

Organisational Leadership Style and Its Impact on the Process of Strategic Public Relations in Tanzanian Commercial Banks

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Abstract

This paper assessed the impact of organisational leadership style on the process of strategic public relations in the context of selected commercial banks in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. The assessed banks were the National Bank of Commerce (NBC), National Micro-Finance Bank (NMB Plc), and CRDB Bank Plc. The paper sought to contribute to strategic communication literature that indicates that public relations personnel cannot realise the process of strategic public relations without commitment and support of the top leaders and related leadership style. Guided by the interpretivism research philosophy, the study qualitatively and purposively gathered data from 12 participants: three chief executive officers, three public relations personnel, three human resource directors, and three marketing directors. The study found that some leadership style behaviours of the top leaders and majority of the line managers in the banks hinder the process of strategic public relations whose four steps are research and analysis of the communication opportunity or problem, planning and management of strategic communication programmes, implementation of the communication strategy, and evaluation of strategic communication efforts. The paper concludes that in the context of commercial banks in Tanzania, both the top leaders and the public relations personnel should play their roles effectively to foster public relations value.

Keywords: *Organisational leadership style, public relations research, public relations planning, programme communication, public relations evaluation, strategic public relations.*

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1. Introduction

Organisational leadership style refers to the purposeful means by which a leader influences subordinates to pursue the organisational future state that intends to change the present one (Gandolfi & Stone, 2017). Organisational leadership style is subdivided into two categories: transactional and transformational leadership styles. These two leadership styles “form a new paradigm for understanding both the lower and higher order effects of leadership styles” (Amirul & Daud, 2012:193). They are the main umbrellas under which earlier leadership types that have existed for the past half a century reside. The transactional leadership style is the one in which a leader promotes compliance of his or her followers, say, the public relations (PR) personnel by rewards and punishments. The style embraces command-and-control as well as empower-and-track leadership models (Gandolfi & Stone, 2017:19). According to Kark *et al.* (2017), the follower’s motivation in this leadership style relies on doing as per the leader’s expectations in order to avoid punishment or disciplinary actions, with a focus on gaining praise or reward. In contrast, the transformational leadership style is the one in which the leader raises the followers’ awareness of the importance of desired organisational outcomes and the ways of reaching such outcomes (McCleskey, 2014). Different from transactional leaders who emphasise the role of rules, standards, and power in organisations, a transformational leader embraces the connect-and-nurture leadership model (Gandolfi & Stone, 2017:19) since he or she is “relationship-oriented, interactive, visionary, passionate, caring, and empowering” (Yue, 2019:4).

In the same vein, efforts to set the overall business strategy by the organisational top leaders require the support of PR whose process should be strategic rather than technical in nature (Tench & Yeomans, 2017). Through the process of strategic PR, the PR personnel assists the organisational leadership in having clarity in the identification of communication tasks, responsibilities, media strategies, and resources needed. The PR personnel also identifies communication milestones and outcomes. To that end, the process of strategic PR is a four-step one. According to various PR scholars (e.g., Broom & Sha, 2013; Heath, 2013; Smith, 2017; Zerfass *et al.*, 2018), the four steps include research and analysis of the communication opportunity or problem, planning and management of strategic communication programmes, implementation of the communication strategy, and evaluation of strategic communication efforts. These steps form the key to strategic communication of opportunities and problems in an organisational setting (Broom & Sha, 2013). Without an ideal organisational top leadership style, the four-step process of strategic PR becomes hard to realise, hence difficult to build relationships with organisation’s strategic stakeholders (Ruck *et al.*, 2017).

