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## Appreciative public relations; An alternative to the problem-solution loop.

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*Public relations practice can benefit enormously from stepping outside the traditional 'problem-solution-next-problem' thinking loop, and embracing the alternative approach offered by Appreciative Inquiry. This commentary signals a research agenda which will be outlined in more detail in a forthcoming full-length paper. The author welcomes feedback and discussion on the work in progress; please see contact details at the end of the article.*

Public relations (PR) practitioners see themselves, and are seen by others, as professional communication, reputation, and issues problem-solvers. Yet such a strong orientation on problems often delivers short-term results that produce yet another round of dilemmas to be dealt with. This 'loop' can undermine management confidence in the ability of public relations to deliver long-term benefits, potentially constraining the public relations function. Results-oriented managers may be reluctant to fund public relations programmes if they are not seen to be delivering sustained benefit to the organisation.

PR practitioners often rely more on experience and creativity than on application of structured methodologies. They seek to solve problems through research (often informal, at least in the early stages of a project) and through use of their own insights gained through previous work. In large consultancies a proprietary methodology may be used in some cases. For example, some firms have developed their own multi-step approach to issues management. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a methodology that practitioners should consider at least as a complement to traditional problem-solving approaches. Unlike these strategies, AI

provides a foundation for constructing positive outcomes in a participative and more robust fashion, thereby optimising the longevity of public relations initiatives built on this basis.

In practice and in theory, public relations stands on a foundation of problem-solving. Academics believe this: writers such as Newsom, Turk and Krukeberg (2000), who comment that "PR people have to be problem finders and solvers and, preferably, problem preventers" (p. 16) are joined by Kendall (1996), who observes that, "(t)he end product of research for a [public relations] campaign, of whatever type, is the statement of the problem or opportunity in such a way that the problem can be solved or the opportunity successfully exploited" (p. 235).

Johnston and Zawawi (2003) identify "problem-solver/manager" as one of the primary roles public relations practitioners hold, while Hendrix (2004) argues that the "public relations process is a method for solving problems" (p. 4). Practitioners also view their work in a problem-related framework: for example Whitney Small, who comments that "PR emphasises problem solving. It involves understanding the needs of an enterprise, the challenges it faces, its goals and the methods in (*sic*) which its problems would be solved so as to meet its goals" (cited in Qiaoxin, 2002, n.p.). In 1999, the head of the Public Relations Institute of Australia's National Education Committee referred to Australian research highlighting "skills in communication problem-solving as an essential requirement in preparing people for entry into a public relations career" (Anderson, 1999, p. 123).

## Problems with problem-solving

Public relations practice may include social marketing campaigns to achieve individual behaviour change deemed to be a social good, or lobbying campaigns targeting policymakers. In both cases, such campaigns may need to be sustained over extended periods of time in order to achieve desired outcomes. However, much PR practice is dictated by the shorter-term horizons of quarterly stock exchange reporting, or immediate issues or crisis management.

Short-term problem fixes – often developed in the nature of time-limited consultancy work – in their nature do not represent long-term resolution (although some issues do, of course, require short-term ‘holding’ actions to enable longer-term approaches to be developed). An unrelieved sequence of short-term initiatives and temporary results can undermine management confidence in the ability of public relations to deliver long term value to the organisation, potentially leading to reduced budgets and even, in extremis, elimination of the PR function. (It needs to be noted, though, that quick, effective public relations work in the heat of a crisis can build management buy-in to ongoing support of PR.)

Public relations is not simply about dealing with dilemmas; it may also involve helping organisations identify, then exploit, opportunities to advance their interests. Organisations may engage in both proactive programmes, deriving from opportunities, and in reactive programmes, responding to events that affect or may affect the organisation’s ability to operate. Identifying opportunities is one of the purposes of environmental scanning and situational analysis (Heath, 1997) although such activities – part of an issues management process – are not always carried out by public relations practitioners (Heath, 1997, p 10).

In today’s marketplace, problem-solving is considered a fundamental skill, sought by employers in those they consider hiring; even proactive work is seen in terms of getting in early to deal with a potential problem or attacking a small problem before it becomes a bigger one. Yet in public relations practice, such

problem-solving competence is on its own often insufficient to create effective long-term responses to organisations’ PR issues. (In today’s uncertain environment, the author considers a strategy effective over a 2-5-year period to be a long-term one.) Long-term strategies are more valuable as they cost less and by use of in-process evaluation may be adjusted as the environment alters, in contrast with continuing development of short timeframe ‘solutions’. Further, if organisations – both *per se* and in terms of the challenges they face – are seen as problems to be solved, they will be described in language that focuses on deficit, on what the organisation thinks it would like to have but does not presently possess.

