

THE EMPLOYEE-PUBLIC-ORGANIZATION CHAIN IN  
RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT:  
A CASE STUDY OF A GOVERNMENT ORGANIZATION

by  
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## ABSTRACT

This study examined the critical roles that employees play in an organization's relationship-building process with its publics. By conducting an in-depth case study of a government organization's exemplary community relations programs, the researcher explored links among three focal concepts: employee-organization relationships, employee-public relationships, and organization-public relationships. Field research was conducted over the course of seven weeks. Data were collected through long interviews, participant observations, and document analysis.

The findings suggest that employees who have positive employee-organization relationships (i.e. employees who have high level of commitment) and those who are capable of using symmetrical cultivation strategies contribute significantly to the development of positive organization-public relationships. The study also found that when the external publics have positive interactions and develop trusting individual relationships with employees, they tend to evaluate the overall organization positively.

The study also found that employee empowerment can occur through employees' participation in public relations programs for external publics. Employees also developed personal networks with other employees through participating in public relations programs, which contributed to the building of an internal community. The study showed that public relations programs that tap into the intersection of internal and external publics contribute to the simultaneous development of positive relationships within and between both arenas. Based on the findings of this study, a normative public relations theory of integrative internal and external organizational relationship management is proposed.

## PURPOSE AND INTRODUCTION

In recent years, relationships between an organization and its publics have been the focal interest in public relations research and practice (Bruning & Ledingham, 2000). However, it is still unclear how in real-life, organization-public relationships (OPR) are initiated, built, and maintained (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 2000; L. Grunig, 2000). In this study, I argue that frontline employees who interact with publics play a crucial role in the organization-public relationship-building process and that exploration of their role provides insightful information for the advancement of relationship theories.

As Morgan and Hunt (1994) asserted, publics interact with employees and not with an organization. Recent developments in various organizational studies also provide rationale for the need to study roles frontline employees play in relationship management. According to organizational scholars, there are positive linkage between perceived quality of employee-organization relationships and external public-organization relationships (Czaplewski, 2001; B. Schneider, D. Bowen, Ehrhart, & Holcombe, 2000; B. Schneider, White, & Paul, 1998). This positive linkage is also seen to be connected to positive organizational outcomes (Rucci, Kim, & Quinn, 1998). Various studies point out how the integrative management of internal and external communication is the most critical factor to realize the positive links among employees-publics-organizational outcomes. However, there is little consensus on how it should be done and which organizational function should claim the responsibility.

As a communication management function, public relations is at the perfect position within an organization to carry out the integrative communication management programs. Furthermore, the recent theoretical developments in relationship management in public relations provide a conceptual framework to understand and implement the integrative management of internal and external communication. Despite the potential in public relations, not much attention has been given to

employees' reports of the quality of their relationships with the organization and even less to exploration of possible links between the quality of employee-organization relationship and the employee-public relationship. I hoped to fill this void in the field by conducting an in-depth case study on an organization's community relations practice. Ultimately, the main purpose of this research was to develop a normative public relations theory of integrative internal and external relationship management.

More specifically, this study explores the nature of links among employee-organization relationships (EOR), employee-public relationships (EPR), and organization-public relationships (OPR), in a real-life setting. I sought answers to the following key questions: 1) How does the quality of employee-organization relationships affect the quality of interaction between employees and publics? 2) How does the quality of employee-public relationships affect the quality of organization-public relationships? and 3) How can public relations as a management function contribute to effective management of internal and external relationships of an organization?

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The most emotional moment in the program [Montel Williams<sup>1</sup>] comes when 8-year-old Kenneth Hughes of Mastic Beach describes what living with cancer has been like.

"I know a lot of adults have said to you what they think has caused this. Why do you think you have cancer?" Williams asks the boy. "Brookhaven Lab," he responds, quivering next to his mother, Debra, after telling the rapt studio audience all he wants is to have a little fun in life. (Zehren, 1998)

Brookhaven National Laboratory (BNL) is a scientific research laboratory located in central Suffolk County, Long Island, New York. It is one of the U.S. Department of Energy's (DOE) premier facilities. During the late 90s, the lab experienced a major environmental crisis—radioactive chemical (tritium) leak from a nuclear reactor.

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<sup>1</sup> The Montel Williams show is a daily, one-hour, nationally syndicated talk show starring Montel Williams. Williams was a motivational speaker prior to his debut as a talk show host in 1991. Issues affecting youth, domestic abuse, welfare and the foster care system are topics of his show (Retrieved December 1, 2003 from <http://www.montelshow.com/about/bio.htm>).

In January 1997, BNL announced that they discovered radioactive tritium in the groundwater at the lab (Powers, 1997). Tritium is a naturally occurring, radioactive form of hydrogen, which also can be artificially produced in nuclear reactors. The contamination at the lab was caused by a slow leak in an indoor storage pool that was used to hold the spent fuel rods from the High Flux Beam Reactor (HFBR), a facility designed for neutron-scattering research.

Not long after this discovery was publicly announced, environmental activists started protests, picketing in front of the lab. One activist even fasted in front of the lab for 40 days, requesting the lab to take responsible actions. The lab made headlines in the news media almost every day and the situation seemed to worsen with time when a nationally broadcast TV talk show, Montel Williams, aired a segment about BNL and cancer on Long Island on January 9, 1998. The following is transcription of a teaser for the Montel Williams Show:

On screen: Actor Alec Baldwin<sup>2</sup> in color, split screen with boy in black & white.

Alec Baldwin: "The reason I'm here today is because of something like this."

On screen: High Flux Beam Reactor at BNL, "Nuclear Labs" in ragged typeface.

Announcer: "On the next Montel Williams Show, Alec Baldwin speaks out about nuclear labs and high rates of cancer."

Alec Baldwin: (on screen) "These people are not voluntarily going to cough up all the information we want—we have to take it from them."

Announcer: "Alec Baldwin speaks out—is cancer hiding in your community? On the next Montel." (as cited in Bond, 1998)

The lab's own environmental investigation revealed that the amount of tritium leaked into the groundwater was in fact minimal and the contamination occurred within the groundwater on site and not off site. To make an analogy, the amount of tritium leaked into the groundwater was a 10<sup>th</sup> of a drop of water. Scientists explained that the amount of radiation caused by the tritium leak was much less than the sands at many beaches along the South Fork in Long Island (Garber, 1999). However, their efforts to relay such a message seemed to have little weight against the negative media coverage already far in progress.

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<sup>2</sup> Actor and activist born on April 3, 1958, in Massapequa, New York. He was in *The Marrying Man* (1991) and in *Prelude to a Kiss* (1992). Other movie credits include *The Juror* (1996), *The Edge* (1997), *Hunt for Red October* (1990), and *Mercury Rising* (1998) (Retrieved December 1, 2003, from <http://infoplease.lycos.com/ipea/A0759873.html>).

## Remediation through Community Relations

Not long after the tritium crisis, DOE terminated contract with Associated Universities, Inc. (AUI) and Brookhaven Science Associates (BSA) was chosen as the new contractor, which was a consortium between a pharmaceutical company Battelle<sup>3</sup> and State University of New York (SUNY). BSA was specifically charged to develop better community relationships by DOE. Remediation was not immediate but progress was made. The lab began to reestablish damaged relationships with its communities through various programs. Through implementation of pilot programs and enhancement of existing programs, the lab began to reshape their community relations programs.

Three years after the management change, the lab received the 2001 Organization of the Year Award from the International Association for Public Participation<sup>4</sup> for its excellent community relations programs. Communication programs during and after the crises are the focal interest in this study. What is particularly of interest in this study is the fact that some of these programs included a great deal of employee involvement. In this study, I focused on studying three major community relations programs within the organization: Community Advisory Council, Envoy Program, and Summer Sundays.

### *The Community, Education, Government, and Public Affairs Directorate (CEGPA)*

At BNL, the Community, Education, Government, and Public Affairs (CEGPA) directorate was the function responsible for all public relations activities. In this research, I refer to this directorate as the public relations function. Before the management change at BNL, various communication functions were scattered throughout the organization. During the crisis, DOE asked

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<sup>3</sup> A non-profit research and development organization, Battelle develops new technologies, commercializes products, and provides solutions for industry and government. Their areas of expertise range from medical products and pharmaceuticals to products for the automotive, chemical, and agrochemical industries. They also develop environmental and energy solutions for industry and government, and technological solutions for challenges in national security, transportation, and health and human services (Battelle, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Details of the award can be found at <http://www.iap2.org/corevalues/cvawards-2001.htm>.



the current CEGPA director to integrate these functions in order to operate them more cohesively. As a result, Media Relations and Communication (MRC), Environmental Management Community Relations (EMCR), Community Involvement (CI), Laboratory Web Content (LW), and Educational Programs (EP) now report to the CEGPA director.

#### *Community Advisory Council (CAC)*

The CAC was a program developed shortly after the environmental scandal that took place during 1997 and 1998. It was a public forum, comprised of a crosscut of stakeholder groups including local activist groups, civic associations, and employees. For the last six years, CAC convened every month at the lab to discuss issues pertaining to the community. The draft charter written in 1998 states the purpose of CAC as follows:

The purpose of the Brookhaven Community Advisory Council (CAC) is to ensure that the ideas, interests, and concerns of Brookhaven National Laboratory's communities are considered by the Laboratory in its decision-making processes. The CAC's mission is to address concerns about the Laboratory's policies and operations, explicitly those related to environment and public health issues. (Brookhaven National Laboratory, 1998, p. 1)

Initial categories of interests and organizations representing the interests were identified, which included local government, civic organizations, business, education, environmental, activist, health, BNL industrial user, labor, BNL employees, emergency response, senior citizen, and other interests (Brookhaven National Laboratory, 1998). Letters were sent to representative organizations in each category asking for their participation in the CAC. Organizations that responded to the letter consisted the initial membership of CAC. There are 32 members in CAC and the first meeting was held in September 10<sup>th</sup>, 1998.