2. Problem Statement

Earlier studies on organisational leadership and strategic PR practice such as Men and Stack (2013) point out a gap in the literature related to the need to investigate the

relationship between organisational leadership style vis-à-vis engagement in strategic PR practice in different contexts to learn how such relationship influence PR outcomes (p. 172). Similarly, Meng and Berger (2018) point out some organisational obstacles hindering the process of strategic PR including lack of engagement of the PR personnel in organisational strategic decision-making, poor job satisfaction, and lack of trust by organisational leaders. Other pointed-out obstacles include downgrading the PR personnel, and little or no budget for PR operations in some organisations (Ayini, 2021). Thus, to honour the call for research in different settings, this paper capitalised on the argument by Anani-Bossman (2020) that though PR has grown remarkably in the African continent (of which Tanzania is a part) since the early 2000s there are few scholarly studies regarding strategic PR practice. In that case, the paper set out to assess the impact of organisational leadership style on the four-step process of strategic PR in selected commercial banks in the context of Tanzania. The following question guided the study: What is the impact of organisational leadership style on the process of strategic PR in the context of commercial banks in Tanzania? This main question had four sub-questions that formed the content of the study. These questions were as follows:

- (i) What is the impact of organisational leadership style (transactional and transformational) on research and analysis of the communication opportunity or problem?
- (ii) What is the impact of organisational leadership style (transactional and transformational) on the planning and management of strategic communication programmes?
- (iii) What is the impact of organisational leadership style (transactional and transformational) on the implementation of the communication strategy?
- (iv) What is the impact of organisational leadership style (transactional and transformational) on the evaluation of strategic communication efforts?

3. Theoretical Foundations

The Path-Goal Theory of Motivation and the Excellence Theory informed the current study. The Path-Goal Theory of Motivation developed by Robert House in 1971 posits that the leader's main objective should be to provide guidance, support, and help necessary for the followers to achieve effectively both individual and organisation goals (Ratyan *et al.*, 2013). The study employed this theory to test how the motivation elicited by transactional leadership style and transformational leadership style affects the process of strategic PR in the context of selected commercial banks in Tanzania.

The Excellence Theory by Grunig and Hunt (1984) and then advanced by Grunig, Grunig, and Dozier (2002) resonates that communication is valuable to an organisation because it enables it to build good long-term relationships with strategic stakeholders (Heath, 2013). To achieve this, the theory calls for organisations and PR departments to demonstrate excellence in ensuring that the PR personnel succeeds in the process of strategic PR (Godam *et al.*, 2019). Thus, the study applied this theory to assess the

extent to which the excellence indicators for the success of the process of strategic PR were achievable or not in efforts to realising the viability necessary for communication in the commercial banks.

4. Previous Studies on Transactional and Transformational Leadership Style and Strategic PR Process

Regarding the transactional and transformational leadership styles, Jekelle (2021) studied leadership style dimensions and organisational commitment nexus in the public sector in Nigeria. The author intended to determine the extent to which the three leadership styles (transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire) related to the organisational commitment of employees. The findings showed that the transformational leadership style had a 68.2 percent match in its relationship with the employees' organisational commitment, followed by the transactional leadership style which accumulated 11.8 percent, whereas the laissez-faire leadership style amounted to 11.2 percent. These findings suggested that the transformational leadership style had the most positive effect in influencing employees' performance level compared to the transactional leadership style.

In another research, Men (2014) carried out a study on why leadership matters to internal communication intending to assess the link between transformational leadership, symmetrical communication, and employee outcomes. The author found that transformational leadership linked positively to an organisation's two-way symmetrical communication thereby improving internal communication as well as employees' behavioural and attitudinal outcomes. The author, thus established that when the organisation leadership cherished two-way symmetric as its model of communication with employees, the relationship between employees and the organisation improved. Furthermore, the study found that transformational leadership's attributes namely articulating a vision, providing an appropriate model, fostering group goals, high-performance expectations, individual support, and intellectual stimulation led to excellence in the organisational internal communication.

