PUBLIC RELATIONS PROFESSIONALS’ PERCEPTION OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AS A MANAGEMENT FUNCTION

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ABSTRACT

Conflicts are a part of daily life that people encounter at home, work, and in organizations. It is evident that organizational conflicts are becoming more complex. In this respect, it is important for senior executives not to disregard these conflicts and involve public relations professionals in the conflict management processes. Hence, it is expected that public relations professionals become participants in the strategic planning process and that senior management relies on their experience and talents during the strategic planning process of organizations and resolution of issues. Another definition of public relations has emerged over the past years, even though the recent definitions of public relations focus on developing mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics. Glen T. Cameron from University of Missouri defines public relations as management of conflict and competition strategically for the benefit of one’s own organization and, if possible, mutual benefit of organizations and individuals. It is impossible to disregard the influence of public relations professionals on managing the conflicts between an organization and its peers, and hence it is important to conduct further research on their approach to conflict management. With this motive, research questions have been generated based on the data presented by Professor Kenneth Plowman as a result of his analysis of strategic management of public relations in conflict management. Using the semi-structured interview technique, public relations professionals in Turkey were asked to describe their approach to conflict management.

Keywords: public relations, conflict, conflict management, public relations professionals.

INTRODUCTION

Today, conflicts both in workspace and private life are intensifying, and public relations experts are increasingly expected to play an active role in their resolution. The survival of corporations depends on their resolution of conflicts, and public relations professionals must take an active role in the resolution via strategic transformation. Due to the fact that conflicts are becoming more complex and starting...
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to include more issues, there may be differences in the conflict resolution strategies of public relations experts. The literature reveals a scarcity of the studies in this field.

Furthermore, conflicts exist in all societies, and they are handled as a significant and dynamic process. It is possible to encounter conflicts on personal, interpersonal, in-group, intergroup, and institutional levels. Moreover, the concept is not only analyzed within the administrative sciences but also within many other disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, political sciences, and international relations. With regards to public relations, the literature reveals that public relations increases its efficiency by forming long-term relationships with the strategic stakeholders, and reducing conflicts between the corporation and its target audience. It is emphasized that, for the efficiency of the corporations, public relations should act as the problem solver (Grunig, 2006).

Public relations experts are defined in corporations as individuals who observe the inner and external publics in order to foresee possible conflicts between the corporation and the shareholders. The long term survival of a corporation depends on clarifying the shared interests between itself and its stakeholders. Corporations must communicate effectively to resolve the conflicts. The two-way symmetrical model being define insists that the public relations experts not be ignored in the resolution of conflict. Management strategies should address how the public relations experts position themselves and apply these strategies in the case of a conflict.

Conflict and its Management

Similar to most concepts in social sciences, conflict also has different definitions. Just as a fight that includes physical violence is defined as a conflict, verbal arguments are also considered as conflicts (Karip, 2013). Although it is generally assumed that definitions of conflict vary from one researcher to another, it is also possible to view the concept as an interaction of the interdependent parties who perceive opposing purposes and values and consider the other party as an obstructer against the realization of their own purposes (Copley, 2008). McGoldrick & Lynch (2005), note that conflicts occur in cases where resources are scarce, there is no or little communication between the parties, parties have misperceptions, there are problems pertaining to the past, interaction between the parties is discounted, and there is an unequal distribution of power. They emphasize that conflict is not the same thing as violence and that it may be constructive when managed effectively.

Organizational conflict occurs when people take actions that are incompatible with their colleagues, community members, or individuals in their networks who benefit from the products or services of the institution (Rahim, 2002). The results of the conflict and whether the experiences during the conflict are harmful or beneficial may vary depending on the quality of the conflict, the parties’ approach, and social judgments of the results. The conflicts that cannot be managed may harm the institutions and individuals, but in cases where they contribute to the resolution of the problems, they can be functional. Therefore, conflicts may have positive as well as negative results (Karip, 2013). By emphasizing that conflict may have positive outcomes, if managed effectively, conflict management becomes even more important.