#### *Envoy Program*

The basic idea of the Envoy Program was to explore the relationships employees had outside the organization. The Envoy Program implementation plan states that the goal of the Envoy

Program is “to encourage and strengthen two-way, person-to-person communication between BNL personnel and key public opinion leaders” (Brookhaven National Laboratories, n.d.d.).

The CEGPA directorate identified, interviewed, and recruited employees, who were involved in community organizations such as church groups, property associations, taxpayer associations, and PTA meetings. Forty-five *envoys* were recruited for the initial program. Envoys participate in monthly meetings where they learn about activities at the lab by having speakers from different divisions of the lab. Each envoy is given an *Issues Notebook* that includes BNL press releases, fact sheets, newspaper clippings, community or civic association-generated fliers, reports, and newsletters. These materials help envoys to respond coherently to inquiries from community members about the lab. If envoys cannot answer specific questions from the community, they are to report back to the program coordinator for further support. Upon any envoys’ request, the CEGPA directorate would connect right persons to respond to questions at hand. Envoys were to bring back any issues or concerns identified within their external communities. Prospective envoys are selected based on the following criteria: 1) A good listener and personable, 2) a relationship-builder, 3) involved with personal, social, or professional organizations, and 4) willing to devote time to review timely Laboratory materials (Brookhaven National Laboratory, n.d.d.).

### *Summer Sundays*

Summer Sundays is an annual community outreach program BNL has been implementing since 1979. It started as a simple weekend tour of the lab. However, it now has expanded into a bigger production. In addition to the tour of the research facilities, Summer Sundays feature interactive educational science shows for children and family, meetings with scientists’ families, and science displays. In general, Summer Sundays are held for 6 to 7 Sundays during the summer months, and according to the Summer Sundays coordinator, anywhere from 500 to 1,500 people

visit the site annually. Summer Sundays provide opportunities for members of publics to interact with employees.

## OPERATIONALIZATION

Relationship management theory in public relations comprise the major theoretical background in this study. Interdisciplinary literature that dealt with the links among employees, publics, and organizational performance, were also reviewed in order to build a theoretical framework. In particular, employee commitment or loyalty emerged as relevant concept through reviewing business management, organizational psychology, and marketing. In the following, key concepts are operationalized based on the literature review.

### Public Relations as Relationship Management Function

According to Ledingham and Bruning (1998), the relational perspective reconceptualizes public relations as a “*management* function that uses communication strategically” (p. 56). Bruning and Ledingham (2000) explained that the relational management perspective moves public relations practice away from “manipulating public opinion through communication messages” to combination of “symbolic communication messages and organizational behaviors to initiate, nurture, and maintain mutually beneficial organization-public relationships” (p. 87). In this study, I also define public relations as a management function that uses strategic communication to develop relationships with strategic publics.

### Organization-Public Relationships (OPR)

Broom, Casey, and Ritchey (1997) defined OPR as follows: “Organization-public relationships are represented by the patterns of interaction, transaction, exchange, and linkage between an organization and its publics” (p. 18). Ledingham and Bruning (1998) defined organization-public relationships as “The state that exists between an organization and its key publics that provides economic, social, political, and/or cultural benefits to all parties involved, and

is characterized by mutual positive regard” (p. 62). Hon and J. Grunig (1999) explained that an organization-public relationship occurs when there are organizational behaviors that have consequences on publics or when publics’ behaviors have consequences on an organization.

There still seems to be much debate on how OPR should be defined and conceptualized. The definitions suggested by public relations scholars thus far are either too broad or too narrow in scope or sometimes neglect the important component of communication in the relationship-building process. In my opinion, an OPR develops only after repeated communication takes place between the organization and publics. In this study, I posit the following as a definition of an organization-public relationship:

**An organization-public relationship (OPR) is a connection or association between an organization and a public that results from behavioral consequences an organization or a public has on the other and that necessitates repeated communication.**

Many researchers have been putting efforts into developing OPR constructs. Bruning and Ledingham (1998) identified five dimensions of relationships: trust, openness, involvement, investment, and commitment. J. Grunig and Huang (2000) proposed trust, control-mutuality, commitment, and satisfaction. J. Grunig and Huang explained the four relational dimensions as follows: Trust—one party’s level of confidence in and willingness to open oneself to the other party; control mutuality—the degree to which parties agree on who has rightful power to influence one another; commitment—the extent to which each party believes and feels that the relationship is worth spending energy to maintain and promote; and satisfaction—the extent to which each party feels favorably toward the other because positive expectations about the relationship are reinforced. According to J. Grunig and Huang (2000), organization-public relationships are successful “to the degree that the organization and publics trust one another, agree on who has rightful power to influence, experience satisfaction with each other, and commit oneself to one another” (p. 42-43). In

this study, I adopted J. Grunig and Huang's (2000) four relational dimensions in evaluating the quality of OPR.

### Employee-Organization Relationships (EOR)

Whereas the concept of OPR refers to relationships between the organization and its external publics, EOR refers to the relationships between an organization and its internal publics, the employees. As employees are often bound by contracts with organizations, it is possible to think that they may have different criteria for evaluating the quality of relationships. Or, it may be that employees put different emphasis on the dimensions of relationships than external publics. For instance, in business management and organizational psychology research, organizational commitment has been considered as the most important factor in building positive relationship with employees (Allen & Meyer, 1996; Mowday, 1998).

Organizational commitment (OC) is generally defined as a "psychological link between the employee and his or her organization that makes it less likely that the employee will voluntarily leave the organization" (Allen & Meyer, 1996. p. 252). OC scholars theorize that for employees, OC would represent a positive relationship with the organization. According to Meyer and Allen (1991, 1997), there are three forms of OC: affective, continuance, and normative. Affective commitment refers to the emotional link employees have with the organization. Continuance commitment is related to employees' recognition of cost of leaving or rewards of staying. Allen and Meyer (1997) explained that when an employee has strong continuance commitment, he or she stays with the organization because they have to. Lastly, when an employee has normative commitment, he or she stays with the organization out of sense of obligation to the organization.

Among the three dimensions of commitment, positive relationships between affective commitment and performance have been demonstrated in the majority of OC studies (Chen, Tsui, & Farh, 2002). Chen and Francesco (2003) explained that affective commitment was studied more

extensively than any other dimension of commitment, partly because affective commitment is considered to develop more specifically in relation to work experiences within a particular organization (p. 493). In this study, I am studying employees of a particular organization. Thus, I focus on exploration of the affective commitment dimension that develops out of specific work related experience with a particular organization.

In this study, I define employee-organization relationship (EOR) as follows:

**An employee-organization relationship (EOR) is a connection or association between an organization and individual employees that necessitates repeated communication.**

#### Employee-Public Relationships (EPR)

In this research, the employee-public relationship (EPR) specifically refers to the individual level relationships that develop between employees and external publics. I take Hon and J. Grunig's (1999) perspective and conceptualize EPR as follows:

**An employee-public relationship is a connection or association between an employee and a member of the public mainly resulting from interpersonal communication that occurs because of behavioral consequences an organization or the public has on the other.**

In exploring employee-public relationships, I mainly resort to J. Grunig and Huang's (2000) dimensions of relationships—trust, control mutuality, satisfaction, and commitment.

#### Cultivation Strategies

J. Grunig and Huang (2000) were among the first to develop maintenance strategies for relationships in public relations. Maintenance strategies are drawn from the models theory of public relations, interpersonal communication theories, and conflict resolution theories. Most recently, J. Grunig (2002) renamed the maintenance strategies as cultivation strategies. He defined cultivation strategies as “communication methods that public relations people use to develop new relationships

with publics and to deal with the stresses and conflicts that occur in all relationships” (p. 5). From this point forward, I will use the term relationship cultivation strategies in place of relationship maintenance strategies.

Hon and J. Grunig (1999) proposed a selective set of symmetrical communication strategies that are likely to produce relationship outcomes. Several strategies were adopted from interpersonal relationships and conflict resolution theories:

**Access**—members of publics or opinion leaders provide access to public relations people. Public relations representatives or senior managers provide representatives of publics similar access to organizational decision-making processes.

**Positivity**—anything the organization or public does to make the relationship more enjoyable for the parties involved.

**Openness**—of thoughts and feelings among parties involved.

**Assurances**—attempts by parties in the relationship to assure the other parties that they and their concerns are legitimate.

**Networking**—organizations’ building networks or coalitions with the same groups that their publics do, such as environmentalists, unions, or community groups.

**Sharing of tasks**—organizations’ and publics’ sharing in solving joint or separate problems.

From the conflict management theories, the following strategies were adopted.

**Integrative.** These approaches are symmetrical because all parties in a relationship benefit by searching out common or complementary interests and solving problems together through open discussion and joint decision-making.

**Dual Concern—symmetrical.** 1) *Cooperating.* Both the organization and the public work together to reconcile their interests and to reach a mutually beneficial relationship. 2) *Being unconditionally constructive.* The organization does whatever it thinks is best for the relationship, even if it means giving up some of its positions and even if the public does not reciprocate. 3) *Saying win-win or no deal.* If the organization and public cannot find a solution that benefits both, they agree to disagree—no deal. (for a review of the full strategy list, see Hon & J. Grunig, 1999)

Within the relationship management paradigm, public relations is a strategic communication management function, and thus research on the cultivation strategies that lead to certain relationship outcomes becomes critical. However, thus far, not too much empirical research has been focusing

on the exploration of effective cultivation strategies in relationship management. Particularly, exploration of frontline employees' use of cultivation strategies in their interaction with the public is scarce. I hoped to fill this void in the field by conducting this research.

### The Linkage Research: Synergy among Internal and External Relationships

The interrelation between employee relations and customer relations has long been a research interest in various organizational disciplines. The basic premise is that in order for an organization to develop positive relationships with its customers, the organization should have positive relationships with employees who interact with those customers. This body of research is often referred to as the "linkage research," (B. Schneider, D. Bowen, Ehrhart, & Holcombe, 2000) which I will discuss in the following.

