

# Addressing challenges in public relations: A comparison among the views of chief communication officers (CCOs) and future leaders

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## Abstract

This study investigates the views of chief communication officers and future leaders in the area of public relations. A mixed method approach was pursued using survey questionnaire among 120 chief communication officers and next generation leaders supplemented by focus group interviews with 10 chief communication officers and 10 future leaders respectively. Content analysis was undertaken to compare the views, experiences and expectations of the people representing the two target groups. - Findings from this study suggested that there is no narrow and conclusive picture of a specific type of personality or vision that a leader must share. The findings of the research demonstrate the need for establishing a precise interpretation of what strategic communication entails, including, strengthening of internal networking, promoting internships and training within a company, examine ways to bring close future to current communication leaders through mentoring programmes, and promote a more balanced work routine. The study offers insights of understanding of strategic communication are crucial to define a systematic view of leadership, strategies and policies that determine the profession and success of companies.

**Keywords:** leadership, chief communication officers, public relations, strategic communication

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Leadership and public relations in contemporary era

Public relations is a cross-disciplinary field of interest to a range of organisations, industries and public services. Over the last decades, a notable expansion in the knowledge, skills and abilities expected for professionals in public relations is evident (Ragas et al., 2014). At the core of this query has been communication, which is dealt with as a tool to legitimise and position business in a wider social context. Substantial changes have taken place at the core of the field which have been reported in terms of research in relation to communication. Yet the vast majority of empirical research reported has focused on the communication processes and the instruments, strategies and objectives in use, whereas there exists a scarcity of research in relation to the attitudes, beliefs and insights of current and future leaders that will shape the strategic communication in their respective organisations.

Nevertheless, this has not always been the case. It is incremental to look in-depth into these leadership figures as the history of public relations showcases how influential is the work of pioneers such as Arthur W. Page (ATandT) in the United States, Albert Oeckl (BASF) in Germany and Lucien Matrat (Elf) in France (Bentele, 2005; Russell, 2014; Xifra, 2012). Their work has defined the institutionalization of the field of public relations and their ideas serve still as paradigms for teaching in public relations studies. On the contrary, today's leaders' stories are left untold for the most part, despite their influence is substantially higher than it was in the case of the communication leaders of the past.

It has been claimed that leadership greatly affect internal communication as different types of leadership pertain to different communication styles and therefore have a key role to play in terms of the internal communication system (Men, 2014). This article, based on the above seeks to raise awareness on the role of communication leaders by allowing for the voices of today's and tomorrow's leaders to be heard. Grounded in an empirical pragmatist paradigm, and based on the findings derived, this study takes a stand in favor of the importance of acknowledging the contribution of these communication leaders in shaping today's and future route of development in the public relations field. At the same time, the intention is to contribute to more systematic research in the subject matter.

### 1.2 Leadership and leaders

This study derives from the belief that leadership is a key factor in establishing communication in different

organisations in the field of public relations. Therefore the theoretical background of the study is based on the three interrelated and fundamental subjects of communication, public relations and leadership. Due to the limitations of this paper, only a brief overview is addressed here however the endeavor is that it will contribute to an understanding of the background of the study stemming from a theoretical and empirical review of the literature.

### *1.3 Leadership in public relations: the empirical evidence*

Although leadership has long been acknowledged as instrument to businesses, it wasn't until recently that it gained interest in the field of public relations and corporate communications (Berger & Meng, 2014, pp. 3, 16; Jin, 2010; Werder & Holtzhausen, 2009; Aldoory & Toth, 2004). The 2014's and 2015's World Public Relations Forum in Madrid and Africa respectively emphasized the importance of transformational leadership and communication (Cartwright, 2014). In relation to leadership in PR, House et al. (2004) identify leadership as "the ability of an individual to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the organization of which they are members" (p. 15). Berger and Meng also provide the below definition:

A dynamic process that encompasses a complex mix of individual skills and personal attributes, values, and behaviors that consistently produce ethical and effective communication practice. Such practice fuels and guides successful communication teams, helps organizations achieve their goals, and legitimizes organizations in society (Berger & Meng, 2010, p. 427).

This study is based on the perception that leadership and communication are interlinked. Communication has been identified as a multidimensional construct (Smidts et al., 2001). Communication dynamics in organizations are multifaceted and intricate (Buckley et al., 1998), in a reflection of the complexity of norms, values, climate and goals of the organization. In this sense, Anne Gregory (2014), chair of the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management (GA) argues that Leadership in public relations is driven by the four Ps, purpose, principles, people and process. She elaborates on the necessity to focus on public relations leadership now and for the years to come.