Some scholars have also reported on the process of strategic PR. For instance, using a sample of 20 models that provide insight into the logic or process of strategic PR, Macnamara and Gregory (2018:481) reported that "many of these models start with organisational objectives without mentioning the first step of the process (formal research) in which stakeholder interests may be identified and accommodated." The authors argued that this reflects the kind of communication process that is one-way and top-down between the organisation and the stakeholders, which may not help the organisation to fulfil its overall business strategy. Moreover, the study found that organisational communicators just implement the communication strategy without being involved in formulating it. The authors argue that this has two implications. In the first place, it undermines the basic principle of the strategic PR process as a two-way symmetrical one. Secondly, it restricts the role of the PR personnel to counsel the top leaders on communication affairs bearing in mind that the role has existed in the

PR literature since the time of the person considered as one of the fathers of PR, Edward Bernays in 1923.

5. Methods

5.1 Study Population, Area, and Sample

The target population involved chief executive officers (CEOs), PR personnel, human resource directors (HRDs), and marketing directors in the Tanzanian commercial banking sector. The organisations under study are located in Ilala municipality in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. The reason for the choice of Ilala municipality as the location of the present study was that it is the headquarters of several banking institutions, including the commercial banks under study. Therefore, it offered a huge possibility of accessing the right targeted study participants to ensure the relevant data inclusion criteria.

The sample size was 12 participants and each bank yielded one CEO, one PR personnel, one HRD, and one marketing director. The researcher considered the 12 participants a good sample size for a face-to-face semi-structured interview since according to Daymon and Holloway (2011), 4 up to 40-sample size in qualitative studies is an adequate number. To fulfil the eligibility criteria for data inclusion, which is accessing the right participants, the study used a purposive sampling technique to select the mentioned participants from a group of members in the top management team (the dominant coalition) in the banks (Leedy & Ormrod, 2021). This is because one would expect the dominant coalition members in any organisation to influence the nature of strategic PR practice (Heath, 2013).

5.2 Measurement

According to Gunasekare (2021), different authors have measured organisational leadership styles and strategic PR practice in a variety of ways. Such ways include the use of qualitative case studies, which is a well-established approach to measuring these types of variables. Thus, the current study employed qualitative modes of inquiry, hence semi-structured interviews and simple observation as data collection methods. The semi-structured interview technique enabled the researchers to discuss in-depth questions related to organisational leadership style and the four-step process of strategic PR and ask follow-up questions on unclear areas. This aligns with Leavy (2014) who postulates that a semi-structured interview enables the interviewer to have more leeway for following up on angles deemed important. The simple observation method helped in exploring contextual practices about organisational leadership style and strategic PR practice, complementing and triangulating the interview data.

5.3 Data Analysis

The method for data analysis was thematic based on the nature of this study that adopted the interpretivism philosophical research paradigm. Thematic analysis involves searching across a data set to find repeated patterns of meanings. To achieve thematic analysis, the researchers started by transferring data from the voice recorder

to computer folders, storing each interview file according to a given sample group. Then, the researchers transcribed and proofread the transcribed files, and assigned code names for anonymity purposes of the study participants' real names. Thereafter, the following four steps followed: identification of data themes and subthemes prevailing within the data set, and second, presenting the data that aligned with such themes. Thirdly, characterisation (description) of such data based on theoretical lenses chosen in order to provide insights about them and last, a brief interpretation or commentary on such data.

5.4 Ethical Clearance

First, the researchers selected a study site without having stakes in the outcomes, and later, identified the study problem that would benefit the participants. Secondly, the researchers sought a research permit from the responsible authorities of the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM), and obtained similar permits from Ilala municipality and Dar es Salaam region authorities, and the commercial banks under study. Thirdly, the researchers informed participants of their rights to participate in the study, and recording of the interviews, and sought and obtained consent from each participant. Besides, since some participants revealed their real names during the interview sessions, the researchers assigned code names for anonymity purposes.

6. Results

This section presents results about the impact of organisational leadership style on the process of strategic PR under four themes. The themes are: research and analysis of the communication opportunity or problem, planning and management of the strategic communication programmes, implementation of the communication strategy, and evaluation of the strategic communication efforts.