Problem-solution approaches may appeal to practitioners because, some researchers say, humans have a ‘negativity bias’: the brain reacts more strongly to stimuli it deems negative (Marano, 2003). Marano argues that it takes frequent small positive experiences rather than occasional big ones to tilt the scales towards happiness (p. 2). Such a bias contrasts with the recognition in psychology that this field has become a ‘victimology’ treating mental illness within a theoretical framework focused on repairing damage (Seligman, 1998). According to psychologist Martin Seligman, founder of the ‘Positive Psychology’ movement:

Psychology is not just the study of disease, weakness and damage; it is also the study of strength and virtue. Treatment is not just fixing what is wrong; it also is building what is right (Seligman, in press, p. 2).

Seligman comments on the need for psychology practitioners “to recognise that much of the best work they do is amplifying the strengths rather than repairing their patients’ weaknesses” (1998, p. 2). In the organisational sphere, Appreciative Inquiry likewise endorses the idea that building on and amplifying what is right (AI practitioners call it ‘what is working well’) is fundamental to developing personal and organisational health.

AI goes further to assert that organisations are heliotropic (Srivastva & Cooperrider, 1990).

Plants are heliotropic, that is, they turn towards the sun to receive nourishment. In the same way, say AI proponents, organisations turn in the direction of the positive, growth-enhancing influences available to them. As Srivastva et al. note, “the entropic forces of organisational life, the naturally fragmenting and deteriorating processes” must be offset if the organisational system is to survive (1990, p. xix). The human qualities that can be deployed in this counter-action include those Seligman identifies as strengths most likely to act as buffers against mental illness: “courage, optimism, interpersonal skill, work ethic, hope, honesty and perseverance” (1998, p. 2).

Public relations practitioners often contend with the effects of entropic organisational forces as these contribute to the creation of issues, to the potential detriment of the organisation’s reputation. Heath defines issues as “matters of concern” to an organisation (1997, p. 5). Issues and reputation management – both sub-disciplines within the wider field of PR – need not, however, be confined to contending with decay, deterioration and difficulty. Both can be recruited to the task of not only ‘offsetting’ such influences but also constructing (AI would say, ‘co-constructing’) mutually beneficial relationships with stakeholders; which, many contemporary PR scholars agree, is a primary role of public relations (Cutlip Center, & Broom, 1994; Heath, 1997).

However, there is a hurdle to be overcome: the language that has developed as organisation members and those employed to advise and assist the organisation operate on the assumption that organisations themselves as well as individual challenges they face are problems to be solved. The vocabulary of organisational deficit includes phrases such as ‘low morale’, ‘executive burnout’ and ‘group think’. Such a vocabulary, which often finds its formal expression in statements, newsletters, intranet announcements and speeches crafted by public relations practitioners, can colour organisation members’ expectations and behaviours, contributing to the production of intensified experience of the situations to which it refers.

There is room for a counter-cyclical movement towards a constructive vocabulary which will help build a ‘virtuous cycle’ of positive expectations and organisation-enhancing behaviours. Such a movement would recognise that ‘Important human processes like communication, decision-making and conflict management are effected more by how the people involved make meaning out of their interactions than by skilful application of any particular technique’ (Bushe, n.d., p. 1). Appreciative Inquiry “rationalises and reinforces the habit of mind that moves through the world in a generative frame, seeking and finding images of the possible rather than scenes of disaster and despair” (Watkins & Cooperrider, 2000, p. 1). Such a habit of mind, if adopted by PR practitioners, would require a fundamental reconceptualisation of their role and methodologies. Such a reconceptualisation would include public relations playing a leading part in developing a more constructive vocabulary.

Appreciative Inquiry emerged from the doctoral programme at Case Western Reserve University in the 1980s. David Cooperrider, a doctoral student, was doing a conventional organisational analysis of ‘what’s wrong with the human side of the organisation’, focusing on The Cleveland Clinic. He became amazed at the level of positive co-operation, innovation and egalitarian governance he discovered. His doctoral supervisor, Suresh Srivastva, suggested Cooperrider’s excitement at this discovery be made the focus of his dissertation. Cooperrider went on to focus completely on a ‘life-centric’ analysis of the factors contributing to the effective functioning of the clinic when it was at its best, ignoring everything else. His report created a stir; and a request from the Board for ways to use the approach he outlined with the whole organisation. Appreciative Inquiry as it is now developed from this original work, and is based on several key assumptions:

- You create more effective organisations by focusing on what you want more of, not what you want less of
- Whatever you want more of already exists, even if only in small quantities

- It's easier to create change by amplifying the positive qualities of a group or organisation than by trying to fix the negative qualities
- Through the act of inquiry we create the social realities we are trying to understand
- Getting people to inquire together into the best examples of what they want more of creates its own momentum toward creating more positive organisations.