This study builds on an existing corpus of literature to explore the perceptions and strategies of chief communication officers (CCOs) and how they manage communication in their firms. Within the limited studies on leadership in public relations (Men, 2014), the primary focus was on examining the leadership styles and traits preferred by public relations leaders with issues explored being the competencies needed to be a leader, ethical aspects and similarities and differences across communication management and other functions (Röttger, et al., 2013, p. 5; Werder & Holtzhausen, 2009; Zerfass, et al., 2011; Aldoory & Toth, 2004; Jin, 2010; Shin, Heath & Lee, 2011). Another area of focus was on theorizing about and measuring leadership in the public relations context (Lee & Cheng, 2012; Meng & Berger, 2013; Meng, et al., 2012; Yang, 2012).

This study proceeds a step further to focus on the perceptions of future communication leaders as well in comparison to the views of the current CCOs, contributing to a scarce and rather unexplored area in the field (Kiesenbauer, & Zerfass, 2015). The most comprehensive study to date exploring leadership in public relations and communication management has been conducted by Berger and Meng (2014). The study revealed the dynamic of leaders to affect practice and how these individuals positively impact the profession and the operations of an organization (Berger & Meng, 2014, p. 301).

### *1.3 Conceptual theories informing the study*

Addressing leadership is crucial since there has not been a consistent model implemented to regulate practice and specific set of standards put. In other words, there have not been particular guidelines to follow or a set of tasks but rather communication management has been subject to internal and external negotiations between different groups (Cloos, 2014, p.146). The latter implies that these professionals must themselves develop and exhibit these capacities that will drive the organizational structures and processes.

What is also instrumental is the identity negotiations and cognitive structures in relation to leadership. Here the social construction theory by Berger and Luckmann (1969, pp. 151–152) could be of relevance as it acknowledges that public relations leaders function produce an identity as a result of the combination of the company, their personal consciousness and social structure. Different experiences produce varying understandings in the PR field. Adhering to the social construction theory in terms of explaining public relations (Tsetsura, 2010) is influential to this research as it proposes examining the discourses of professionals to identify changes over time that occur in the professional field.

In an attempt to examine the social reality of professionals in the field of public relations, sociologists like

Pohlmann, et al. (2015) have identified consistent patterns in the mindsets of top managers. Following this line of thinking, several studies have taken an approach of interviewing leaders and detecting authentic leadership (Men & Stacks, 2014). However, only very few research projects have undertaken a mixed-method design approach as will be pursued in this study (see for example Berger & Meng, 2014; Tench et al., 2013, pp. 64–79).

#### 1.4 Research aims and questions

The preliminary investigation of relevant literature led to the formulation of four basic questions which determined the nature of the research process reported in the next section of this paper. The four research questions addressed in this study are:

- 1: How is strategic communication interpreted by future communication leaders and the extent to which it can contribute to organizational goals?
- 2: How do future communication leaders conceptualize leadership and what are the key characteristics of a good leader?
- 3: According to communication leaders, which are some of the key measures to support a management career?
- 4: Which are some of the major and relevant trends in corporate communications from the perspective of communication leaders?

## 2. Method

A pragmatist paradigm informed the choice of research approach for this study. The intention in using a pragmatist perspective towards the research is to discover the truth rather than testing hypothesis and seeking to uncover causal relationships that are generalizable through a deductive approach (Kuckartz, 2012, p. 75). Therefore although there is interest in the extent to which the findings of this study are generalizable to a broader population, the primary focus of the study is to gain insights into these CCOs and leaders' positioning and conceptualizations, without presupposing that there is a single truth to be discovered.

There is no overarching framework for how pragmatist research should be conducted; rather each pragmatist research is determined in terms of the philosophical stances and phenomenon to be examined and for different reasons (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p.5). In this sense, a mixed methods approach was considered the most appropriate to answer the research questions in this study. The challenge in this paper was to avoid being restraint by "traditional" quantitative methods pertaining to leadership research.

The overall design of the research was planned to be emergent and consisted of two interrelated stages (Figure 1). Stage One involved the development of survey questionnaire using both open ended and closed questions based on the preliminary review of the literature and research questions driving the study. It was anticipated that the analysis of the data collected from Stage One would inform the design of the next stage. Stage Two involved focus group interviews with CCOs and leaders; these were meant to supplement the findings from the questionnaire.