In the last 25 years, institutions have changed their approaches to conflict management and have adapted themselves to managing organizational conflicts in a more strategic and proactive way (Pekka & Siira 2010). Conflict management can be defined as parties in conflicts taking mutual actions to move from disagreement to
resolution. It does not mean that a conflict must always be resolved and completed after an agreement. Institutional effectiveness might require that a slight conflict be managed via appropriate strategies in different situations (Karip, 2013). There are a number of different conceptualizations of conflict management strategies in the literature. In terms of public relations, the concept of conflict is utilized theoretically for the resolution of problems.

**Public Relations and Conflict Management**

There is no unanimous agreement concerning the definition of public relations. This is an example of the subdivisions of social sciences. Communication forms the basis of public relations, which is defined as a management duty enhancing the communication between an institution and the target public to form and maintain mutual communication (Peltekoğlu, 2013). Public relations, defined as a management function, is expected to contribute the management of the conflicts. Lately, this expectation has increased.

It is expected that public relations practitioners participate in strategic management. Executives rely on the experience and skills of the public relations experts in the strategic planning of the institution and the resolution of its problems (Plowman, 2005a). Conflicts between shareholders and institutions need public relation experts’ skill and care in problem solving, and public relation experts are expected to contribute to the institutional management of the responses to the conflicts (Plowman, 2005b). Grunig and Hunt (1984) present four public relations models based on the historical process of public relations and the communication styles applied in them. The two-way symmetric model, the latest phase of these four, includes the strategies of negotiation and conflict resolution that can be used for the changes necessary in the behaviors and attitudes of the institution and the target public. It is stressed that conflicts must be resolved through negotiation or communication (Okay & Okay, 2007). However, since the application of the two-way symmetric model represents the interests of the institution, it is said that the model has a mixed motive, the combination of two-way symmetric and asymmetric models (Steyn, 2011). The mixed motive model includes the use of basic short-term asymmetrical practices in a symmetric philosophy (Van Dyke, 2005). In the late 1990s, there was a change in the purpose of public relations from the communication-centered towards communication improvement with the institutional shareholders (Steyn, 2001). In response to the criticism that the symmetric model cannot be realized in practice, Grunig (2004) stated that new ideas about the model were being developed. He designed a new model as part of a more comprehensive theory instead of handling the public relations in four separate models. This model is defined as the two-way symmetric model of the public relations, based on dialogue as the tool to form and continue effective relationships as opposed to the two-way asymmetric model.

The most recent model covers both symmetry and asymmetry as a two-way practice. Developed in 1995, it was used by institutions for negotiation and agreement, providing a common ground between conflicting interests. The new model of symmetry does not exclude the asymmetric approach to reach symmetric results (Grunig, 2004). The new model of symmetry indicates that institutions and shareholders have conflicting interests and common ground can be achieved for a win-win situation through negotiation and cooperation. For an institution to gain the best
position, the use of asymmetric tactics should be taken into consideration (Grunig, 2004). Grunig (2004) specified that experts must have knowledge about the strategies they can use in different fields, and mentions that he has searched for and found strategies that could be used by public relations experts consistent with Plowman’s suggestions for conflict resolution. Plowman (2005) presents the principles of strategic management below as a result of his study:

**Strategic thinking**
- Boundary span the open systems environment with strategic stakeholders
- Incorporate the mission, goals and objectives of the organization
- Take a long-range view of the effects of organization actions

**Solve problems both internally and externally**
- Acknowledge concerns of the other side
- Encourage joint fact-finding
- Use the mixed motive model of public relations

**Use sound judgement**
- Commit to minimize impacts of consequences for the other side
- Act responsibly, admit mistakes, and share power
- Act in a trustworthy fashion at all times

Plowman’s principles should be taken into consideration in the management of conflicts within the frame of public relations. Research questions from the study are posed to public relations experts in Turkey.