There are several other central principles:

- Every system works to some degree. It is important to discover the positive, life-giving force within the system and to appreciate ('value') the 'best of what is'. (This is helpful to PR practitioners because it is a non-threatening angle of approach: clients feel they are inviting you in to assess and affirm rather than to hammer them about what is going wrong).
- 'Inquiry' implies a recognition that a process of discovery is involved (no assumption that a pre-determined answer will 'fit' the situation).
- Knowledge generated by the inquiry should be applicable. That which is both possible and relevant needs to be considered.
- Systems are capable of becoming more than they are, and they can learn to guide their own evolution – so provocative challenges and bold statements of 'what might be' are important.
- The process of inquiry is a collaborative, system-wide one.
- The act of asking a question (such as, 'How can we improve our reputation') influences the system's reality in some way, and starts to achieve change.
- We 'grow toward what we persistently ask questions about'. (Rossi, 1999).

Other assumptions include the constructionist principle that the language we use constructs our reality. Horowitz and Bordens argue that people tend to be cognitive misers in constructing social reality, with limited capacity

to understand information and an inclination to use only enough effort to get the job done (1995, p. 91). Public relations practitioners are often tasked to influence the process of social reality construction through selecting and strategically deploying language that will frame a particular event, issue or organisational policy. This selection can include 'spin', a pejorative term that means 'when an idea or situation is expressed or described in a clever way that makes it seem better than it really is, especially in politics (Spin, n.d). (An example was provided by a practitioner friend who, retained by home construction interests, sought to reposition a widely publicised 'leaky buildings syndrome' as a 'weather-tightness of homes' issue.) Public relations has become such an equivocal concept that government and corporate organisations are increasingly replacing job and department titles with synonyms.

This strategic selection of language can also be used in communication designed to motivate and encourage desired behaviour in an organisation, in line with the tendency of human systems to project ahead of themselves "a horizon of expectation that brings the future powerfully into the present as a causal agent" (Srivastva & Cooperrider, 1990, p. 97). In selecting this terminology, PR practitioners may be complicit in using language as a means of control to create "self-fulfilling expectations within groups, organisations or whole societies" (Srivastva & Cooperrider, 1990, p. xvii).

Yet in seeking to influence the 'interpretive schemes' that members of a particular group use to give life and meaning to their actions and decisions (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) when fulfilling a brief from a client or employer, there is potential for practitioners to choose to be more generative than this.

Again, a relentless focus on problems constrains an organisation from progress through its persistent use of 'deficit' language, stressing what the organisation does not have rather than what it does possess. PR practitioners can become caught up in the vocabulary of deficit, and perpetuate it through press releases, intranet announcements, and their discourse about the organisation's situation. In



this way, they can become associated with the organisation's problem syndrome, detracting from the credibility of their work. Employees expected to 'buy-in' to a positive vision of their organisation's future understandably struggle when the culture is focused on problems.

For this reason alone, Appreciative Inquiry is a tool PR people need to understand and know how to apply. It taps into the energy and commitment of stakeholders both inside and outside the organisation and recruits their insights to the task of building a future for the organisation in which everyone is involved. In my work with a small organisation, Appreciative Inquiry helped to elicit constructive responses from a group of people concerned about a repositioning of their organisation that had significant implications for job responsibilities. In consulting to a national organisation, AI was an inviting framework for semi-structured group interviews with people ranging from telephone operators to managers. In this latter case, the process helped confirm that the organisation was doing the right things: its execution of them had become tired.

Why should all this matter to the practitioner? It should matter because clients and employers expect them to deliver robust results that directly influence the achievement of organisational objectives, and existing approaches often fall short of this expectation. AI is one way of improving public relations' ability to deliver a more reliable, resilient result.

Is Appreciative Inquiry about wishing problems away? Accenting the positive and pretending the challenges do not exist? No; but there is a case for approaching issues from a different perspective. Practitioners presented with a 'problem,' view their professional reputation as contingent on coming up with a workable 'solution'; and it usually is. But what would happen if they took a different angle: 'What is working around here? How can we make more of it? If there are issues, what resources do we have to bring to them?'

This is the territory of Appreciative Inquiry. To explore what AI would mean for PR practice would not be easy for a practitioner (or a PR academic, for that matter!).

Getting out of a problem-solution thinking loop can be frustratingly difficult, let alone persuading clients and employers to adopt a different perspective. But for public relations people willing to make the effort, Appreciative Inquiry can help draw on the resources of an organisation's community in a way that will strengthen and support both the role and the outcomes produced by the PR function.

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