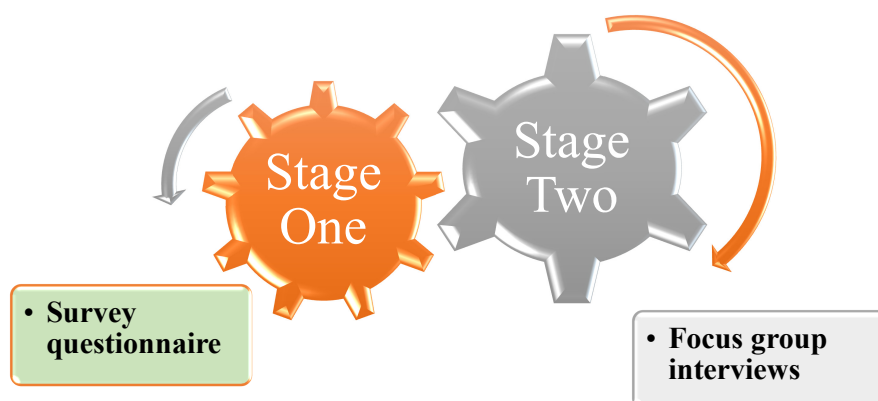


Figure 1. The research design process

## 2.1 Data collection instruments and sampling procedures

This subsection describes the two main sources of gathering data for the research process, which were a survey questionnaire and focus group interviews. The intention is to briefly provide with the rationale for using each method as well as describing the procedures followed.

### 2.1.1 Survey questionnaires

A survey questionnaire was administered to gain information about the characteristics of the group of professionals (n=120). Drawing from Gray (2004) controlling extraneous variables was pursued through using a random probability sample from twelve companies. The data generated by the questionnaire (see Appendix 2 for questionnaire) was mainly used for comparative purposes. They made possible two kinds of comparisons:

- (a) comparisons between the various characteristics of the research participants, and
- (b) comparisons between the findings of this research and previous research.

To obtain answers to the questionnaire, these professionals were questioned via an online survey tool and were completed over a period of four weeks between December 2015 and January 2016. Due to the busy schedule of these professionals it was thought best to complete the questionnaire online to enable the data to be collected within a reasonable time frame, while maximising the response rate. According to the demographics gained from the survey questionnaire, almost half of these CCOs and future leaders possess at least a Masters Degree or MSc (Figure 2).

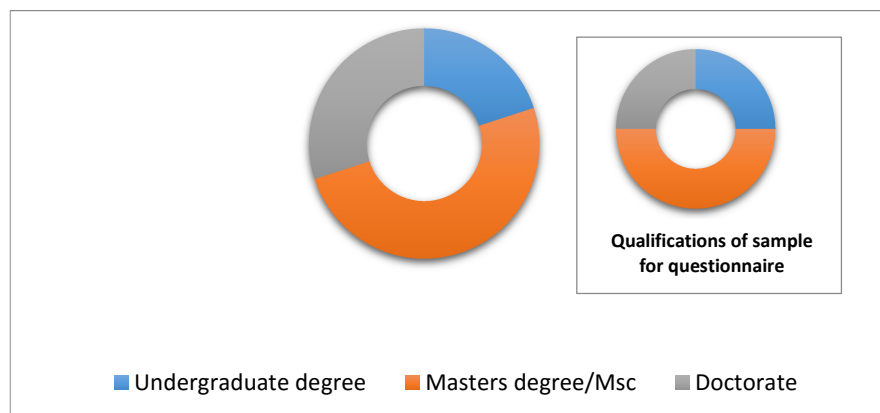


Figure 2. Highest qualification sought for all respondents to the questionnaire

### 2.1.2 Focus group interviews

Looking into research methods by Clifford and Valentine (2010), Cohen et al. (2007), Mason (2002), Robson (2002), and Denscombe (2010) the decision was to conduct focus group interviews to further assist to answer the research questions of the study.

A number of respondents in the survey questionnaire from the twelve companies participating in the research were recruited for the focus group interviews. The target population and sample size for this research was determined by constraints of time, finance and the nature of the research methods pursued. Systematic selection of subjects from a population list is a probability sample (Robson, 2002, Cohen et al., 2007). Having accessed the list of companies to participate in the questionnaire, five companies were selected based on criteria of geographical, socio cultural and socio-economic variables for the areas where the companies were located. It was decided to limit the target population for the focus group interviews to ten CCOs and ten future leaders. The intention was to create two mixed-sex groups of 10 CCOs and 10 leaders respectively. The group size is considered manageable by other researchers and can reveal intra-group dynamics (Cohen et al., 2007; Krueger, 1994).

Figure 3 and 4 illustrate the years of experience of the interviewees that participated in the focus group interviews.

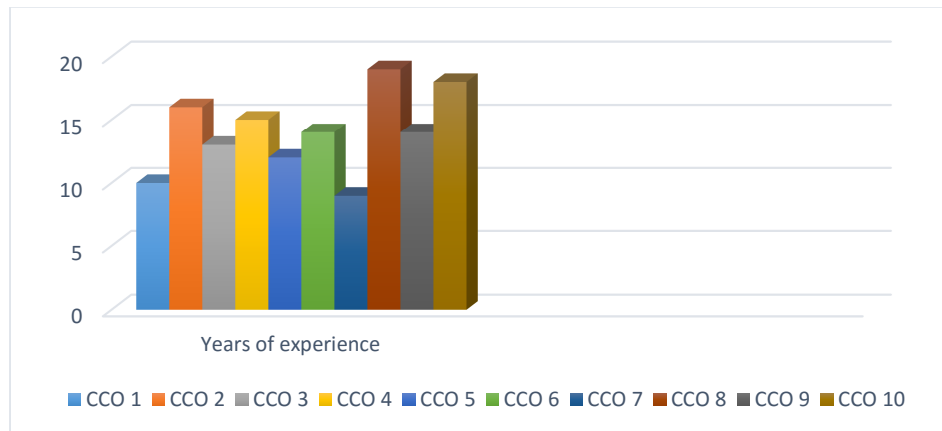


Figure 3. Years of experience in corporations (CCO interviewees)