**Purpose and Method**

This study aims to reveal perspectives of public relations experts in Turkey on the subject of conflict management with reference to the vision that public relations experts are effective in the management of conflicts between institutions and shareholders. For this purpose, research questions have been formed as Grunig suggests. This implies an analysis of strategic management of public relations in the management of conflicts, as Plowman concludes in his findings. The present study used a half-structured interview technique to ask questions of 10 public relations experts in Turkey. Interviewees consisted of experts in the agencies and active private institutions in Istanbul. All of the interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants. The duration of the interviews varied between 30 minutes and 1 hour and 30 minutes.

**Findings**

As a public relations expert, do you consider that you play an active role in the resolution of conflicts? What is your approach to the conflict resolution procedure?

First, the experts were asked whether they play an active role in conflict resolution. Among the participants, there were those who emphasized that they definitely have an active role:

Of course, we play an active role. Many crisis scenarios occur on the side of the institutions that we work with in the case of a conflict. These conflict situations usually occur after these crisis communication scenarios. We usually try to act as objectively as possible. If the institution we represent must take step backwards, we manage this convincing process in a bidirectional way. We, as public relations experts, pay attention
and strive to be fair in order to protect both our customer and our target mass (C - Agency employee).

Most of the participants stated that they try to find effective resolutions:

I try to bring effective resolutions using the powers and responsibilities. I have per my job definition (E - Private institution employee).

Yes, I play an active role because I am the only person who can make a statement to the General Manager in the case of a conflict and interfere during a possible crisis in the sector where I work. Moreover, since we work with almost all the departments and their authorized people as public relations experts, I try to overcome the conflict situations with a resolution, oriented approach (F - Private institution employee).

They specify that public relations experts must have a proactive approach toward the formation of conflicts, and play an active role in conflict resolution:

Yes, I believe I play an active role in conflict resolution as a public relations expert. Yet I consider that the prominent duty of a public relations expert is to present a proactive approach foreseeing the situation that can lead to conflicts, and to avoid approaches to drag the institution to a crisis (H- Agency employee).

Firstly, we create the shareholder map to avoid conflict. We detect the potential or possible conflicts beforehand and take precautions against them. It is also important to plan what to do beforehand. When a conflict occurs, the role of the communicator is highly significant. He must have a very active role in foreseeing the potential conflicts and protecting the interests of the institution that he serves in the direction of its strategies (D - Agency employee).

Do you consider the duties, purposes, long-term plans of the institutions in the resolution of conflicts?

All the participants indicated that public relations experts must act in accordance with the purposes and strategies of the institution and manage the conflicts with these purposes and strategies in mind.

Institutions always have a strategy. There is a purpose and there is a strategy that shows the way to reach this purpose. It is reflected throughout the whole institution. In general, this strategy must be taken into consideration in the conflicts resolution procedure. We have to say what we want to say in accordance with this strategy (A- Private institution employee).

... It includes the business targets, short, middle, long-term business strategies. These are the points, which the communicator must refer to (D- Agency employee).

Surely, if there is a conflict in the institutional perspective, to act in accordance with the existing institutional structures and standards is our principle duty and action (F- Private Institution employee).

Surely, institution's strategy is very important in the management of conflicts. Management strategy prepared in accordance with the mission of the institutions must coincide with the communication strategy. Thus, it directly affects the conflict management strategy in the approach of public relations. During the conflict management, a communication strategy which will recede from the institutional promises, abuse the trust, will affect the institutional image negatively and harm the prestige of the institution must be avoided (G - Agency employee).
Are the interests of the other party important for you in the conflict resolution? Do you try to find common ground?

Almost all the participants agree on finding common elements. Public relations experts working in agencies report that they pay attention to the interests of the opposite party. Moreover, experts working at the public relations departments of the private institutions clearly indicate that they prioritize the interests of the institutions they work for. In this respect, they indicate that they act in the direction of the institution’s interest, yet they cannot ignore the importance of finding common ground to resolve conflicts.

