Repairing Organizational Trust

I wrote the paper below for my final project in Foundations of Strategic Communication Management with Michelle Shumate, Ph.D. The prompt for this paper was to apply academic research on strategic communication to an issue in my workplace (past or present). This paper provided me with an opportunity to review course material on stakeholder salience, activism, and dialogic communication – along with additional research on organizational listening and trust repair. I was then able to synthesize my learnings, analyze an issue in my workplace, and issue recommendations for responding to that issue with a holistic, strategic communication mindset.

Definitive, Not Dismissed:
A Case Study of Broken Trust and Recommendations for Repair

It is a well-known fact in the nonprofit sector that organizations with effective, high-quality programs tend to boast program participants and/or graduates who champion the brand. After all, who better to speak to an organization's reputation than the people who have benefited from its mission? However, if these stakeholders are not properly engaged and communicated with, an organization's greatest allies can quickly become its worst nightmare. In this case study, I apply the research topics of stakeholder salience, activism, dialogic communication and organizational listening, and trust repair to the challenges one nonprofit organization is facing with graduates of its largest program. Hopefully, approaching those challenges with a strategic communication lens will "wake up" this organization from its nightmare so it can re-establish trustworthiness and be better equipped to realize its vision.

Literature Review

Stakeholder Salience

In the late 1990s, Mitchell et al. proposed a new model by which organizations could assess the salience of various stakeholder groups. This model, which teaches managers to evaluate different stakeholder groups according to their power, legitimacy, and/or urgency, helps organizations clarify which groups are more important and thus should be prioritized in communication. Power, for example, is assessed by determining a stakeholder's ability to effect change on an organization. Legitimacy, on the other hand, is a byproduct of the stakeholder's regular interaction and "strong binding relationship" (Cornelissen, 2017, p. 68) with the organization. Urgency, then, reflects the time-sensitivity and/or perceived importance of a stakeholder's claim. Stakeholders who are shown to possess all three of these attributes are classified as definitive, and because they are most salient, Mitchell et al.'s model dictates these key players should receive priority attention and be actively engaged and communicated with.

Activism

Activists can prove to be extraordinarily salient stakeholders. Their goal, according to Grunig, is "to improve the functioning of the organization from outside" (1992, p. 504). They are characterized by "motivation, fervor, and enthusiasm" and will "persevere until they achieve their goal" (Grunig, 1992, p. 504). It should come as no surprise, then, that research shows activists are nearly always successful in disrupting the target organization. Grunig asserts that two-way symmetrical communication may well be the most successful public relations model in coping with this group, in part because it gives organizations the opportunity to see the negative and/or undesirable consequences of their words and actions. Further, this model enables organizations to communicate what they are doing about those consequences and to navigate activists' shifting positions. Considering the dangers Grunig found of not engaging with activists, it seems wise to dive deeper into the nuances of more symmetrical communication.

Dialogic Communication & Organizational Listening

The consensus among communication scholars today is that transparency, collaboration, and listening are "the preferred ethical mode of communication over the [historical] notion of engagement as control, enacted through one-way dissemination of messages" (Dhanesh, 2017, p. 927). What this has meant for organizations in a hyper-connected world is heightened expectations of two-way symmetrical communication – or, as Pearson first elucidated, dialogic communication. Dialogue in this sense is "a product of ongoing communication and relationships" and is marked by five central traits: mutuality, propinquity, empathy, risk, and commitment (Kent & Taylor, 2002, pp. 24-25).

Inherent in this form of communication is the impetus on organizations to listen to their stakeholders. Macnamara considers listening to be "the vital corollary of speaking" (2016, p. 152) and a non-negotiable component of dialogic communication. Specifically, he identifies "effective ethical listening" (2016, p. 151) as the ideal because it extends beyond merely paying attention to and trying to understand what the speaker has to say; it includes thoroughly considering the speaker's requests and responding in an appropriate manner. Macnamara does, however, give an important caveat: while effective listening does not require that the listener agree with every request, "research shows that an explanation or some statement is required in cases of non-compliance with requests" (2016, p. 151).