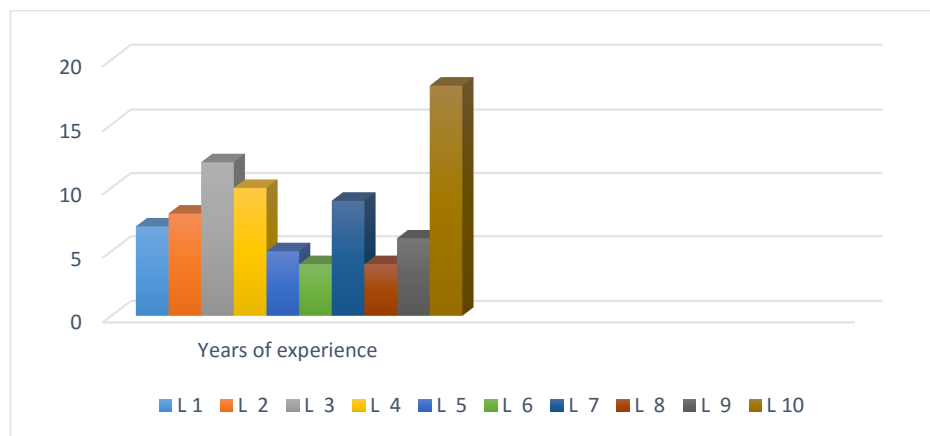


Figure 4. Years of experience in corporations (future leaders' interviewees)

## 2.2 Data analysis

Patton (1990) defined the purpose of data analysis as the gathering of “comprehensive, systematic, and in depth information about each case of interest” (p. 384). To approach the data, generally, inductive reasoning (using the data to generate ideas) for hypothesis generating, or deductive reasoning (beginning with the idea and using the data to confirm or negate the idea) for hypothesis testing, are used. In this research, an inductive approach was considered more appropriate. Therefore, the analysis and comparison among the views of the CCOs and the future leaders was distinguished in the following:

In regards to the analysis of the survey questionnaire, the SPSS quantitative software was utilized to interpret the responses to the questionnaire, followed by a qualitative content analysis of the focus group interviews using the Nvivo qualitative software. Throughout the field study, the intention was to pair analysis with data collection. The effort to keep these two processes close to each other resulted in final analyses shaped by all participants.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Interpreting strategic communication and its contribution to delivery of organizational goals (RQ1)

The synthesis of findings derived from the survey and focus group interviews from this study suggest that chief communication officers have an in-depth understanding of strategic or corporate communication. They perceive communication as a key strategic variable that is incremental towards delivering the goals of their companies,

handle its actions and guide the management that will lead to establish the respective company in the eyes of the public they serve. What was cited more frequently during the focus group interviews as the most crucial element in regards to the latter is managing stakeholder relationships. An indicative statement is:

CCO 9: "...In my view, it is imperative in undertaking strategic communications to sustain the relationship and dialogue between a company and its various stakeholders. This is a solid way to possibly establish the company..."

The majority of CCOs (Figure 5) and future leaders (Figure 6) interviewed for this study identified strategic communication as instrumental. Interestingly enough, the vast majority of the CCOs could not provide with a clear definition on what strategic communication entails. However, organizational leadership influences strategic internal communication in several ways (Men and Stacks, 2014), making it imperative for CCOs and future leaders to have an in-depth understanding of the concept.

