire for open communication and dialogue, inherent in the public affairs approach, may not be readily accepted by all corporate advisors making up the team.

Heath (1999) stated that one of the many challenges for the issues management

practitioner is to become “well versed in interdisciplinary backgrounds; providing the vision to see public policy implications for an entire organization” (p. 78). He recognized that issues management is a function that impinges upon, and is impinged upon by, many other corporate functions. How exactly this could be achieved, however, was left unanswered. In general, the academic literature is silent on how to tackle this issue.

Influence in issues management decision-making -- who controls and wields authority – is, however, a concern that appears throughout the practitioner discourse. This concern is exacerbated by the absence of corporate regulations to manage issues management teams and a lack of recommendations on how the team should operate in corporate codes of conduct or corporate governance guidelines. It is left to the auspices of the CEO or board members to determine the approach to follow and whose advice to take.

Conflicting agendas in issues management

Practitioner literature is peppered with references to conflict between legal and public affairs counsel. Cooper (1992), and Register and Larkin (1997), in separate articles referred to the antagonism that often characterizes the relationship. While Cooper (1992) claimed that lawyers are often distrustful of public affairs advisors’ motives in releasing written material, Register and Larkin (1997) were more direct in their criticism of the legal approach, and advised public affairs advisors to “get to the CEO first” (p. 201). Domination, rather than cooperation, appears to be their preferred method of managing differing agendas.

Lukaszewski (1995a) also reviewed relationships between communication and legal advisors in issues management, concluding that conflict inevitably stems from different backgrounds and training:

The public affairs process is charmingly intuitive and delightfully broad in its acceptance of plausible potential scenarios. The lawyer is far more focused, less inclined to speculate and often antagonistic to the idea of extensive public communication preparation (p. 103)

In one of the few empirical studies of internal issues management practice, Fitzpatrick and Shubow Rubon (1995) conducted media content analysis of sexual harassment cases in large US corporations to explore the hypothesis that legal considerations take precedence over communication. Of the twenty-three articles they reviewed, more than two thirds of the cases were dominated by legal strategy rather than communications strategy. They concluded that legal counsel often held sway over communication counsel, “based on the fear of litigation that may accompany the disclosure of information” (Fitzpatrick & Shubow Rubon, 1995, p. 7). Their study illustrated that the principles of open dialogue and corporate social responsibility can fall victim to corporate fear of legal action. This, in turn, produces a ‘closed system’ response to issues, rather than the ‘open system’ advocated in Heath’s (1999) theoretical framework.

The thorny question of who drives the issues management process remains a central theme in issues management practice. In answering the question of who wields more influence it is reasonable to assume that senior management with process-based training accustomed to ‘tangible outcomes’ (Lukaszewski, 1995b, n. p.) similar to law may view the legal approach as more influential and accessible than the perceived ‘intuitive’ approach of communication. Consequently, issues management has not always fulfilled its early promise of placing the communication advisor at the forefront of strategic corporate policy-making (Clarkson, 1993). Lukaszewski (1995b) argues that:

The public affairs consultant is often left ‘outside the room’ when issues have decidedly legal overtones. When this happens, the reputation and perceived ineffectiveness of public affairs and issues management are at fault, not the legal counsel brought in or the executives who trust attorneys and seek their assistance. (n.p.)

The key question remains; how can the practice of issues management move forward to gain greater acceptance?

Moving forward: towards a multi-disciplinary approach

Issues management and corporate communication are increasingly functions that demand an understanding of complex business processes. Corporate accounting practices, public policy processes, government legislation and regulators, risk management, and business planning techniques are all part of the equation that must be understood if the industry is to effectively mix in top management circles.

Equipping public relations graduates with the necessary skills to offer strategic counsel may provide part of the answer. In 1996, L’Etang and Pieczka criticized public relations education in UK universities, claiming that it amounted to industry training not ‘academic’ or business study. They argued that corporate communication and issues management practice requires strategic thinkers, suggesting that traditional public relations education and training were out of step.

Piper and Thoreau (1998), academics from the Auckland Institute of Technology, presented an article at the 1998 Australian Communications Skills Conference arguing for a far more interdisciplinary business curriculum in order to develop the requisite workplace skills, especially group skills, that students would use in practice. They argued for an integrated business degree to provide the “natural learning” (Piper & Thoreau,

1998, p.26) that came from mixing different disciplines. Piper and Thoreau's study draws heavily on the systems approach to learning, rather than the traditional approach of discipline boundaries.

Such multi-disciplinary learning could be transferred to the issues management curriculum. That is, re-creating the issues management team in an academic setting would provide valuable insight into the different agendas that students are likely to encounter in corporate settings. A thorough grounding in legal principles, corporate policy-making processes, and other related fields would produce a new breed of practitioners able to understand and respond to criticism and move towards 'tangible outcomes' in issues management practice.

Developing legitimacy

The outcomes of issues management practice are not easy to evaluate against bottom line measurement. The basis of the industry is to recommend that corporations act as 'good corporate citizens' based on the principle of corporate social responsibility, a notion that does not always sit well with managers trained to demand financial outcomes (Clarkson, 1993, p. 10). Evaluation of outcomes has always bedevilled the public relations industry and issues management is no exception. Lack of empirical evidence to support issues management practice is compounded by the fact that issues management is, by its very nature, a long-term function that is unlikely to produce results measured in annual financial cycles.

Presenting the value of issues management is problematic and demands that senior management share the issues management advisor's orientation towards communication and transparency. Case studies revealing the damage that can be done if corporations ignore the external demands of stakeholders are often used to present the case for issues management, and that process does have a certain resonance with senior management, but when it comes down to

the line it is the 'intuitive' aspect of issues management that creates difficulty.

Greater legitimacy for the practice may come from existing management structures and corporate regulations. Law Professor John Farrar sees merit in placing issues management under the corporate governance umbrella, as a management function governed by a clear set of regulations and guidelines (Personal communication, Prof. J Farrar, Bond University, July 3, 2002). This would give the practice greater visibility and legitimacy and demonstrate how it operates in the corporate setting. This approach may include producing a set of guidelines to govern the function of the issues management team, offering greater transparency and accountability.

Conclusion: The internal dimension of issues management: driven by conflict or consensus?

The title and thesis of this article present a challenge to current thinking about issues management practice. In this article, re-defining issues management practice is viewed from the internal perspective rather than the traditional external focus of the discourse. The purpose is two-fold; to suggest that the theoretical orientation of practitioners often produces conflict in the issues management team, and to argue that ignoring or glossing this internal tension, and perpetuating practitioners' desire for control of the issues management process, is a barrier to achieving the collaboration and consensus that might drive the practice on to new heights.

Issues management is a relatively new discipline that is still searching for acceptance amongst senior management. Two recommendations included in this article -- reviewing teaching practices and codifying the practice in corporate governance guidelines -- may offer a way forward to achieve collaboration rather than conflict. These recommendations

offer further opportunities for research and inquiry.

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