Trust Repair

Gillespie and Dietz conceptualize trustworthiness as grounded in an organization's ability, benevolence, and integrity (2009, p. 128). Similarly, Hon and Grunig argue that trust is determined by an organization's integrity, dependability, and competence (as cited in Hung-Baesecke & Chen, 2020, p. 2). It seems almost inevitable, though, that there will be times when stakeholders' trust in an organization breaks down. These organization-level failures can occur as a result of fraud, deceit, incompetence, exploitation, or any number of other events that might lead stakeholders to withdraw from, obstruct, or retaliate against the organization (Gillespie & Dietz, 2009, p. 127). How should organizations regain trust once it has been lost? Relatively little research exists this topic; however, communication scholars seem to agree that dialogic communication plays a critical role (Hung-Baesecke & Chen, 2020).

"[T]he primary objectives of any trust repair process," say Gillespie and Dietz, "are to overcome … salient negative experiences and to restore confident positive expectations about the violator's future trustworthiness (2009, p. 133). These goals can be achieved by following Gillespie and Dietz's four-stage reparative process (2009, pp. 137-141). First, organizations must provide an immediate response that acknowledges the failure, expresses regret for the consequences, and commits resources to understanding why the failure occurred and preventing it from recurring. Second, organizations must accurately and transparently diagnose both the cause(s) of the failure and the actions necessary to avoid similar failures moving forward. Third, organizations must issue an apology that acknowledges their responsibility and/or guilt, offer reparations to the affected stakeholders, and enact interventions that will reform specific aspects of the organization's trustworthiness – i.e., its ability, benevolence, and/or integrity. Lastly, organizations must evaluate the effectiveness of their interventions in order to identify and resolve any persistent problem areas, as well as to determine if trust repair was achieved.

Writing just a few years later, Bachmann et al. offer six mechanisms of trust repair (2015, pp. 1125-1135) that, for the most part, align with Gillespie and Dietz's four-stage approach. For example, Bachmann et al. identify relational mechanisms (parallel to the "immediate response" stage), sense-making mechanisms (parallel to the "diagnosis" stage), regulation/formal control and ethical culture/informal control mechanisms (parallel to the "reforming interventions" stage), and transparency mechanisms (parallel to the "evaluation" stage) that should be used to restore organizational trust. They go further, however, in identifying the role that credible third parties can play vis-à-vis transference mechanisms like "certifications, memberships, affiliations, awards, and endorsements" (Bachmann et al., 2015, p. 1127). Nonetheless, the literature makes clear that repairing trust is not as simple as making an apology and moving on. It is a complex, time-consuming process that must fully engage and satisfy stakeholders if it is to be effective.

Case Study: Anonymous Organization

<u>Background</u>

Founded in Unspecified Year, Anonymous Organization is a nonprofit organization that exists to [mission statement redacted]. Anonymous Organization's largest program, Existing Program, [program description redacted]. While I have been working with the organization for only a short time, I have heard frequent comments "through the grapevine" from and about graduates whose experiences in the Existing Program were less than ideal. To my understanding, Anonymous Organization has previously conducted digital surveys and informal discussions to take the pulse of these stakeholders; however, little has been done to address their concerns until recent months. This situation has escalated to the point that many graduates are openly telling the organization's staff and members of the community (who are not directly affiliated with the organization) that they will not support Anonymous Organization – and, further, that they will not encourage others to support the organization – until their feedback is acted upon. This issue is one of grave concern to me, as I am currently responsible for the organization's fundraising and marketing/communications.

<u>Analysis & Recommendations</u>

My approach to this case utilizes a strategic communication lens with three goals in mind: 1) rebuild trust with graduates, 2) reduce the need for future activism on the part of graduates, and 3) establish a framework for ongoing communication that satisfies both the organization and graduates. To achieve these goals, I must first identify that which I have determined to be the root of Anonymous Organization's current difficulties with graduates: it has failed to acknowledge the salience of this stakeholder group. In the past, the organization's staff has simply dismissed many graduates and even current participants of the Existing Program. Staff members have minimized or outright denied the importance, severity, and/or prevalence of concerns brought to their attention; even worse, staff members have promised change and then failed to deliver. Therefore, my first and foremost recommendation to Anonymous Organization is to acknowledge that this stakeholder group is powerful (graduates are restricting financial and volunteer support of the organization), legitimate (graduates possess strong, close ties to the organization), and urgent (graduates support is needed now more than ever before in the organization's history). Graduates are, in fact, definitive stakeholders and Anonymous Organization would be wise to stop dismissing them and their claims.