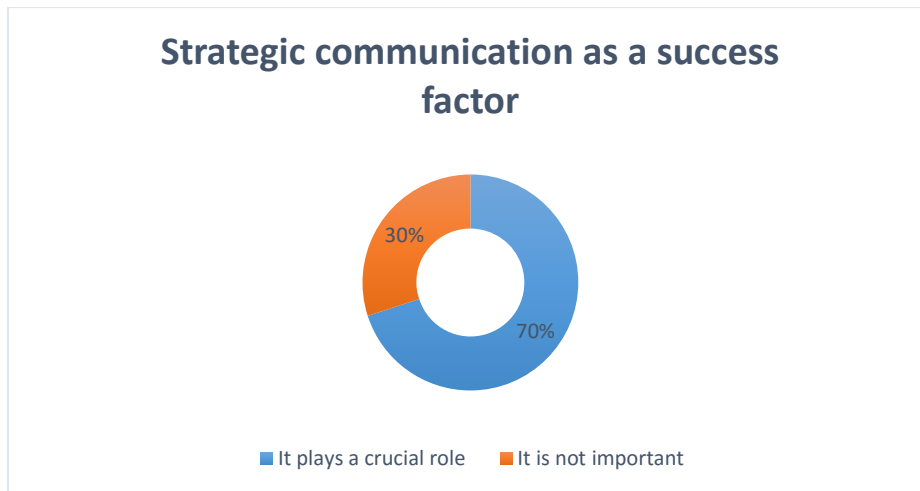


Figure 5. Strategic communication as a success factor (CCOs' answers)

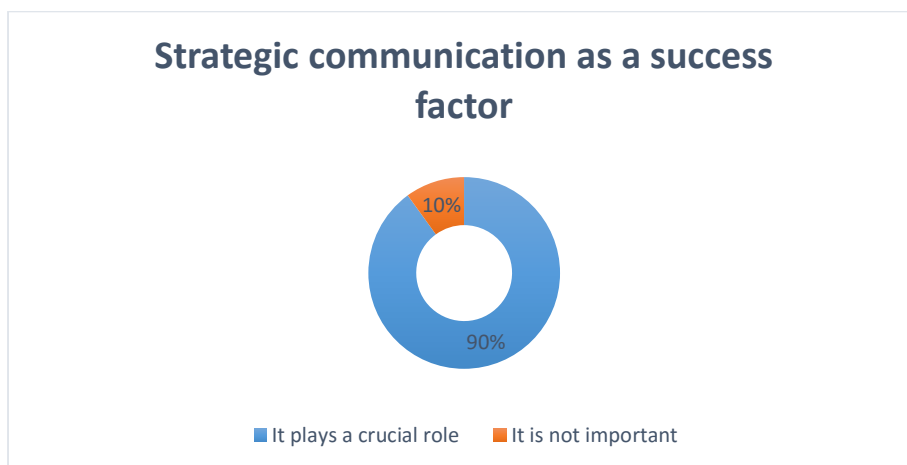


Figure 6. Strategic communication as a success factor (future leaders' answers)

On the contrary, next generation leaders appeared to be more aware of the term yet with a limited vision on the

functions of communication. Over half of future leaders perceive communication's role as catering for establishing the reputation of a company and characteristic is the statement:

Future leader 2: "...At best, communication is key to preserve and increase our reputation as a company. When you lose that integrity and trust, it is virtually impossible that our products will sell the same..."

In regards to whether and how to measure communication, most of the respondents in the questionnaire believe that it is possible to quantify the value of communication, however they elaborate that the measurement is found on how the communication department of the company functions at board level and the manner in which it is involved in making strategic decisions by other top managers (Figure 7). Indicative of this perception is the following statement:

CCO 9: "...You understand the value of communication by examining how far in the corporate strategy ladder you find yourself to be as a department and how you influence what the company does. This should be done in cooperation with other departments and managers..."

Future leaders as mentioned assert on the value of communication. For example it was stated:

Future leader 3: "...Perhaps we cannot measure strategic communication in accurate numeric terms, however it is possible to evaluate the extent of influence your department carries..."

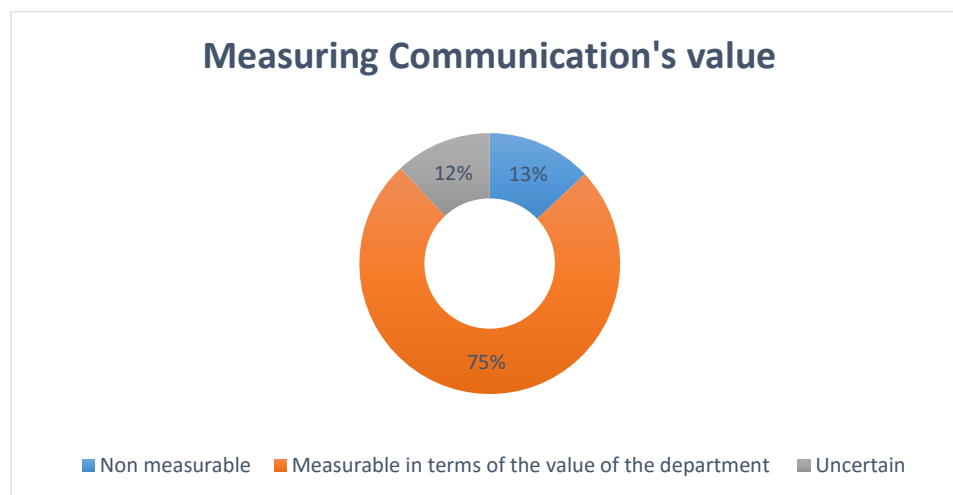


Figure 7. Is communication value measurable? (n=120)

### 3.2 Leadership and characteristics of a good leader (RQ2)

The second question enquired into the ways in which one can be a leader in a department with a number of ways been mentioned by the participants in the research. What was derived as primary perception among CCOs is that leaders should urge and inspire their employees to be independent (Figure 8). Representative of these views is the statement:

CCO 4: "...My advice is that a leader should provide the sort of strategies and boost the employees to act on their own, take initiatives and be independent within their area of expertise..."