In general, organizational scholars argue that in order for an organization to effectively build long-term relationships with customers, it must first develop positive, long-term relationships with employees who interact with those customers (Kiger, 2002; Duboff & Heaton, 1999). Business management scholars Rucci, Kim, & Quinn's (1998) study of Sears also provides encouraging evidence on the positive links among employee-public-organizational outcomes.

In an effort to turn around the sagging Sears, Rucci et al. and the Sears management developed a model that suggested how creating a compelling place to work leads to creation of a compelling place to shop, which in turn would make Sears a compelling place in which to invest. Relevant performance indicators were developed for the three objectives, which included financial performance indicators for the compelling place to invest. Rucci et al. examined the causal path among these three components and found that a 5-unit increase in employee attitude measures—attitude toward job and the company—resulted in a 1.3-unit increase in customer satisfaction and, eventually, a 0.5% increase in revenue growth (p. 91).



The recent developments in organizational climate research also relates to the findings of the Sears study. According to B. Schneider, Gunnarson, and Niles-Jolly (1994), while culture “refers to the broader pattern of an organization’s mores, values, and beliefs,” climate refers to the “atmosphere that is perceived by employees to be created in the organizations by practices, procedures, and rewards” (p. 18).

B. Schneider and his colleagues (B. Schneider, 1990; B. Schneider & D. Bowen, 1985; B. Schneider, White, & Paul, 1998) conducted series of studies exploring the relationship between employee experiences of service climate and customer experiences of service climate. Their research demonstrated that there is a significant link between employees’ experiences and customers’ experiences of service climate. It was found repeatedly that when employees reported the existence of a strong emphasis on service in their organization, customers also reported they received high quality service. Furthermore, the research extended to the issue of bottom-line outcomes resulting from customer satisfaction. In other words, organizational climate experienced by an employee is transferred to publics through their interaction, and the quality of this interaction affects publics’ attitude or behavior toward the organization.

In marketing, scholars also argue that you need satisfied and motivated employees in order to provide quality service to customers. Berry (1981) explained that employees are the internal customers and jobs are “internal products that satisfy the needs and wants of internal customers while addressing objectives of the organization” (p. 34). Berry further suggested using “internal marketing” to increase employee satisfaction and motivation. More recently, the notion of “internal branding” began to emerge as an alternative to internal marketing. Proponents of internal branding argue that a company must first gain employees’ support in its brand (Mitchell, 2002).

Throughout the review of management and marketing literature, the employee-publics-organizational performance link or chain research seems to be gaining momentum. The task is

simultaneous creation of positive relationships both inside and outside the organization through various management practices. For organizational commitment scholars, developing employee commitment through human resources practices is the answer. For marketing scholars, application of external marketing strategies to employees and integrating human resource and other supporting functions under marketing is suggested.

The common thread in the discussion of positive links among employee-publics-organization outcome is the importance of the quality of interaction between the employees and publics as it affects publics' attitude or behavior toward the organization. However, research devoted to systematic exploration of employees' communication skill sets or development of coherent communication management system is scarce. In this regard, the cultivation strategies discussed in public relations theories provides useful insights. Based on the discussion on to this point, I posit the following research questions.

#### *Research Questions*

- RQ 1. How do participants characterize the organization's climate for external relationship building?
- RQ 2. What types of organizational commitment do the employee participants have?
- RQ 3. How does the quality of employee-organization relationships (EOR) affect the employee-public relationship (EPR) building process?
- RQ 4. What types of cultivation strategies do the participants use, see as important, or find effective in developing positive employee-public relationships (EPR) or organization-public relationships (OPR)?
- RQ 5. How does the quality of employee-public relationships (EPR) affect the public's evaluation of the organization?

## METHODOLOGY

Mitchell (1983) defined a case study as a “detailed examination of an event (or series of related events) which the analyst believes exhibits (or exhibit) the operation of some identified general theoretical principles” (p. 192). According to Stoecker (1991), case study is the best way to refine general theory as it allows researchers to explore different outcomes of general processes suggested by theories depending on different contexts. Stake (1995) distinguished different types of case studies as follows. An intrinsic case study is carried out when one wants to understand a particular case. When one has a research question and wants to get insight into the question by studying a particular case, instrumental case study is conducted. A collective case study refers to extension of an instrumental study to several cases (pp. 3-4).

One of the main purposes of my study was to refine and expand the relationship theories by investigating how they operate within a specific organizational context, which made use of case study design appropriate. Because this study seeks to answer questions that arise from a conceptual review of theories and tries to understand the theoretical framework within a specific setting, it can be considered as an instrumental case study. Case studies are frequently carried out for the development of theory for further research. This study is also intended for development of theory for subsequent research.

In this research, I will not attempt to make statistical generalizations to a larger population. Rather, as Yin (1994) explained, I will try to make analytical generalization to expand theory. I opted for depth of understanding of the complex links among internal and external relationships rather than broader statistical generalizations. However, I believe that the results of this research can provide grounds for generalizations about the studied case and other similar cases (Yin, 1994; Gomm, Hammersley, & Foster, 2000).

My primary source of evidence comes from qualitative interviews with participants. I conducted in-depth interviews with public relations practitioners, frontline employees, and members of external publics. Document and observation data were reviewed and analyzed to corroborate the findings from the interviews. I was on-site for seven consecutive weeks to conduct interviews, collect documents and make observations.

Table 1

Data Collection Summary for Interviews<sup>a</sup>

Participants	Non-PR Employees	PR Practitioners	Top Management	Community Members	Total
All Interviews	25	8	3	17	53
Total-length of Interviews (Hours)	22.08	9.25	2.20	11.11	44.64
Mean-length of Interviews (Minutes)	53.00	69.37	43.92	39.21	50.54
Range-length of Interviews (Minutes)	29 - 71	40 - 103	39 - 49	12 - 69	12 - 103

<sup>a</sup> Note: Informal interviews with the 10 community members at the Summer Sundays are not included. Total length of the informal interviews was 22.23 minutes.

### Participants

In this study, I adopted the theoretical construct sampling strategy used in qualitative research. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2002), when a research project is driven by theoretical concepts, participants can be selected according to the criteria of key constructs. As I was particularly interested in roles employees play in relationship building process with publics, I recruited employee volunteers who participate in the organization's community outreach programs. Initially, I had discussions with the contact person at BNL to identify participants who were theoretically relevant. I also recruited key communication managers and gained access to top

managers, which allowed me to gain understanding of how they understand and envision the characteristics of a normative communication model for developing positive relationships with employees and external publics. Total number of participants in this study was 63. Detailed breakdown of the participants is shown in Table 1.

### Interviews

In this study, I used a semi-structured interview, which uses interview guides to facilitate the interview process and make efficient use of time. Interview guides contained questions designed to reflect theoretical concepts I am investigating (see Appendix A & B). Relationship questions were modeled after Hon and J. Grunig's (1999) qualitative research guideline. Two pilot interviews were conducted with one public relations practitioner and a non-public relations employee. Questions that were not effective in eliciting relevant responses were adjusted or dropped. Words that were unclear or confusing were reworded.

As shown in Table 1, the total number of interview participants in this research was 63. I interviewed 25 non-public relations employees, 8 public relations and 3 top managers, and 27 community members. Ten of the community members were interviewed informally during my participant observation of Summer Sundays event. With the exception of the informal interviews with the 10 community members, the length of interviews ranged from 12 minutes to 103 minutes. Average length of an interview was 50.54 minutes, and total interview time was 44.64 hours.

### Document Analysis and Participant Observation

Yin (1994) believed that documentary information should be "the object of explicit data collection" (p. 81) in case studies. As Yin explained, documentations were used to corroborate findings from other sources. In this study, I mainly collected official documents such as memos, newsletters, internal reports, yearbooks, annual reports, minutes of meetings, policy statements, and

Table 2  
*List of Documents Analyzed*

Type of Documents	Number
Newsletters (May-July, 2003)	7
Brochures	2
Promotional catalogue	1
Magazines published by the organization	4
Newspaper articles searched in electronic databases	15
Meeting minutes	7
Employee handbooks/plans	2
Envoy Issues Notebook <sup>a</sup>	1
Policy statements	2
Organizational chart	2
Broadcast e-mails to employees (Archived file: 1997-2001) <sup>b</sup>	3
Internal research reports	6
Proceedings from the annual Communication & Trust Advisory Panel Meeting (Binded Books: 2001-2002) <sup>c</sup>	2

Note. <sup>a</sup> This notebook contained press releases, clippings of newspapers, copies of internal newsletters, presentation files, and reports on environmental cleanup dated from 1999 to 2002.

<sup>b</sup> Total size of three files: 7.9 MB

<sup>c</sup> This document contained evaluation plans, year-end report of community outreach activities, and presentation files.

brochures. In addition, I also reviewed the archived press clippings at the organization. Table 2 summarizes documents that were collected in this study.

Participant observation was not a major data collection method because of limited resources. However, when possible, I made unobtrusive observations during the organizational activities such as internal meetings of the public relations department, meetings of the community advisory panel, and community events. I also followed the day-to-day activity of a public relations manager.

### Data Analysis

In qualitative research, there are different analysis techniques. In this research, I chose Wolcott's framework as it captures the essence of qualitative data analysis. Wolcott (1994) explained there are three parts to qualitative data analysis: description, analysis, and interpretation. However, other researchers' suggestions relevant to the three steps were also consulted.

In description phase, I stay as close to raw data, treating them as facts. Main raw data in this study will be the interview transcripts. Interviews were recorded with a digital voice recorder and transcribed. The direct quotes used in this research are verbatim, and I indicated my editorial insertions within brackets. Scholars take different approach in transcribing interviews. Some believe full transcriptions provide richer data; however, some scholars maintain that partial transcriptions of relevant responses can elicit equally rich data as the fully transcribed ones. In my study, I did partial transcriptions of relevant responses rather than a verbatim transcript because of limited resources—time and money.