6.1 Research and Analysis of the Communication Opportunity or Problem

The Excellence Theory in PR postulates that carrying out PR research and analysis of data is essential for the communication of organisational opportunities and problems between it and the strategic stakeholders. This requires the support of the organisational leaders and related leadership style in accordance with the ideals of the Path-Goal Theory of Motivation. Thus, the study participants provided comments regarding the communication policy environment or CEO directives on the necessity of the PR personnel to provide the top leaders with well-researched PR plans before addressing the communication opportunities or problems. This also went hand in hand with assessing whether the researches carried out by the PR personnel were formal or informal. The interview findings show that although communication policies gave room for the practice of strategic PR research and analysis, the facilitating top leadership environment contributed to its poor implementation leading to the PR personnel's reliance on informal rather than formative research. The three PR personnel had the following to say:

I always carry out informal research because, according to the policy, the formal one is carried out once per year, and includes all functional departments of the entire bank. Therefore, for me, it is not the question of CEO directives, but rather, I carry out these kinds of [informal] research from time to time because it is important to do that (PR personnel A).

The communication policy environment about carrying out PR research is good; however, there is a limitation of funding because of ours depends on the general marketing budget. Therefore, mostly we carry out casual PR research, whereas the formal ones are under marketing (PR personnel B).

The communication policy environment allows me to do PR research, especially for issues that are likely to lead to negative publicity. For major communication plans, however, usually the bank carries out a general stakeholder or marketing assessment review once a year—during the end and beginning of a new financial year. This usually gives a picture of key themes to address in our PR campaigns (PR personnel C).

Under the same aspect, the remaining nine leaders (three CEOs, three HRDs, and three marketing directors) provided their comments. Significantly, their comments indicate that only three leaders out of nine acknowledged the importance and existence of policies about the necessity of the PR personnel to provide them with well-researched PR plans before addressing communication problems or opportunities. Contrariwise, the following three interviewees' responses reflect what the remaining six of the leaders from this group said about the importance of strategic PR research and analysis in the banks:

We use research in our everyday life here due to the nature of the business itself, and we depend on all the units charged with that responsibility including PR. However, the bank's conduct in supporting any unit's needs and outputs for research depends on how tangible the evidence is in terms of its statistical contribution to the overall goal of the bank (CEO A).

Although it is important, we do not necessarily depend exclusively on PR research in order to understand customer opinions... Alternatively, we depend largely on real marketing research in order to determine and make business communication decisions (HRD B).

Before the bank supports any research initiatives, the top authority struggles to find out if the results will be viable or not in terms of helping the bank grasp the actual opinions and behavioural motivations of its stakeholders. The authority also considers if there are any substantial cost-effective benefits associated with its results. Otherwise, the bank relies on other units that can do a better job (Marketing Director C).

6.2 Planning and Management of the Strategic Communication Programmes

According to the ideals of the Excellence Theory, PR is a strategic communication management function employed by an organisation to establish relations with internal and external stakeholders. This section, therefore, presents the study participants' views regarding the second phase of the process of strategic PR, namely the planning and management of strategic communication programmes, and assesses the impact of banks' leadership styles on this stage. Specifically, the study assessed the extent to which the banks' PR personnel by virtue of the communication policy's supportive climate participated in the top management meetings. The aim was to uncover whether the PR personnel contributed to the deliberation of the overall strategy on banks' communication objectives during such meetings, or that they dealt with only technical media relations role. The findings from the three PR personnel show that only one among the three PR personnel had full participation in the top-level meetings, and enjoyed open platforms for personal and occasional dialogue meetings with the CEO on matters of brand communication as testified below:

Yes, the policies allow me to attend the top management meetings to contribute to the overall strategy on communication objectives. I also seek personal and occasional meetings with the CEO to provide counsel on brand communication techniques because, basically, that is my duty. Regarding the technical media relations role, my duty is to oversee it... as I have assistants to help with that (PR personnel A).