In regards to this question, almost all future leaders appeared to be in agreement with CCOs on several key characteristics of good leaders. They share the belief that a leader should be inspiring employees and drive independent and innovative thinking, while also be willing to hear the views of their employees, being open to ideas. The next statements are characteristic of this view:

Future leader 5: "...I think it is of the most important attributes to be able to exhibit a willingness to hear the feedback of the employees whilst maintaining their internal instincts strong ..."

Future leader 3: "...To me you cannot be a leader if you do not have an eye for innovation and forward thinking, which at times comes from your employees. Therefore you must strive to make space for dialogue between you and them..."

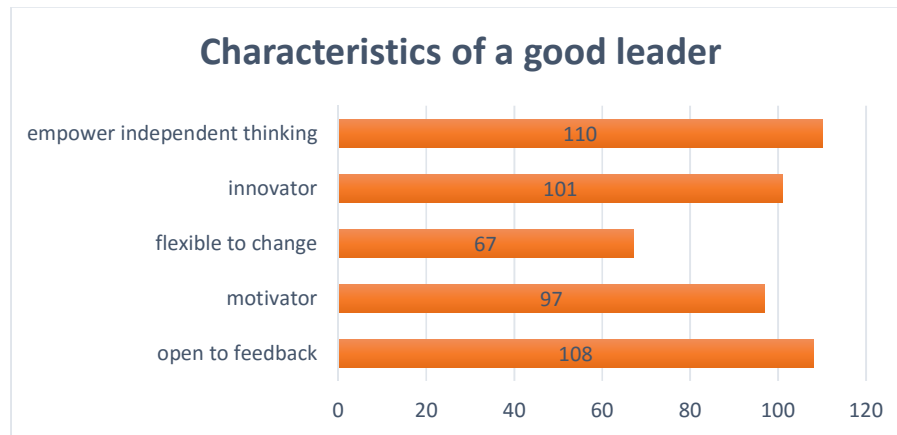


Figure 8. Characteristics of good leaders (n=120)

### 3.3 Key drivers to promote leadership in corporate communications (RQ3)

As far as the ways in which leadership can be cultivated if at all, several other key drivers were identified including internships, teamwork, motivation and gaining responsibilities, external and internal networking, as well as having a role model or mentor (Figure 9).

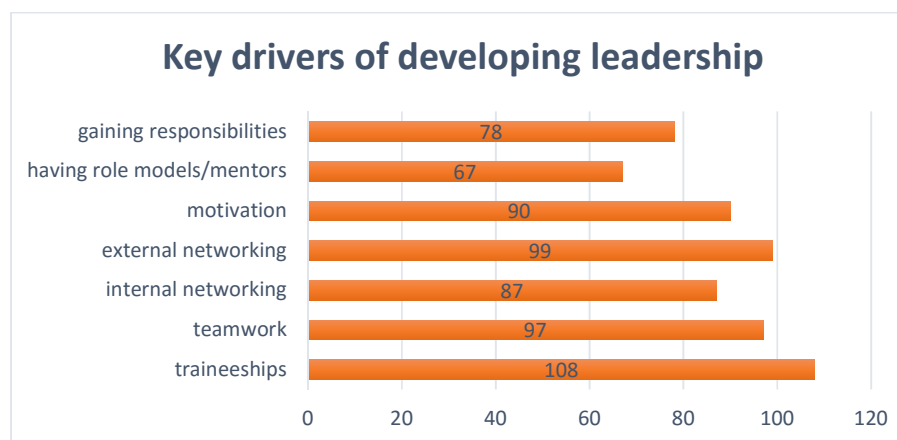


Figure 9. Key drivers to develop leadership (n=120)

84% of all respondents to the survey (Figure 10) described that one primary goal of a company should be to pursue internships and train the employees in leadership skills and foster a general life-long learning corporate culture. This was acknowledged as the most valid way to pursue the development of leaders. If proper training takes place, this increases the potential for meaningful knowledge gained that will be used in variant contexts and departments in a person's career.