Interviews were transcribed and read repeatedly to look for emerging categories or themes, which then were coded according to Strauss and Corbin (1998), Rubin and Rubin's (1995) suggestions. This is what Miles and Huberman (1994) referred to as the data reduction phase. Because my study was driven by theoretical research questions based on literature review, I used

my research questions as default categories under which I selectively filed the descriptive data.

When unexpected themes emerged, I coded them separately and looked for connections to themes filed under default categories.

In the analysis phase, I extend beyond the raw data to systematically “identify key factors and relationships among them” (Wolcott, 1994. p. 10). In the final stages of interpretation, I turn to the theoretical framework and make sense of what goes on, and extend the analysis. Evidence from documents and observations were also analyzed and discussed in conjunction with the interview data.

### Ethical Considerations

Before conducting this research, I submitted appropriate documentation for review by the Human Subjects Committee of the Department of Communication and the Internal Review Board of the University of Maryland. Issues of confidentiality, potential benefits the organization would get from participation, and time commitment of participants were explained in the informed consent form. Prior to conducting personal interviews, I asked for permission to record the session. No participants were forced to participate or disclose information.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### RQ 1. Climate for Relationship Building

According to B. Schneider et al. (1994), organizations create a climate that is defined as the atmosphere perceived by employees through their practices, procedures, and rewards. Climate researchers argue that the atmosphere experienced by employees is transferred to the public via external exchanges. I posed the following research question in order to determine whether the organization’s climate contributed to development of positive relationships with the external publics and whether the identified climate was indeed transferred to external publics through employee-public interactions:



RQ 1. How do participants characterize the organization's climate for external relationship building?

Most participants in this study said that the lab strongly emphasized building positive relationships with the external community. After the management change, the climate regarding external relationship building changed significantly. In the section that follows, I have organized my findings about climate under the rubrics of organizational practices/procedures and rewards.

### *Organizational Practice/Procedure*

#### *Leadership Behavior*

When I asked participants which practices or procedures reflected the organization's emphasis on relationship building, many mentioned the current leadership's behavior. Participants frequently pointed to Jack Marburger, the new director who was installed after the management crisis, as the person who set the tone for community relationship building throughout the lab. One participant described Marburger's style as follows:

He would talk to people. He engaged them, he listened more. They [the community] just had more access. He would, if my community [the employee's community] as taxpayers, say they want to hear from the lab, Jack went. He would say: "Here I am, I am the director of the lab. I am not sending out a representative, I am not sending out an environmental guy." They were hearing right from the horse's mouth and not some kind of derivative.

One participant described Marburger as a "Walter Cronkite figure on Long Island, somebody you could trust." Employees said his behavior represented management's commitment to the rebuilding of external relationships with the community. Jack Marburger provided a great contrast from the climate of the previous management, which was described as "arrogant" proponents of "intellectual elitism." One participant reported that the previous management would make comments such as, "We will tell the public when they need to be worried." These leaders believed the mission of the lab was to produce good science, and that everything else lagged far behind in importance. One participant remembered the climate in the following manner: "We just

didn't see the point to invest the time and effort, money, resources into the community. So when things started to go bad, we had nobody there to come to our defense." However, participants told me that they did not see the previous management or the leader as necessarily being the "bad guys." They told me that the management simply did not communicate well with its communities.

Marburger strongly encouraged the lab to recognize that other elements of management are just as important as the pursuit of science. One participant described the shift instigated by Marburger as a "mindset" change that took place throughout the organization, rather than as a simple move toward equal funding for community relations and the development of science. According to Woodall (2003), employees "scrutiniz[e] senior leadership actions and also the fundamental value propositions of their organizations" (p. 12). As Woodall argued, leadership has to "walk the talk" in order to foster a certain organizational climate; otherwise, employees will not embrace the value promoted by the organization (p. 12).

In my review of internal and public documents, BNL's commitment to community relationship building became quite apparent. The following quote from BNL's Community Involvement Policy Statement (Brookhaven National Laboratory, n.d.c.) illustrates this commitment:

It is BNL's policy to ensure that the ideas, interests and concerns of its stakeholders are considered in program planning and decision-making processes that affect the community or the general public. This policy is intended to bring a broad range of viewpoints and values into program planning and decision-making before decisions are imminent to enable the Laboratory to make informed decisions and to build mutual understanding between the laboratory, its stakeholders and the general public.

The laboratory's mission statement also indicates, "Brookhaven's broad mission is to produce excellent science in a safe, environmentally benign manner with the cooperation, support and appropriate involvement of our many communities" (Brookhaven National Laboratory, 1999, p. 9). Another document describing job duties and performance criteria for managers provided

evidence of internal organizational practices supporting community relationship building. Senior managers, for example, are expected to adhere to the following standards:

Responsibilities: Ensure proper communication of Laboratory plans to the community and community input regarding those plans.

Accountabilities: To DOE, for effective and pro-active community relations. (Brookhaven National Laboratory, n.d.b.)

Line managers are expected to perform the following:

Responsibilities: Comply with Laboratory requirements for identifying issues with community impact, and developing and executing community involvement action plans.

Accountabilities: To Laboratory Management, for proper identification of issues of community impact, and effective development and execution of community involvement action plans. (Brookhaven National Laboratory, n.d.b.)

### *Community Involvement Training*

In training managers in the community involvement process, the lab exhibited further evidence of an overarching climate for positive external relationship building. *The Community Involvement and Laboratory Decision-Making Handbook* (Brookhaven National Laboratory, n.d.b.) was written as a reference for line managers and others at the laboratory to provide guidance in conducting community involvement activities. According to the handbook, all line managers are expected to “embrace the need for involving the community in issues and decision-making, when appropriate” (p. 2). Senior managers within the organization undergo a one-on-one training process with the Community Involvement office based primarily on this handbook.

The handbook offers detailed descriptions of principles and resources available in the planning, development, and implementation of community involvement programs. The five principles described in this handbook are as follows:

1. Community involvement will begin early in every appropriate project or decision-making process.
2. Every community involvement process needs to have a clear connection to a specific issue or decision.

3. How a specific decision relates to other decisions (especially higher-level decisions) will be made clear throughout the process.
4. The way and degree to which community involvement will or will not affect the decision will be clearly stated throughout the process.
5. The segment of the community that may be affected by the decision will be defined. (Brookhaven National Laboratory, n.d.b., p. 3)

Determining whether an issue requires community involvement is the first step. The handbook provides a checklist to allow managers to personally assess a situation. The checklist includes questions such as the following: “Is community involvement required by law or agreement?” “Could the decision affect sensitive components of the ecological system on and/or of the laboratory?” “Could the decision affect the quality of life of the members of the community?” “Could the issue impact one or more values (needs, concerns, priorities or interests) within the community?” and “Based on your evaluation of the issue, will a decision be better made by involving the community?”

When managers determine that community involvement is warranted, the next step is to determine at which level the decision-makers should be involved and how a community involvement team should be established. The manager responsible for a particular issue works with the Community Involvement office to identify members for the community involvement team as well as to design and implement action plans. The handbook outlines strategies managers can employ, including community surveys, door-to-door visits, community roundtables, small group meetings, and community workshops. Once a plan of action has been agreed upon, the next step is to implement the plan and involve the community in the issue. Finally, the handbook directs managers to conduct evaluations regarding the effectiveness of community involvement.

According to a recent internal report (Brookhaven National Laboratory, 2003c), 80% of senior and mid-level managers have been trained in community involvement and decision-making process. This training was one of the key procedures highlighting the lab’s emphasis on external

relationship building on the managerial level. The handbook also identifies employees as members of the BNL community and states that when they identify issues of importance, they should bring the issue to their immediate supervisors' attention (p. 3).

*Paid Time/Departmental Support*

Most employees confirmed that the organization encouraged and supported community involvement by permitting them to take time off for community outreach. "Well, we are allowed to do that," an employee told me. One employee explained that he is paid for his time when he engages in a public speaking function. The time he takes off for such an engagement is not charged as vacation time. Participants also said that their departments or divisions supported their outreach efforts. According to a CEGPA manager (anonymous, personal communication, April 2, 2004), officially, employees can use up to 10 work-hours per year for community outreach related activities such as attending training sessions and meetings. However, the manager added that many employees tend to volunteer their non-working hours in community outreach activities.

*CEGPA as Communication Counselor/Hub of Information*

Employees also said they believed that having a separate directorate for community outreach programs encourages external relationship building. Participants reported that communication efforts vis-à-vis the community were not as visible prior to the crisis and under previous management. In fact, community involvement was little more than a one-person operation; and other communication functions such as media relations and education programs were under disparate directorates. CEGPA now is integrated into one central directorate staffed by more than 30 people, thus allowing for more cohesive internal and external communication.

An employee explained the importance of the CEGPA directorate:

Having people that are trained, know, and able to correspond with the community is a valuable asset to the scientist, engineers, and all others working at the lab. I know that there are things that go on in the lab that I have very little knowledge of. [For example, the] water

treatment plan, storm sewer system. Addressing [various] issues to the public and retrieving the fact in detail from different offices around here [the lab] and then putting them in means of easy digestion for public consumption, I think becomes an extremely valuable asset for the lab.

This employee maintained that the CEGPA directorate functions as “the center point for dissemination of information to the public,” thereby lessening the burden on other lab departments.

When faced with a difficult communication situation with the external public, employees familiar with the objectives of the public relations directorate considered it a valuable resource. Throughout the course of my personal observations, I expressed surprise on several different occasions to the Community Involvement manager when someone called her to ask for input on an external communication matter. The manager advised me that such telephone consultations, in which she discussed appropriate ways to communicate messages in public, were central to her job. When an issue required further action, she would refer some callers to the media relations department for additional assistance. One employee related the following story to illustrate the ways in which the public relations directorate helps employees to communicate with external publics:

There was a guy named \_\_\_\_\_, who lives two doors down from me and his daughter has got some disease. And he thinks the lab gave it. When I take my garbage down he comes up and screams at me. And I go to [CI Manager] and ask, “How do I handle this guy?” So she’ll teach and say, “This is how I would handle it.” I have done it many times. So there’s a really good exchange and they never blow me off.