Inversely, the field data exhibit that the remaining two PR personnel had a shallow or rather limited participation in organisation top-level meetings to contribute to the banks' communication objectives. This is how they expressed themselves:

I participate in some of the meetings especially when the top leadership requires advice on something potential about corporate communication affairs since I am not one of the line managers here...The line managers are the ones who participate in the bank's higher-level meetings. About the issue of holding dialogue meetings in person or directly with the CEO, yes..., when I have something very important on brand communication (PR personnel B).

All the top-level meetings have a clear schedule that indicates who should attend certain types of meetings depending on the strategic subject matter under presentation. For me, I attend only the meetings that have a direct involvement of my department. For issues about holding dialogues with the CEO for brand communication discussion, it is under marketing and retail... However, if required, I do it cautiously to avoid a collision of duties with the directorate of marketing (Chief of PR personnel C).

The above PR personnel's responses in the two banks on this aspect were similar to those provided by the top leadership and some of their line managers. That is, the majority of the leaders and the line managers did not view the PR function as part of the management team, and they were skeptical about the participation of their PR

personnel in top-management meetings. However, the third CEO had an impressive response, and he said:

Yes, the participation of the PR director is important for us because the bank depends on her expertise to advance its communication purposes with the stakeholders. Personal dialogue meetings are also possible between my office and hers (CEO A).

Thus, the following are the three representative responses from the remaining eight participants about the above aspect:

The Top management team meetings are very important and are organised on rare schedules. Those who should attend are, definitely, the responsible members only. Therefore, some of the top-level meetings may require the attendance of the PR personnel whereas others may not (CEO B).

The marketing director is the key advisor on marketing communication issues. The PR personnel can also handle that but not necessary because brand communication is a separate marketing function. However, he assists with event logistics for issues typical of corporate affairs or PR. Thus, sometimes he attends some of the higher-level meetings for clarification and advice (CEO C).

Certain communication responsibilities are not directly under the leadership of the PR personnel. Therefore, attendance or non-attendance to some of the top-level management meetings depends on who is responsible for what communication projects or tasks (HRD B).

6.3 Implementation of the Communication Strategy

Implementation of the communication strategy is the third element in the process of the strategic PR. It is the most visible element in the process by which the PR personnel practically demonstrates the value of PR in helping the organisation establish and retain mutually beneficial relations between it and the strategic stakeholders. Therefore, the study aimed to assess the extent to which the banks' top leaderships affect the two-way symmetric PR communication model, which the PR Excellence Theory and scholars view as the most complete form of organisation's communication process. This is because the model establishes dialogue and engagement between strategic stakeholders and organisations, hence promoting free and equal information flow between the two parties based on a balanced (symmetrical) mutual understanding.

The study's findings indicate that the banks' PR personnel practised a mixture of the four PR communication models namely, press agency (publicity), public information, two-way asymmetric, and two-way symmetric. However, the findings reveal that predominance was on the first three models compared to the two-way symmetric. This understanding stems from the PR personnel's opinions on the extent to which the CEOs or directors and managers enabled them to engage in dialogical two-way communication with the targeted stakeholders on their behalf to frame messages and

represent their opinions. The understanding also stems from the examples of the possible media channels that the PR personnel relied on to carry out such a role. The following are the responses of two of the three PR personnel in connection to the above aspect:

I often engage in dialogical two-way communication with targeted stakeholders to represent the top leaders and other managers to address the viewpoints of the bank or the top leadership. The media tools relied on are both internal and external ones such as position papers, backgrounders, brochures, internet, radio, television, newspapers, news releases, sponsored magazines, and direct mail (PR personnel A).