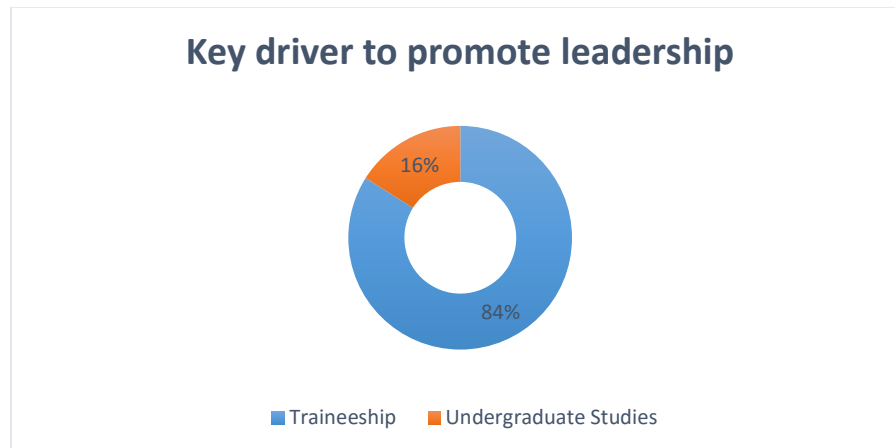


Figure 10. Key driver to promote leadership (n=120)

The above finding was confirmed by the focus group interviews. 8 out of 10 CCOs interviewed on the drivers to leadership mentioned the importance of training and internships in particular at the early stages of someone's career. For example these CCOs state:

CCO 9: "... My experience shows that traineeships are extremely valuable. We have adopted this method for over 20 years now and I see how it helps employees grow..."

CCO 5: "... My opinion is that a leader should be able to motivate others, whether it is employees or the clients. And he must gather a range of skills including managerial, professional skills as well as have a broad experience in different communication disciplines. It is not enough to specialize in a single area in a communication department if you are looking to achieve a leadership role..."

These understandings were also shared among future communication leaders with 9 out of 10 interviewed attributing great importance in the experience gained through internships. An indicative statement is:

Future leader 2: "...There is nothing compared to the actual practical experience I gained once I stepped foot in the company. Working with colleagues from different areas in the communication department was the number one incentive to launch my career and get insights on strategic communication from the very beginning.

What was also cited as key among CCOs in the study to succeed was developing a personal network, both external and internal. A characteristic statement from the interviews is:

CCO 1: "...I think it is fundamental to promote yourself in professional networking sites and share ideas with other colleagues since this a way to broaden my horizons and at the same time close new deals, create a level of trust that could lead to partnerships..."

CCO 9: "...You must work hard to become known among people of the same stature and higher, and networking online is one way to succeed so. You don't want to stay in the backstage when you are looking to build a leading company..."

This finding is confirmed by other studies such as Zerfass et al. (2014; p.71) which indicated that young CCOs make extensive use of professional social media sites to network.

Internal networking was rated as equally important among future communication leaders who assert that establishing solid relationship as a communication manager with other staff can enable fast, effective responses and decision making. The following are characteristic statements of the latter:

Future leader 8: "...I don't like to keep everything to myself. I learn a lot by interacting with other colleagues in my firm and seek to exchange ideas on a range of topics."

Future leader 1: "...I tried to establish a good level of internal communication with contacts from various departments in the firm from the very beginning, even if it's having discussions over lunch break..."

### 3.4 Future trends in corporate communications (RQ4)

The final question of this study concerned the challenges ahead for communication leaders. 65 % of CCOs and emerging communication leaders maintain the view there will not be any radical changes in the field in terms of the content of corporate communications but rather in the instruments and channels of communication (Figure 11).

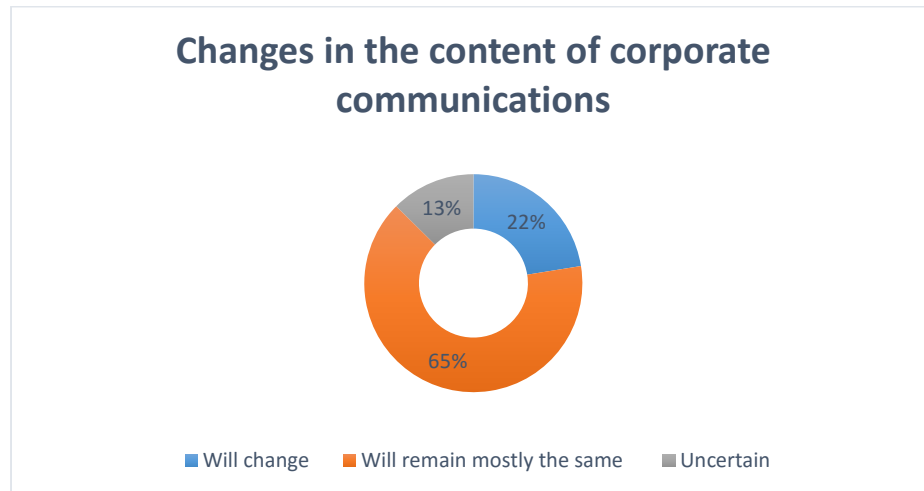


Figure 11. Will the main tasks or content of corporate communications change in the next ten to twenty years? (n=120)

Similar to the findings from Kiesenbauer and Zerfass (2015)'s study on how CCOs and future leaders identify potential developments will take place, the sample in this study identifies that a more individualistic consumer behavior, internal communications, meeting external expectations, hyper-transparency and balancing work-life commitments are among the challenges for the next years (Figure 12).