### *Organizational Rewards*

#### *Institutional Rewards*

According to the CEGPA director, approximately 15% of employees volunteer for community outreach efforts out of a total population of 2,887 employees. Although there is no monetary incentive to participate in outreach activities, volunteers receive institutional recognition through annual luncheons, plaques, and service certificates. According to a member of the

Community Involvement staff, there were approximately 400 employee volunteers in 2003 recognized for their involvement in community outreach programs.

*Personal Rewards*

When asked what rewards they received for their community outreach efforts, many of the employees responded that they participated in these activities for their own “personal gratification” rather than to receive recognition from the lab. Although many enjoyed institutional recognition, participants would not have volunteered if they did not find these activities inherently satisfying. Employees’ remarks such as “I don’t need external reward. I think it is part of my job to do this” and “I do it because I want to do it” were common.

Community outreach efforts provide employees with depth to their organizational lives. Working in the community allows one participant to break out of his daily routine while the interaction with external community members reenergizes him. Another employee who gives lectures at local schools about his research told me that interacting with students makes him think about new ideas or solutions. This employee also displayed letters, pictures, and cards he received from his audiences, which confirmed that the rewards are “pretty personal.” This employee appreciated the assistance he receives from the CEGPA directorate, which coordinates his speaking engagements and provides support staff. BNL has been able to develop a nurturing climate for external relationship building.

*Summary of RQ 1*

Data from interviews and documents offer evidence of a climate that emphasizes positive, long-term relationship building with the external community. The lab currently possesses a concrete set of organizational practices, procedures, and rewards that foster such a climate. One of the important organizational practices that encourages a climate for positive external relationship building, as viewed by employees, is the visible leadership. Non-managerial employees cited

allowance of time or paid time and departmental support of their community outreach activities as the most significant practices stimulating external relationship building. An integrated community relations function, as exemplified by a public relations directorate acting as a consultant to employees in need of guidance or advice when dealing with external publics, was also regarded as evidence of organization-wide support for the overarching community ideology. In addition to institutional rewards, such as free luncheons or plaques, employees considered personal gratification an important factor that motivated them to participate in community outreach programs.

### RQ 2. Organizational Commitment

As was discussed in the conceptualization chapter, organizational scholars have demonstrated a positive statistical relationship between employees' relationship with an organization, and the attitude or behavior of external publics toward the organization. I wanted to explore how such a positive relationship between the two variables occurs. I was especially interested in the quality of employee-public interaction, the resulting employee-public relationships, and the impact of the relationships on the publics' overall view of the organization. First step was to find out the level of commitment employees in this study had. The following question was posited for this purpose:

RQ 2. What types of organizational commitment do the employee participants have?

I explored commitment levels by asking questions such as, "How long would you like to stay with the organization?"; "How much do you identify with the goals and mission of the lab?"; "Would you be willing to invest extra effort in your work for the organization?"; and, "How long would you like to maintain your membership with this organization?" Most individuals who participated in outreach programs said they were happy with their work at the lab. Common responses were, "I love what I do," "It is a great place to work," and, "It is an appealing place to



work.” One employee said, “Well, my wife says that ‘He gets to do what he wants to and gets a paycheck for that.’ I like doing what I’m doing most of the time.”

Participants revealed their emotional attachment to the lab through stories of how devastated they were, and how they pulled together, during the lab’s environmental crises.

What may be a big surprise to you is that the relations of the internal employee community were perhaps the best in the history of the lab during ‘97; the reason being there was so much attack from the outside the employees got together. So you got scientists and union employees and secretaries all talking together, coming together, and I would say there was an enormous positive synergy internal to the lab.

According to this top manager, many concerned employees volunteered their efforts for community outreach. Another employee shared the feelings she had during the crisis:

I knew how hard the people in the \_\_\_\_\_ group worked. I knew that the lab respected the environment and was not out there throwing chemicals out the back door. A lot of people [external publics] just did not know. So it actually hurt to work here as a very dedicated employee. As a result of that, I was very willing to participate in a lot of the community meetings.

Meyer and Allen (1996) explained that employees with strong affective commitment tend to align themselves with the goals and missions of the organization, are willing to put extra effort into their work, and want to stay with the organization for the long-term. Indeed, employees who volunteered for community outreach were willing to give the lab time outside of their normal work schedule. When asked why they volunteer for community outreach programs, participants told me they believed in what was being done at the lab. Although participants did not recite the lab’s mission verbatim, it was evident they were all aware of its goals.

The lab’s mission statement states:

Brookhaven National Laboratory's mission is to produce excellent science and advanced technology with the cooperation, support, and appropriate involvement of its scientific and local communities. There are four fundamental elements in the Laboratory's mission:

- To conceive, design, construct, and operate complex, leading edge, user-oriented facilities in response to the needs of the DOE and the international community of users.
- To carry out basic and applied research in long-term, high-risk programs at the frontier of science.
- To develop advanced technologies that address national needs and to transfer them to other organizations and to the commercial sector.
- To disseminate technical knowledge, to educate new generations of scientists and engineers, to maintain technical capabilities in the nation's workforce, and to encourage scientific awareness in the general public. (Brookhaven National Laboratory, n.d.a.)

Most employees interviewed hope to retire at the lab, indicating their desire to maintain a long-term relationship with the organization. A 2003 employee survey conducted by the lab revealed the longevity of employees at the lab. Twenty percent of employees (approximately 577)<sup>5</sup> stayed with the organization for over 10 years. Fifteen percent of employees (approximately 433) worked at the organization for more than 20 years (Brookhaven National Laboratory, 2003).

### *Summary of RQ 2*

In conclusion, findings suggested strong affective organizational commitment on the part of employees who volunteered in community outreach programs. Most participants were satisfied with their work, and hoped to maintain a long-term relationship with, and retire from, the lab. They were willing to put in extra hours doing community outreach work, and took heart in the lab's mission and goals.

It is important to note that employee volunteers comprise only about 15% of all lab employees. As one employee told me: "You don't have a lot of people [employees] who take the time to do these kinds of things [community outreach activities]. I don't think it is a large fraction of the employees." I did not set out to study all lab employees, however, but chose participants

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<sup>5</sup> Total number of BNL employees was 2,887 as of year 2000.

according to their theoretical relevance. That is, I was specifically interested in those employees who volunteered for community outreach programs.

Most employee volunteers seemed to believe that a small number of people could make a difference. One employee said: “It is a small group of people [but] it migrates, it is like fungus, it is growing, you know. That’s because these [envoys] are passionate people.” In fact, based on the success of the Envoy Program, the lab launched Envoy Program 2; and new employees, referred by the original envoys or approached by the CEGPA staff, were recruited.

### RQ 3. Employee-organization relationship (EOR) & Employee-public relationships (EPR)

The next step in this research was to determine how the quality of employees’ relationship with the organization, indicated by their levels of commitment affected the way they interact and develop relationships with the external publics. The following research question was posited for this purpose:

RQ 3. How does the quality of employee-organization relationships (EOR) affect the employee-public relationship (EPR) building process?

One employee who volunteers in Summer Sunday program explained that her satisfaction with work was projected to community members with whom she interacted:

Well, I can look at people who don’t necessarily like their jobs, and I know that there is no way that they would ever want to give anything extra. If you are not happy with the way the lab is treating you [you won’t volunteer for outreach programs]. I am satisfied with what I do, and I am happy to tell the community that, too.

“If you're not happy in what you're doing, you can’t project that same image to the outside people. People will see through it very easily. You can’t fake it,” said another envoy when asked about his role. Another employee shared that he would not have been an envoy if he did not feel good about what was going on in the lab. “It is important that the person who is the envoy does feel good about the lab.” Another employee explained that one has to believe in the workplace in order to interact

confidently with the public. One employee volunteer described how her good internal relationships were projected to outsiders:

I have good interaction with them [lab employees she knows] and I feel as though people [at the lab] respect me and I respect the lab. I think I bring that message to others [outside the lab]. If I am nasty, they [external publics] are not only going to think not highly of me, but [they would think] also ‘What kind of a company would hire that kind of person?’

Most employee volunteers believed that external publics could easily read the employees’ level of satisfaction with the lab during their interactions. Therefore, they treated publics the same way they are treated at the lab.

However, one employee said she did not think the quality of her relationship with the lab affected the way she interacted with the community:

I have a neutral view of the place. Personally, this is not my dream career. I stayed here because it is a good enough place to work. I just think that the accusations that were made against us, and the facts behind what happened with the tritium, [was] just ridiculous. So, it [volunteering for community outreach] had to do more with what was the right thing to do for me.

She added that, although she did not have a good working relationship with the former department head during the crisis, her willingness to go out into the community, and explain what the lab stands for, was unaffected. She understood her relationship with the lab as separate from her relationship with the individuals with whom she works. Responses from most employees, however, confirmed that their level of commitment toward the lab *would* affect their willingness to participate in community outreach programs. Most envoys also told me that they believed their positive relationship with the lab would be projected in their interaction with members of the community.

### *Dual Commitment*

Many employees were clear that they were not only volunteering for the lab’s sake. Employees often said they see themselves as a part of the surrounding community, and were motivated to participate in outreach as a result of their commitment to their communities. According

to a fact sheet published by the human resource department, most of the employees in fact live within a 30-mile radius of the lab (Brookhaven National Laboratory, n.d.d.). Several envoys mentioned the importance of maintaining personal integrity within their own community. One envoy told me:

I am continued to be viewed as a trustworthy, thoughtful person who is motivated by the right things within the community. And if I thought the lab was wrong or negligent, I mean my credibility with people in the community is very important, you know. So I am not so ‘company man,’ so to speak, that I would not be truthful with my friends or neighbors.