I believe the necessity of favoring the interests of both parties and especially finding common elements eases/accelerates the resolution. Ignoring the opposite party and their interests leads you to think that you have resolved it. Yet it comes back to you at some point. Yet, if you find a resolution that both satisfy him and yourself, which is possible, you gain a partner for yourself. Therefore, you should look at the cases together with the opposite party (I - Agency employee).

We do not ignore the interests of the opposite party but we do not act in the direction of its interests. Our job is to mediate. Thus, we surely observe, conduct research, watch and find a common element. In addition, we try to be reconciliatory working on the common elements (C - Agency employee).

One of the most significant functions of the public relations experts is to develop a communication strategy, which will contribute to the prestige increase of the institution. As communicators, it is very important that we know that institution prestige must be achieved through honest, clear and sincere messages to the public. Thus, I try to have an attitude, which will not put the company behind the eight ball, harm the prestige and yet consider the public conscience as prominent (B - Private institution employee).

Common elements must be found. Yet communicators generally remain faithful to the interests of their own institutions as a first step. Therefore, they may always not be able to act in favor of the opposite party’s interests and reach an agreement. In the conflicts, the interests of the institution are usually taken into consideration (J - Private institution employee).

What is the public relations model that you apply in the resolution of the conflicts? (Two-way symmetric/ two-way asymmetric/ karma motivated)

Most of the participant mentioned that the ideal model of communication is the symmetric one, yet the asymmetric communication style was also used, depending on the case:

The model we apply is exactly the two-way symmetric model. Yet sometimes we also apply the asymmetric model, because first we get the briefing about the conflict from the institution. We certainly base that briefing on research. We never act with the ungrounded data. There is also a briefing process, and after this briefing process, we observe the responses coming from the social media, press or the target mass and we use questionnaires to analyze. We re-evaluate their attitudes after the questionnaires. We assess the external perception depending on those attitudes. If we have to change something on the side of the institution again, we dialogue with the institution and try to change the approach there. So in brief, a two-way symmetric system functions as a general frame. Yet until this two-way symmetric system is held, there occurs an
asymmetric method based on briefing and research and the symmetric communication model forming in the last level (C – Agency employee).

What we suggest and prefer is the two way symmetric model, because doing what you want and dictating something unilaterally without mutual feedback or passively listening the response of the other side without taking any action is outdated. In the 21st century, whether you like it or not, thanks to applications such as social media, everything is symmetric and bidirectional. No institution has the luxury of saying “I act as I like to, and ignore what is coming from outside” (D – Agency employee).

It depends on the structure of the conflict, yet I mostly use two-way symmetric model (F – Private institution employee).

There should be mutualism and people should listen to each other. Everyone suggests their own idea in their effort to achieve common ground. We try to find this. Nowadays, no resolution is achieved without doing it. You cannot manage and act on behalf of the company. The world has changed (G – Private institution employee).

What are your responsibilities in the conflict resolution procedure?
Participants report that their responsibilities include understanding the subject, searching for the causes of the conflicts, spanning boundaries, bringing the parties together, enabling them to negotiate, directing the institution, acting fairly, and acting as a part of the strategic management plan:

Responsibilities are, firstly, to be able to understand the issue fully and estimate the results and various effects from the perspective of various segments. Secondly, the responsibility of negotiation between the interests of the institution and the other party. In addition, all the process regarding the accurate formation of the style of the communication and delivering in the accurate timing should be executed in the control of the communicator (B – Private institution employee).

Our biggest responsibility is to observe the conflicts on behalf of the institution. The institution usually cannot see much beyond the high walls. It cannot detect outside reactions and reflections. If there is a conflict situation, our responsibility is to detect it and warn the enterprise. Moreover, in this phase, we make some observations in the research regarding the target mass. If the conflict situation has occurred, our responsibility is to observe the reactions, warn the institution, direct it accurately, and if the conflict lasts too long and there is nothing the institution can do about it, undertake the role of negotiator and to reach the common ground fairly (D – Agency employee).