Figure 12. Future challenges in organizational communication (n=120)

The following statements are representative of these views:

CCO 1: "...I don't perceive that major changes in terms of communication management between the company and stakeholders will emerge. However I believe that digitization will be even more prominent..."

CCO 6: "...I feel that more attention should be paid to internal communication, enhancing the flexibility in departmental structures and meeting external demands from social media..."

Although in the past, more importance was attributed to achieving external communications (Dolphin, 2005), there has been an increase in interest in improving internal communication as it is seen as a catalyst to organizational excellence and effectiveness (Men, 2015; Grunig, 1992) and therefore it should be continuous (Young & Post, 1993). Emerging communication leaders also agree that it is important to improve internal communications as well as acknowledge the role of social media in strategic communication and leadership overall. One statement characteristic of the latter is:

Future leader 7: "...My perception is that the most critical part will be to be able to compete in social media although of course internal communication is important. However where the game is played in terms of communication really nowadays and in the future is online..."

In addition, a substantial number of emerging leaders and CCOs mentioned the challenge of work life balance as a challenge to which they must be able to respond if they want to be successful. For example, in the interviews it was stated:

CCO 5: "...I know from first hand that you cannot expect to succeed if you work 9-5 like in other professions. You must find a way to navigate through this obstacle in order to move forward. Otherwise, you will be left behind..."

Future leader 9: "...I think that you have to accept and embrace the fact that your life is mostly your job or at best that your free time will be limited. The competition is huge and you must show determination and overcome such dilemmas if you want to be a leader in a corporate firm..."

In relation to the previous and following the discussion on the need to internationalise communication activities proposed by Ingenhoff (2013) and, future leaders were questioned whether the nature of communication activities such as traditional stationary work would remain the norm or it would evolve due to the need for increased mobility among firms and businesses. 70% of the respondents of the study claimed that corporate activities should remain in their local headquarters to maintain the same level of quality of services, however for 89% of these emerging leaders, the event of working abroad does not seem distant not unwanted. Indicatively, two interviewees stated:

Future leader 2: "...I don't consider it a problem. In fact, I think developing such partnerships of a global scale should be pursued by a true leader and in this sense I would be willing to travel..."

Future leader 3: "...You must be available at all times and cannot expect to work merely in the range of your local district if you are running a leading organisations. There are responsibilities that come with the position and demand to be flexible even in terms of where you work..."

#### 4. Conclusion

This study was grounded in the qualitative research previously conducted by Kiesenbauer and Zerfass (2015) by taking a pragmatist approach using mixed methods. Due to the choice of this approach for the study, a wealth of data has been gathered from the survey questionnaire among 120 respondents and interviews with 20 chief communication officers and leaders of the next generation employed in multinational companies worldwide. The findings of the fieldwork provide with some important and useful insights into some burning issues concerning the professional life of postmodern businesses.

One key finding deriving from the analysis of these professionals has been that there is not a single recipe for the attributes and characteristics of a leader in today's public relations environment. Although there is agreement between general attributes among CCOs and future communication leaders, both categories do not have a narrow and conclusive picture of a specific type of personality or vision that a leader must share. This could be explained by understanding the field of public relations as still maturing, and in this sense does not share a confined collective identity or such established conceptualisations on the profession and its responsibilities.

Based on the overall findings a number of issues were identified which can potentially inform public relations in practice, as well as spark the interest on future research. Important issues to be addressed include:

- The need for establishing a precise interpretation of what strategic communication entails
- Strengthen internal networking
- Promote internships and training within a company
- Examine ways to bring close future to current communication leaders through mentoring programmes
- Promote a more balanced work routine

Despite the limitations of the sampling procedure, it was considered that this study contributes to the field of public relations by this more in-depth look into the voices and perceptions of professionals in corporate organisations as the importance of leadership is increasingly acknowledged.

## Acknowledgment

The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments. We are grateful to the financial support provided by the major project of the National Social Science of China (no.15BGL200). We wish to thank The Overseas Education College of Jiangsu University for their valuable support especially the Dean Prof. Jing Gao and PhD supervisor Dr. Yong Cui. We are also very thankful to PhD scholar Mr. Henry Asante Antwi and Miss. Tehzeeb Mustafa for their valuable suggestions.

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