Another envoy explained that maintaining his reputation as a credible person within his community was important to him. He said, “It’s the reputation that I carry with me. It is integrity, I have lots of credibility, and that’s what I think I bring to the table [for the community].” Another employee was an envoy to her sons’ high school and her church. She explained how she relates to her community: “You are a part of the community and why would you say something that is not truthful? You are sitting with other parents. You are involved with people who have kids who play with your kids or whatever.” Most envoys did not separate themselves from the external community.

Another employee volunteer said:

The bottom line is that we are them. I know that there isn’t an ‘us’ and ‘the community.’ So when you have relationships with people in the neighborhood, and they know that you’re an honest person, and under no circumstances are you going to tell your child’s friend’s mother a lie to protect your company.

Clearly, employee volunteers had a dual sense of commitment, both to the lab and to their communities. An envoy said, “I think it [the Envoy Program] facilitates two ideals I have. I want people [within her community] to feel comfortable [about the lab] and, you know, I want to help the lab.” In the envoys view, the lab benefited from their participation in community outreach programs because the envoys brought positive relationships into the lab. One envoy described it in the following way: “It is not like employees all of a sudden got religion and ran off and joined these

groups. It was that the lab got religion and found the employees who belong to groups. Because we are a part of the community, it was very natural to find us and use us.” Another envoy thought that “the lab has gained a lot from [envoys] being out there.”

In general, employees viewed themselves not as promotional message carriers, but as facilitators of understanding between the organization and the community. “I see myself more as a mediator. I can bring messages in both directions,” an envoy told me. Another envoy explained, “The Envoy Program is trying to put a pulse on the community; how are they feeling now, what affects are being made, and trying to get out more information so that people understand what’s done here.” “My role is to go into the community and tell the people the fact[s] that we know. When we find out there are rumors or concerns among people, we are not going to solve the problem, but we are supposed to contact [the CI coordinator].”

In OC and marketing research, scholars often focus on ways to increase employee commitment to the organization, and how such commitment can be used to enhance organizational goals. Similarly, public relations professionals work to find the best ways to communicate organizational messages through their public relations programs. The Envoy Program, however, was not a promotional tool, but a form of symmetrical communication whereby the organization listened to public opinion. Furthermore, this program did not merely use the employees to promote the lab, but also respected the importance of the employees’ dual commitment to the organization and the community.

In turn, the employees developed a sense of satisfaction by not only helping the lab’s goals and missions, but also by providing service to their own communities. I wanted to know more about whether or not employees thought community outreach programs such as the Envoy Program were effective, and asked why they thought the programs worked. In the following, I discuss success

factors identified by the employees, and relevant responses from community members who interacted with the envoys.

*Interpersonal Communication/Informality*

“What I like about it [the Envoy Program] is that [I am within] my natural environment,” one envoy explained. For envoys, interaction with community members usually took place in everyday life settings, such as school PTA meetings, church, children’s sports, local dance groups, local taxpayers’ associations, property owners’ associations, rotary clubs, and professional societies. Another envoy said the program was effective in part because it was not a grandiose plan. He explained that because envoys were not asked to go into to the community representing the lab, and were not pressured to promote the lab, the program became the “fun stuff” for him.

Employees viewed the rather informal structure of the Envoy Program as its greatest strength. One envoy referred to his interactions with community members as “a purely personal, off-the-cuff, spur-of-the-moment interaction with somebody asking and talking about the lab, or reactions about the lab.” Another envoy referred to it as a “grassroots type of thing” and an “informal” program. He explained that the program was about “[Bobby] talking to [Sam] and saying ‘[Sam], what’s going on up there?’”

An illustrative story told by an envoy provided further insight into the potential of these informal communication settings. The envoy had been on a sports club team with an elected official of his community:

He [the elected official] comes up to me one day and says, ‘What are you doing up there? What kind of nuclear bombs do you have?’ Here is an elected official, talking to me and asking me these questions. I said, ‘How about you coming to the lab and I’ll introduce you to Community Involvement and people who are doing the science?’ So he came. After that tour, he said, ‘Thank you very much. I [now better] understand [what you do out here].’ By him coming here and talking person to person with senior level management on any concerns he had, [we were able to] defuse any concerns that he had. So now what we did was to have

somebody high in the pyramid [understand the lab], and [he] can diffuse issues before it came down to the public.

Two community members shared similar experiences of the ripple effect of their interaction with the envoys. A community member who was involved in several environmental groups said she shared her experience with the lab's envoy with those groups. Another member told me she was involved in various civic groups in the community, and she, too, shared information she gathered from the envoy with the civic groups. She was also able to compare the lab's communication practices with other organizations with which she deals. She has found that the lab's community programs are "very good to excellent" compared with other organizations.

The informal nature of the program facilitated communication with community members who tend to be timid or embarrassed in public settings. According to an envoy, the Envoy Program allowed people to ask questions and receive answers in a more calm and comfortable way than in public settings. A community member who interacts with an envoy felt the non-threatening nature of the interaction allowed her to better listen to what the envoy had to say about the lab. She told me that she "would not have done that through a newspaper ad."

Overall, the interview data showed that an interpersonal communication program that taps into everyday life settings is a powerful tool for risk communication. Consequently, it is important to have committed employees who are willing to embrace the role of facilitator between the organization and the public. In addition to the traditional, mediated channels of communication, organizations should focus on the potential impact informal, interpersonal communication can have on strategic communication management.

#### *Educational Value/Building of Internal Communities*

My interviews with the envoys revealed an unexpected finding: although the program was designed for external relationship building, it also had a positive effect on the development of internal relationships. Several envoys explained how the program taught them more about other



departments in the laboratory, and caused them to develop relationships with other employees at the lab. One envoy said, “There are so many things which we learn from the monthly meetings. [I learn about] things that are going on here [in the lab] and the application of that basic research, and that’s helpful.” Another envoy told me that as a result of participating in the program, “you will know more than others, so that makes me feel special.” “Part of being in the program has given me an overview of the work that’s being done here and that helps me,” shared another envoy.

“A lot of departments and divisions around here are like systems. You don’t leave your little enclave. So this is a great way, number one, for [employees] to meet the scientist who’s doing the work we all support, and two, to see the world outside [a] particular division,” another envoy told me. In other words, the Envoy Program was an educational forum that helped employees from different departments develop relationships with one another, expanding their social network.

One envoy pointed out that his network of relationships within the lab helped him provide answers to questions from the community because he did not have to spend time searching for answers on his own. Another envoy described this network as “everybody complimenting each other; everybody crossing each other’s strands and you make this nice network of communication fibers within the lab, and it goes out of the lab.” In this way, the Envoy Program at BNL, though intended for external communication, also contributed to the development of an internal community. Initially, I thought that symmetrical, internal communication systems, not external communication systems, would contribute to development of positive EOR. However, my findings suggested otherwise.

### *Empowerment through Involvement*

In addition to helping the lab as facilitators, envoys enjoyed the chance to talk about the lab as a group at the envoy meetings. “You feel good when you are invited to talk,” one envoy told me. Another envoy felt his “ego being fed” since “the lab will listen to you.” “It is morale boosting

because it's like I have more purpose in what I'm doing in my job," said another envoy. Envoys felt their voices were being heard by the organization during envoy meetings.

In addition, employees brought public opinions to the lab, which helped the lab learn how to improve. Employees found helping the lab in this way to be very fulfilling. They were empowered by participating in a process that helped the organization make better decisions. They were also contributing to their own communities by ensuring their communities' voice was heard at the lab. In this sense, the Envoy Program made it possible for the lab to simultaneously build positive relationships with both internal and external publics.

### *Summary of RQ 3*

In conclusion, most employees who participated in this study believed that the quality of their relationship with the organization does affect their willingness to interact with the external publics. Employees also believed that the quality of their relationship with the lab would be projected in their interaction with the publics. However, employees said they were not volunteering their efforts for the sake of the lab only; employees were also motivated by their commitment to their communities.

Particularly in the Envoy Program, the employees played an active role by collecting public opinions, rather than passively relaying promotional messages to the public. Employees believed their role was meaningful in that it not only helped the organization make better decisions, but also provided the community with opportunities for their voices to be heard. Participants felt the informal and interpersonal nature of the Envoy Program contributed to its success. The interview data showed that reaching the publics in their natural, everyday environment, through contact with individual employees, was an effective way to connect with the community.

Unexpectedly, employees found educational value in the external community outreach programs. They liked knowing more about what was going on in the lab, and consequently gained a

better understanding of their own place and role within the organization. I found that the community outreach program also provided opportunities for lab employees to build a stronger internal community. Overall, employee participation in external communication programs fostered positive internal and external relationships.

#### RQ 4. Effective Cultivation Strategies

In this study, I attempted to discover effective strategies in addition to those proposed by Hon and J. Grunig (1999). I developed the following research question for this purpose:

RQ 4. What types of cultivation strategies do the participants use, see as important, or find effective in developing positive employee-public relationships (EPR) or organization-public relationships (OPR)?

In order to gain cororientational insight, I discuss the organization and the publics' responses together as they relate to each cultivation strategy identified.

#### *Visible Leadership*

As was briefly discussed in the results regarding climate, leadership presence emerged as a strategy that contributed to positive relationship building. Practitioners referred to this strategy as the "top-down approach," which is successful because community members are "hearing from the horse's mouth," as one practitioner put it. As a result, the community is reassured of the management's commitment to the relationship. To illustrate this point, most practitioners mentioned Jack Marburger's communication with the surrounding community during the crisis, with one manager saying:

The biggest success was when Jack Marburger, the former director of the lab, said to our group that "I am the spokesperson. I am the one responsible for the laboratory. That's my role." The minute he said that, the weight of this lab's problems came off our shoulders and we were no longer the lightning rods. We could go out and do the strategic planning, recommend, advise, and guide.

She also emphasized that the presence of the key decision makers from the lab at community meetings is crucial and that directors and deputies should be sitting at the table with the community. She said, “If you don’t have that, it ain’t going to work.”