Representation of the bank's top leaders or heads of other departments depends on the stakeholders in focus. For example, I cannot engage in a direct two-way dialogue with certain stakeholders such as investors, or government legislators... there are specific managers for such stakeholders. However, for the stakeholders who are within my jurisdiction, the two-way media tools that I apply are such as press releases, social media, posters, radio, television, magazines, and special events such as exhibitions. Others are websites, transit vehicles, press conferences, trade shows, position papers, and fact sheets (PR personnel C).

The following three representative responses show what the other nine participants (CEOs, HRDs, and marketing directors) said regarding the same aspect. That is, this group of leaders gave opinions on the extent to which they could allow the PR personnel to engage in dialogical two-way communication with targeted stakeholders on their behalf to frame messages and represent their opinions. Their opinions also include the possible examples of such stakeholders:

We have an enabling environment for the PR director to work professionally because that is what the bank advocates. Regarding the issue of representing the top management to the stakeholders, well, it depends on the key message and on the type of stakeholders... Her main representation is usually with the media fraternity to facilitate media relations (CEO A).

The office of corporate affairs and PR can engage in a direct representation with some of the stakeholders such as the media, and the critics in order to keep a positive image of the bank on related issues (CEO B).

The PR personnel can represent the HR directorate to communicate with employees in a two-way encounter. However, there are specific relationship issues that he cannot deal with unless accurately specified by my office. Similarly, with the outside stakeholders, one cannot engage directly with groups, for instance, the clients or government legislators unless accompanied by the heads of particular departments (HRD B).

6.4 Evaluation of the Strategic Communication Efforts

Overall evaluation is the final stage of the process of strategic PR. Speaking from the strategic management point of view, organisations usually carry out an overall evaluation of the strategic objectives to determine their effectiveness, and such strategies include strategic PR initiatives. Thus, the study assessed the participants' comments about the top leadership style in involving the PR personnel to evaluate the strategic PR plans, as well as the methods used for this activity. The findings indicate that the banks depended highly on external PR evaluation agencies to carry out the evaluation process and that such agencies did it once at the end of each financial year. Furthermore, the PR personnel on their part said they used such evaluation methods as desktop surveys, news clippings, and telephone surveys. The following are the detailed views of two of the three PR personnel:

The bank allocates adequate PR strategies evaluation budget, but mostly, it is for the enhancement of an external PR agency that assists us in the process of effecting annual evaluation rather than depending on the internal evaluation mechanisms. Internally, when there is a need for evaluation, we carry it out but often on small scales such as media monitoring through computer and telephone surveys (PR personnel A).

The bank has a relationship with an outside firm specializing in the evaluation of not only the PR strategies but also of the marketing programmes, and helping to assess the reputation index. However, sometimes this leads to disagreement between its evaluation report and the view of what we in the PR department hold about our tasks... the two sides have different perspectives and methods of evaluation (PR personnel C).

In addition to the above views of the PR personnel, the following three responses depict what the banks' leaders (CEOs, HRDs, and marketing directors) said about the PR evaluation aspect which also indicates that they depended highly on the external PR evaluation agencies:

Evaluation of communication issues is essential. We have reputable external evaluation mechanisms in place to understand the needed communication intervention (CEO A).

In order to understand PR results from different angles, we depend less on internal evaluation initiatives compared to reports of external teams on not only PR but also on marketing issues to give us real views of stakeholders (Marketing Director B).

In this bank, we use both internal and external evaluation means not only in the PR department but also in all other operational units. However, we consider external evaluation the most transparent form because they are outside of the internal influences and, hence independent (HRD C).