My second recommendation to Anonymous Organization is to immediately initiate a slow, deliberate trust repair process that does not at first require additional involvement from graduates, the vast majority of whom have already documented their concerns in multiple surveys, individual and group discussions, etc. Anonymous Organization must demonstrate its future trustworthiness by issuing communication that acknowledges and apologizes for its failures, expresses regret for the consequences of those failures, identifies the causes of the failures, and outlines the reforms that have already been made to avoid similar failures moving forward. Particular attention should be paid to formal rules and controls (e.g., policies, codes of conduct, etc.) as well as informal cultural controls (e.g., staff changes, professional training, etc.) that will prevent future failures. This communication should come in the form of a live, virtual meeting with multiple members of the board of directors, the chief executive officer, the program manager, the program coordinator, and myself as the organization's marketing/communications lead. The meeting should be recorded and distributed via email to all graduates after the fact.

My third recommendation to Anonymous Organization is to conduct a series of small group (and perhaps even individual) listening sessions with graduates to reset power dynamics in the relationship between staff and graduates, resolve negative emotions, and re-establish expectations between the parties (Bachmann et al., 2015, p. 1129). Given that graduates were, during their time in the Existing Program, in a subordinate position relative to staff, these listening sessions will play a decisive role in setting the players up for more symmetrical communication moving forward. I will specifically train the staff members who participate in these sessions to employ effective ethical listening – namely, by acknowledging graduates' views, interpreting their communication fairly and receptively, seeking to understand their perspectives and feelings, and demonstrating careful consideration of their requests. Utilizing these relational mechanisms will go a long way toward rebuilding trust in the organization.

My fourth and final recommendation to Anonymous Organization is to establish a system for ongoing dialogic communication with graduates. Responsibility for graduate relations and communication should account for no less than one-third of the job responsibilities of a single staff member. This individual should form a 10- to 15-person graduate advisory council that meets regularly to advise on program policies, review end-of-program surveys from current participants, address grievances of current participants (in consultation with staff and neutral third parties), and plan engagement opportunities for all graduates. To ensure graduates' voices are never again dismissed, the graduate advisory council should be granted two voting member positions on Anonymous Organization's board of directors. In addition, the staff member responsible for graduate relations should receive regular evaluations from the graduate advisory council to ensure their communication is characterized by mutuality, propinquity, empathy, risk, and commitment. These reviews should take place quarterly until the graduate advisory council is satisfied that organizational trust has been repaired and that reviews can take place less frequently. I am confident that if Anonymous Organization follows these four recommendations, it will re-establish trustworthiness with graduates and be better equipped to realize its vision.

Conclusion

I am carrying forward a number of best practices, both from this case study and from the remainder of our course content. To start, I see more clearly the importance of pausing to evaluate a situation, investigate relevant research findings, and then – and only then – create a nuanced, holistic strategy. Many readings from this course made note of the fact that communications practitioners often default to ineffective strategies, so in order to produce better outcomes, I must have a firm understanding of the options available to me and make informed decisions. Second, I realize that my stakeholders (to whom I previously and insultingly referred as my "audiences") are likely to care more about the de facto effect of my communication than they do the intention behind it. This is a humbling reminder for me and should ground my work, day-in and day-out. Lastly, I recognize that in a modern, boundaryless organization, many other groups of people have just as much a stake as do employees. I am not the only stakeholder nor even the most definitive stakeholder, and pretending otherwise does me no favors. Therefore, I as a communication practitioner would do well to engage fellow stakeholders from a place of mutuality, propinquity, empathy, risk, and commitment. This seems the most ethical and effective road to follow.

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