CAC members also noted that leadership presence at council meetings affected their perception of the lab’s commitment to the relationship-building process. “The director is there,” one member told me. She added: “How many people do you see show up from the lab? The whole damn room is filled with them and that’s typical [of CAC meetings].” “Lots of times, the managers, workers are in the audience [at the CAC meeting],” another member observed. For him, the presence of the managers and workers meant that they would “listen,” and, “if they can respond and they can get something done, they’ll do it.” Another member said “the quality of the leader” is made apparent in the meetings, and she believed the leadership’s presence at CAC meetings indicated the lab’s serious commitment to “involving the community in the process.”

#### *Face-to-face Communication*

Face-to-face, one-on-one communication was considered vital in building a relationship with the community. The group communication setting of the CAC effectively personified the lab. Practitioners and top management found mediated communication vehicles such as print media or online communication limiting. In particular, public relations practitioners said that face-to-face communication made it possible to observe behavior, facial expressions, and vocal tonality.

At community meetings, the lab director tried to get a sense of the “community’s collective emotional state.” Practitioners were able to make meaningful connections with community members through face-to-face communication. The practitioners found that when the lab made a meaningful connection with someone, that person became more aware of the lab’s activities and they “at least give a cursory look” to the lab’s messages in the mass-media. One practitioner referred to this process as “putting a face on the lab.”

Community council members' responses indicated that this strategy was having the desired effect. One council member told me, "Depending upon the issue and what's going on, you are going to have a different person each time; so I don't see the lab as necessarily 'they.'" Another member said that, when considering a certain project presented by the lab, she "can visualize the person's face." Face-to-face communication allowed the lab to dispel the mysteriousness of "the lab," and to eliminate past perceptions of it as an impersonal organization that created misunderstandings and speculations.

One CAC member described why he thought interpersonal interaction was effective:

People are more likely to believe when they have a one-on-one conversation with somebody and it maybe semi-officially, or it might be an informal phone call, might not be a part of a meeting, but that person becomes a human being, less of a representative or a part of a large organization. When you see them as a human being and you hear what they are saying, you tend to believe them more.

Another CAC member said having "people [community] come [to the lab] and speak one-on-one with people [at the lab]" is one reason the lab has been able to build positive relationships with the community.

### *Openness*

Hon and J. Grunig (1999) identified several key strategies for relationship building, including honesty and the open sharing of information and decisions with the community. The management and practitioners repeatedly emphasized these same strategies. The director of CEGPA said: "We do not convince the public, we do not sell the public. That has not been the reason why we have the programs we do. We involve them, we explain their decision space, and we are honest about it." Another manager explained the lab's strategy this way: "I am not saying that the community gets to steer the boat for us. I'm saying that they get to put their core values on the table and they are heard and respected. There is transparency."

Both managers stressed the importance of providing relevant information, whether good or bad, so the community could make its own judgments about the lab's decisions. In any case, engaging the community in the decision-making process was critical so that the community could be heard in all matters.

When asked which communication strategies were most effective with external publics, the employee volunteers first mentioned openness and honesty. An envoy told me:

One of the biggest things is you need to tell them the good and the bad. I think it's nice to go there [to her community group] and always have a good message, but I don't think that's very honest. I had a few stumbling blocks with that, to be honest. We had this deer radiation and maybe I should have tried to avoid the issue but that's not acceptable to me, because I have relationships with these people, and I am not going to stand up there and not acknowledge a deer [affected by radiation] was found. Someone needs to either give me information or tell me whom the person is that they [community members] can call. I am not going to stand there and act like there is nothing going on, you know. I don't think it was a big deal, but it becomes a bigger deal if you are not up-front.

Another employee mentioned that it was important to "admit where the fault was." He added, "Once they [community members] hear that [your openness], then they think they can trust you more, be more open." Another envoy said that her community members know she would not tell a lie. Another told me that "truth" is the number one priority in communicating with community members. Community members I interviewed also noted the openness and honesty of the employees. "She [envoy] will be upfront and tell me the truth. She is not going to dance around the corner. She is very straightforward." "I have grown to trust her and her word," said another. Clearly, the openness and honesty of envoys contributed to a high level of trust among community members.

### *Listening*

"Listening" was a term often mentioned by the CEGPA staff. The CEGPA director said that anger directed at the lab during the crisis was "not at the tritium, but the anger was at a lab that

wouldn't listen and wouldn't engage. That was it!" She emphasized the importance of listening by saying:

You know, if you are willing to listen, it's amazing what you can get. If you are willing to listen to people and try not to prejudge, and that's not always easy. It's easy with people you like or agree with most of the time. In fact, we've learned, I have personally learned, probably more from the activist community than I did from our friends. Because they would pick at your weaknesses. It took a long time for me to get to this point, but I [now] look at it as feedback. This is not just a guidepost; it is a way for us to clean up our act to become more careful.

Another CEGPA community relations practitioner told me that "listening is 80%" of her job. CAC meetings were the main mechanism for listening, one in which different community groups are able to openly share their values and opinions. For envoys, listening was crucial as they carried out their role as the ears of the lab during the tritium crises.

#### *Access*

Hon and J. Grunig (1999) also discussed providing opinion leaders or members of publics access to public relations practitioners as an effective cultivation strategy. The envoys in particular, considered their main role as providing the community with access to relevant information. In accordance with the role description found in the Envoy Program implementation plan (Brookhaven National Laboratory, n.d.d.), envoys often described themselves as a "facilitator," "liaison," or "mediator" who provides community members with access to the lab.

Community members are reassured because they know who to contact when they have issues or questions about the lab. "[Envoy name] is there [at her community meetings] monthly to give updates to people about the lab," one community member explained. "When the lab had environmental issues, I had asked [envoy name] to explain it to me. I wanted to better educate myself about the issue. It was helpful. When you know someone you can trust, you can go and ask

them,” another member told me. “Whenever you raise the question with him [envoy], he will follow through.”

Aside from access to information, envoys also provided access to lab resources. One community member described his experience with an envoy as an impressive event. With the help of an envoy, a local Boy Scout troop, of which he was a leader, was given access to lab facilities so the scouts could conduct their merit badge science projects. “I was very impressed in [how] the staff treated us,” he explained. “They were very helpful; they were very respectful; and knowing the fact that these people come in their own time to help our kid was really an eye opener.” He told me that he sensed a “genuine feeling of support, interest, and respect.”

The envoys made it possible for the lab to become a valuable resource for the surrounding communities, and facilitated the development of mutually beneficial relationship between the organization and the public.

When asked about effective cultivation strategies, most CAC members also talked about access using the same terms as Hon and J. Grunig (1999). Practitioners and management responded directly to telephone calls from council members, rather than delegating the collection of negative reactions or opinions to third parties.

“I know I can call people who work at the facility and I will get a response. They’ll give me information that I want,” a member told me. Another CAC member said he knew the lab was “a phone call away” when he needed information. Current lab management has provided more access than in the past, one CAC member said.

At that time [under previous management], you have got to pull teeth to get the documentation. You know it exists, and you got to pull the teeth to get it or it’s fallen to: “Well, it’s in the admin record. Go to the library.” O.K., so you are going to waste my time, with little kids at the time, I am going to take three little kids up to the public library and stand around, sit 30 minutes researching the administrative record to find the document we are all talking about, stand there, put 10 cents a copy, and so now I can make a copy and shove my kids back in my car and go home and take an hour or two hours, when you can



send me a photocopy and send the stupid thing and mail it to me? Now you got me tested... now [after the management change] the documentation we get is, you come away with saying, I wonder if they left any stones unturned. They just gave me all this information.

Another member found that: “[In the past] if you wanted information, you could set [an] appointment and go on the lab site to use the library. But it [gaining access to information] was up to you to initiate. Now, the lab has initiated it by forming and hosting CAC.”

### *Responsiveness*

For the practitioners, timely response to community requests or potential issues was a key strategy for the lab’s risk management. When asked to identify key communication strategies for effective community relations, one practitioner explained,

[When] you are timely in providing the information and responsive to their [communities’] concerns, it doesn’t mean that you have to agree with them, but you are responsive and you are acknowledging their issues and recognizing their value and telling them whether or not you’ve been able to incorporate their input, and if so, how you did it or didn’t. If you do those things, you are going to do O.K.

Another practitioner described CAC meetings as a forum for being responsive: “So the CAC gives us feedback, and the end of that is that we have the responsibility to tell them how that feedback was used. To actually go back to the council and say this is what was done with it.” She referred to this as “closing the loop.” Practitioners’ responses made it clear that they were consciously employing two-way models in their communication with the community.

Community members mentioned that whenever there were questions about the lab, they could rely on the envoys to get back to them with answers. If the envoy did not know the answers, she or he referred them to the right person at the lab. A community member said:

We [his community] like to have [a] person like [the envoy’s name] who is willing to say, ‘Well, I don’t know, but I know who to go ask, and I’ll find out, and I’ll get back to you on Monday,’ and then she follows through and she does get back to you Monday. That kind of thing builds confidence.

Similarly, when another community member's group had a question about the lab, she knew she could go to the envoy and the envoy would "come back with answers." For most members, responsiveness meant that the lab would follow up on issues or requests made by community members. "They always call back," a member told me. "They are pretty responsive to comments," another member said when asked about the lab's most effective strategies. CAC members often discussed access and responsiveness together, suggesting the importance of direct communication from both sides.

### *Continued Dialogue/Patience*

Based on their experience with the CAC, most of the management and public relations practitioners suggested "continued dialogue" as an important cultivation strategy. "The biggest thing [for relationship management] is to continue the dialogues" with the community, a top manager stated. Some described continued dialogue as having "patience." Despite difficulties in the beginning, BNL and CAC learned to maintain open communication and, as a result, now have a mutually respectful relationship.