7. Discussion

The first theme presented in the preceding section was related to the findings of research and analysis of the communication opportunity or problem. From the data about this theme, the communication policy environment of some of the banks and the top leadership contributed to poor implementation of this important first stage of the four-step process of strategic PR practice. Due to this, the PR personnel relied on informal rather than formal research. In addition, results show that only a few of the banks' leaders acknowledged the importance of instituting a conducive communication policy environment that mandates the PR personnel to provide them with well-researched PR plans. This suggests the presence of the transactional leadership style mind-set that downplays the importance of formal PR research and analysis to merely an informal or casual one. However, Zerfass *et al.* (2018) argue that this stage is essential. It is an indispensable opportunity to examine and understand the targeted stakeholders' behaviours, attitudes, and opinions related to organisational opportunities or problems so as to establish ways of engaging them, and sometimes, seeking the attention of the media on behalf of the organisation. Besides, the Excellence Theory postulates that it is necessary to apply formal rather than informal research as the foundation for all sensible internal and external organisational communication programmes because it helps to generate more efficiency in PR efforts (Seitel, 2017).

Principally, PR formal research assists the organisational leadership in issues management, serving a lot of money that could be spent to curb the problems of relationships had the risks not been identified. It also improves the decision-making process about PR issues among the board members, executive committee, and staff. In addition, PR formative research pragmatically simplifies the ways of communicating the services to the stakeholders as the members have a full understanding of their needs. Thus, for the banks' top leadership to assess effectiveness in communication efforts such as message coverage, message believability, and behavioural changes resulting from their interactions with the stakeholders, it is necessary to invest in formative PR research and analysis, which should also gain the support of a conducive banks' leadership style, principally, transformational leadership.

The second aspect presented in this study was related to the views of the study's participants about the planning and management of strategic communication programmes. Regarding this aspect, an important finding testified by both the PR personnel and some of the top leaders was that only one among the three PR personnel had full participation in the top-level meetings. She also enjoyed open platforms for personal and occasional dialogue meetings with the CEO on matters of brand communication. The remaining PR personnel of the two banks demonstrated shallow or rather limited participation in contributing to communication objectives. An implication of this is the possibility that the PR personnel received directives from such top-level meetings on the communication objectives to implement, which is a peculiar feature of transactional leadership style rather than transformational. This is evidence of the relegation of the PR personnel to a marginal level in the banks. It

signifies a feeling that such banks hired the PR personnel with a primary focus of simply implementing communication strategies formulated by other line managers. Therefore, practising PR as a management function in some of the banks was lacking to a certain extent. Inversely, the Excellence Theory establishes that managed communication enables an organisation to achieve goals because it helps reconcile them with the expectations of its strategic stakeholders (Austin & Pinkleton, 2006). That is why PR scholars such as Yue (2019:7) have “vied for institutionalising PR as a strategic management function in organisations for decades.”

In commercial banking organisations, therefore, the PR personnel should have the power to practise PR according to acceptable principles of the profession instead of receiving the directives demonstrated by the transactional leadership style of the top leaders, irrespective of how good their intentions are. This calls for full involvement of the PR personnel in top-level meetings because it nurtures their aptitude to think strategically in terms of outcomes or impact of PR activities, and awakens their levels of accountability and participation in the overall banks’ visions. This improves PR effectiveness based on the agreed communication objectives from the onset and encourages future thinking.

On implementation of the communication strategy, the results of this study show that the banks’ PR personnel practised a mixture of the four PR communication models. These models are namely, press agency (publicity), public information, two-way asymmetrical, and two-way symmetrical in the third stage of the process of strategic PR. As revealed by the findings, the first three models predominated the two-way symmetric model, which the PR excellence theory and scholars view as the most complete form of organisation’s communication process (Falkheimer, 2014). One could attribute this discrepancy to the banks’ leadership style that prevailed, transactional, which lacks the feature of a two-way symmetrical orientation. This understanding stems from the PR personnel’s comments on the extent to which the CEOs or directors and managers allowed them to engage in dialogical two-way communication with targeted stakeholders on their behalf to frame messages and represent their opinions. The understanding also stems from the examples of the possible media channels that the PR personnel relied on to carry out such a role. However, it is important to note that though all four PR communication models often help organisations to achieve different purposes, the predominance of the first three PR communication models as revealed in this study demonstrates a simple output of communication that cannot fully help the banks to achieve quality strategic relations with the stakeholders (Heath, 2013).