I try to find a solution by sympathizing with all parties in their own situational conditions. I try hard to reinforce my leadership role and protect my authority to provide efficiency for the future working process (F – Private institution employee).

To analyze the cause and formation of the conflict, to act in the direction of the institutional communication plan and to play a role in parties’ reaching a resolution (J – Private institution employee).

Do you accept your mistakes and share the power?
All of the participants indicated that they accept their mistakes both on the agency level and as persons in charge of the institution’s public relations:

The principle is not to take it personally, we are human beings and we all make mistakes. In such situations, the important thing is to take the personal responsibility,
apologize if necessary, fix the mistakes and finally ask for support if we cannot handle the situation. What is important for us is to resolve potential conflicts which can harm the institution we serve. Therefore we support and share the power (D - Agency employee).

We accept our mistakes. It is always important for us to give clear explanations both as a public relations agent and on behalf of the institution. We always take transparency as a principle. If there is a conflict, we try to expand the correct information as much as possible. Therefore, we both share the power with the institution and undertake the responsibility (H - Agency employee).

I do not believe that there can be an effective share of responsibility without power share. The important is not to hold the power but to effectively and accurately use it in the direction of common target (F - Private institution employee).

There are some conditions that we cannot foresee in the resolution of conflicts. There are some issues that I cannot handle by myself. In such a situation, I directly consult the management team, because the huge prestige of the institution should not be dependent on my courage. I meet the management or other related departments (G - Private institution employee).

In general, participants emphasize that public relations experts should also interfere with a proactive approach before the conflict occurs, and specify that public relations have an active role in the conflict resolution situation. Moreover, they indicate that public relation experts pay attention to the purposes, duties and long term plans of the institution in the conflict resolution from a strategic thinking perspective and that conflict management strategies should absolutely be in conformity with the management strategy of the institution. Participants also mention that they pay attention to the interests of the other party, try to find common elements and public relations use symmetric as well as asymmetric model to resolve conflicts depending on the situation, to "solve problems both internally and externally". In addition, in terms of the use of a sound judgment, public relations experts act responsibly, accept mistakes, and share the power with top management or other departments.

**Conclusion**

Conflicts experienced in all aspects of life gradually become more complicated for institutions. This is why conflict management should certainly be taken into consideration. While the strategic evolution of public relations makes its role in the institution more and more important, public relations experts are expected to take an active role in determining and applying conflict management strategies. In any case, when public relations experts form long-term relations between institutions to reduce conflicts, they increase the effectiveness of institutions.

In this study, we conducted face-to-face interviews with 10 active public relations experts regarding conflict management. The answers to the research questions were grouped based on the principles of strategic thinking, solving problems, and using sound judgment. It can be concluded that agency employees are more active in deciding and resolving a problem as compared to those working in institutional public relations departments. Although they can develop similar strategies to those of agency employees, they are more dependent on the decisions of the executives in practice.

Participants emphasized that they play an active role in the process of conflict management. They also specified that public relations experts should try to foresee potential conflicts. They indicated that public relations experts should act as a strategic
bridge between the stakeholders and the institutions and develop conflict management strategies by taking into consideration the purposes, duties, and targets publics of the institution. These experts referred to the new model of symmetry in the public relations specifying that they use the appropriate model for every different situation of conflict resolution. Most of the survey participants reported that in today’s environment it is impossible for public relations experts to resolve any kind of problem by excluding the other party. Shareholders’ expectations have led institutions to act responsibly and exchange viewpoint in order to survive. Participants stated that transparent and accurate communication should be used actively in the management of conflicts. Based on all these expressions, executives should make public relations experts a part of strategic management. It can be concluded that the strategies identified in the conflict resolution literature are also taken into consideration by the public relations experts interviewed in Turkey. The approaches of the public relations experts towards conflict management are in accordance with the analysis of the strategic management. In this sense, experts report that they use similar approaches to conflict management. To execute these applications, they should hold positions in top management.
REFERENCES