That is why Seitel (2017) encourages the application of the two-way symmetrical PR communication model for organisations to make themselves understood and to understand their stakeholders. The two-way symmetrical PR communication model is dialogical oriented in nature, which is one of the main features of the transformational leadership style. Due to this, it facilitates fruitful conversations between the banks and their stakeholders in a bid to fulfil the four goals of communication namely, to inform,

to persuade, to motivate, and to build mutual understanding. Therefore, the commercial banks in the current study should struggle to benefit from such goals by ensuring that their PR departments engage in strategic two-way communication programmes and campaigns across all media channels whether owned, earned, paid, or shared in a manner that helps deliver the banks' messages. This goes hand in hand with ensuring that the chosen media channels depict the said two-way symmetrical orientation. These media channels include but are not limited to e-mails, instant messages, websites, mobile apps, blogs, podcasts, media-sharing sites, forums, webinars, and automated telephone response systems. Others are audio texts, intranets, conferences, government or judicial testimonies, trade shows, exhibitions, rallies, sponsored events, anniversaries, contests, recognition award programmes, personal lobbying, and correspondence telephone calls.

Regarding the evaluation of the strategic communication efforts, the current study found that the top leadership gave more weight to the external PR evaluation agencies to evaluate the strategic PR plans. The agencies did such an evaluation once at the end of each financial year. Such dependence on the external PR evaluation agencies suggested a top-down directive leadership behaviour (transactional) by which the top leaders simply directed the PR personnel to act on the evaluation reports produced by the external agencies (in which they did not have full participation). This implies further that the PR personnel relied largely on the leaders' directives to serve only one side in the relationship, that is, to meet the banks' overall communication goals instead of playing the profession's dual role. Playing the profession's dual role means that the PR personnel should attend to the banks' communication goals while at the same time giving due attention to the stakeholders' interests (Macnamara & Gregory, 2018). However, there are numerous advantages of empowering the internal PR department to carry out the evaluation of its PR strategies rather than lean on the external PR agencies to do the job. The advantages include team membership, knowledge of the banks, economy or cost-effectiveness to the banks, availability to associates, banks commitment, the immediacy of the process and feedback, as well as the adequacy of background information for doing an evaluation.

Another significant finding in this theme was that the PR personnel on their part used such evaluation methods as desktop surveys, news clippings, and telephone surveys. It seems possible that due to the reliance on these kinds of evaluation methods by the internal PR personnel, the top leadership resorted to the external PR evaluation agencies to carry out the job instead of the internal PR mechanisms. Therefore, although desktop surveys, news clippings, and telephone surveys are important methods, they are not adequate for internal PR evaluation. Consideration may include other formative quantitative evaluation techniques such as readership studies, head counts, and feedback tracking (Smith, 2017). On the qualitative side, the evaluation methods to use may include interviews, focus group discussions (FGD), and case studies. Thus, without using such kind of evaluation techniques, the banks' PR

personnel will find it difficult to acquire the top leadership's *buy-in* in the facilitation of the internal PR evaluation process.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has shown that the process of strategic PR is important in contributing to commercial banks' bottom-line strategies. That is, the process of strategic PR is an essential tool for the top leadership in these banks to drive the overall communication business strategies. However, it is through effective top leadership styles among other internal pre-conditional factors that the process of strategic PR succeeds in assisting the banks in this regard. Therefore, to foster PR value in the context of the current study's commercial banks, an effective top leadership style should be the one that accelerates formal PR research and analysis, allows the PR personnel to participate fully in the top-level meetings to contribute in the formulation of overall banks' communication strategies, and lets the two-way symmetrical PR communication model flourish. In addition, the PR personnel should ensure that the internal evaluation methods are formative-oriented in nature to gain the leadership's *buy-in* in the process.

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