"We [the lab] knew if we started the CAC, it was going to be a long-term commitment," said one practitioner. Another practitioner explained: "It [a positive community relationship] doesn't happen right away. It is painful, it takes time, it is extremely expensive, but it is the right thing to do. You have to wait for the group to mature." The organization saw "investment of time" as a key strategy in their relationship building process. Employees spent significant time coordinating the 3- to 4-hour CAC meetings that were held after work. One top manager noted that the cost of community relations was "more in time than money." These managers all referred to a temporal aspect of the cultivation strategy that was not included in Hon and J. Grunig's (1999) theory.

### *Educational Communication*

Management, public relations practitioners, and community members all regarded educational communication as a key strategy in the lab's efforts to build community relationships. The complex scientific and technological nature of the lab's work requires careful translation for effective communication with community members who do not have a background in science. One manager explained, "It is not just giving them [community members] information [but] having them [community members] understand them [someone presenting information]." One of the main tasks of the public relations division was to interpret the scientific process and its effects on the environment for community members. The lab director described this task as "putting things into perspective" for the community. One of the major causes of the tritium crisis was a lack of educational communication, which led the community to perceive the lab as a mysterious and secretive place.

Similar to the practitioners, community members also regarded educational communication as an important strategy. "The community needs to know what's really going on with the lab," said one community member, "So again, if they [the community] think it is a dark secretive place, they are not going to be feeling warm and fuzzy towards it." Knowledge begets trust, one community member said: "The more people understand, the more they begin to know, the more they begin to trust." Another member felt "providing more knowledge" is important because the unknown is often a source of suspicion: "You can always have questions about what goes on in a lab, you know. You hear these stories about having nuclear types of reactors and so on and so forth. People might have questions about that." "It is nothing more than education," one member described the communication between the lab and the CAC.

### *Networking*

In Hon and J. Grunig's (1999) terms, the lab used a networking strategy to build relationships with various groups through the CAC forum. Furthermore, the lab not only provided an opportunity for the community to communicate about the lab's activities, but also to develop understanding among different interest groups within the community.

Development of the CAC was a wise strategy, one practitioner explained. Had the lab approached each community group separately to build a relationship, more manpower and time would have been expended. In this sense, the community council itself is an effective strategy for the lab to cultivate relationships with multiple publics at once.

### *Respect*

For the envoys, respecting the other side's viewpoints was an important part of their role. Showing respect for community members also involved adjusting to the various communication styles of community members. Community council members also saw respect as a key to a good communication strategy. They used words such as "sincerity" and "genuineness" to describe it. The council members' description of respect matches what Hon and J. Grunig (1999) call "assurance," a strategy in which a party "attempts to assure the other parties that they and their concerns are legitimate" (p.15).

For CAC members, understanding the different communication styles of groups was another form of respect displayed at CAC meetings. A community member shared a relevant experience with a public relations manager:

There are different ways of communicating. You and I get the same end result, [but] it's just different processes and mechanisms. If you can respect that, if you can be patient about that, [you can work together]... You're very lucky when you're involved in a process and you have certain key managers, or certain key individuals, that are the ones that work to understand the other group's individual way of communication. You don't need everybody involved in the process to be those key people. [Manager name], she listened and she got a better idea of how the advocacy and activist world work, and the way that our mindsets are.

This community member emphasized the significance of an organizational representative who can respect and understand the varied communication styles of the community groups.

Other community members appreciated the fact that the envoys translated scientific topics into lay terms for them. “They are able to talk to us, not down to people, but with the people, and I think that is important. Because sometimes people have enough trouble with scientists. ‘Oh they are talking. I don’t understand a word they are saying!’ and so having the [envoy] liaison thing is so good.” It is critical, therefore, that public relations practitioners and frontline employees learn to communicate effectively and adapt their communication strategies to each of their publics.

### *Sharing of Tasks*

Task-sharing was another cultivation strategy suggested by Hon and J. Grunig (1999). In this strategy, organizations and publics solve common or individual problems together. The following anecdote, also discussed in previous sections, demonstrates that the lab and community council members employed this task-sharing strategy.

When the lab was under budgetary constraints to carry out an accelerated cleanup of a river in the community, council members lobbied for more money by writing letters to Congress and by placing stories in the media. Environmentalists wanted to achieve greater environmental safety and protection. Civic associations represented residents wishing for a clean environment around them. Political coalitions hoped to make elected officials accountable, and employees simply wanted to do the right thing. The groups’ motivation to accelerate the river cleanup effort may not have been the same, but the result would serve all interests. As one CAC member put it, the lab and the community were both cognizant of the “utility of collaboration” to solve a collective problem.

In conclusion, I found that cultivation strategies such as visible leadership, face-to-face communication, listening, continued dialogue, and respect contributed to the development of

positive relationships. In the following section, I discuss the quality of interaction, and how the resulting relationship between the employees and publics affected the quality of OPR.

Figure 1.

*Effective Cultivation Strategies*

	Management, PR Practitioners, & Non-PR employees	Community Members
Newly Identified	Visible Leadership	
	Face-to-face Communication	Face-to-face Communication
	Listening	
	Responsiveness	Responsiveness
	Continued Dialogue/Patience	
	Educational Communication	Educational Communication
Hon and J. Grunig (1999)	Access	Access
	Respect	Respect (Assurance)
	Openness	Sharing of Tasks
	Networking	

*Summary of RQ 4*

The lab considered Hon and J. Grunig's (1999) openness, assurance, and networking strategies to be crucial in their work with the community. In addition, the lab emphasized its own temporal strategy, which entailed a patient, ongoing dialogue to cultivate a relationship with the community. Listening, responsiveness, and educational communication were factors critical to a successful community relations program at BNL. Visible leadership and face-to-face communication helped create a positive relationship with the community by personifying the lab. Community members agreed that the lab successfully employed community relations strategies to create positive relationships with the public.

The effective cultivation strategies used by individual envoys were similar to strategies used in group communication settings, such as the CAC meetings. I found that employees who participated in the Envoy Program were competent communicators who used symmetrical cultivation strategies. Cultivation strategies such as openness, access, responsiveness, listening, and respect contributed to the development of positive relationships between envoys and community members. Figure 1 summarizes the findings on cultivation strategies. In the following section, I discuss the quality of interaction and how the resulting relationship between the employees and publics affected the quality of OPR.

#### RQ 5. Employee-Public Relationships (EPR) and Organization-Public Relationships (OPR)

In this study, I assumed that publics are more likely to develop constructive relationships with the employees and have a positive view of the organization when they have positive interactions with employees. To explore this assumption, I developed the following research question.

RQ 5. How does the quality of employee-public relationships (EPR) affect the public's evaluation of the organization?

I interviewed community members who came in contact with each other through community outreach programs. In particular, I focused on the Envoy Program since it was specifically designed to encourage regular interaction between employees and community members. I found that community members who interacted with an individual employee through the Envoy Program often considered themselves as having personal relationships with the envoy. Overall, community members used their experience and relationship with the envoys as a frame of reference when evaluating the lab.

*Envoys as Credible Reference*

Community members who interacted with envoys explained that the relationships they had with individual envoys formed a basis for their cursory evaluation of the lab. A community member who had negative opinions about the lab in the past said her relationship with the envoy changed the way she thought about the lab. “Because I feel he [envoy] has a good judgment, that automatically changes some of my perceptions about the lab.” Another community member said, “When it is somebody that [community members] know, [someone] they trust and understand, [then] that person emulates the lab...and they feel ‘Oh, well gee, the lab can’t be that bad if these great people work there.’” Another community member felt that “if it weren’t for [the envoy], I would probably be far more negative about the lab.” Still another community member said, “I mean, my impression of the lab changed because of my associations [with the lab employees].”

Community members’ responses indicated that they trusted envoys more when envoys were viewed as friends and neighbors, rather than as representatives of the organization. “[Envoy name] is my friend,” a member told me. Another member further illustrated this point: “Rather than bringing down someone with high title from outside, the local person [envoy] makes a different impact if they are addressing the [community]. I think they can relate on a local level and local concerns.” She added that envoys put a “personal face to the large organization.” Another member said that her community organization considered the envoy part of their organization: “I think they kind of adopt whoever the liaison is. They come to all the parties and whatever; it is like a part of the family. [Envoy name] is like a part of the family. They adopted her.” The interview data suggested that developing positive personal relationships with the envoys made the envoys’ evaluation of, or information about, the lab credible to community members.



*Skepticism toward Mass Media*

An interesting theme found in interviews with community members was their skepticism about what they see or hear in the mass media. “I don’t know if I trust the press,” a community member told me while explaining the value of having an envoy as a source of information. She explained that, because she trusts the envoy, she does not put “too much stake into rumor and to what I hear from the media.” She would go to an envoy for information before making a judgment on a particular issue. Another community member also tended to be “a little cautious and not too hasty in making judgments” about messages she got from the media. She told me that the press can be “misguided,” and that she tries to get all the facts before making judgments.

One woman felt “newspapers just want to sell papers” by covering sensational topics. After reading a report on water contamination in her neighborhood, she went to one of the envoys for further information on the issue. This way, she was able to gather more information about the issue and understand the lab’s position on it.

However, community members also exercised constructive skepticism toward the lab, even when they had positive relationships with the envoys. As one community member put, the positive relationship he has with an envoy “doesn’t make [him] love the lab,” but it does help him give the lab the benefit of the doubt. Another member’s relationship with her envoy does not always affect her views about the lab. “I kind of make up my own mind about things.” She doesn’t take what the envoys tell her to be the whole truth either, but looks to other sources for verification. “I can see several sides of all things. I have checked out what they have said as well, just to make sure I have all sides. I also talk to other environmental groups as well.” However, she added that the envoy “never misguided” her, and thought the lab was being “open enough” that she could trust it.

Overall, the envoys were viewed by community members as credible sources of information. This made it possible for community members to gather balanced information about issues or

problems related to the lab. Hence, the envoys made it possible for the lab to counteract any negative bias in mass media coverage.

Interview data suggested that when community members developed trusting, personal relationships with envoys, the envoys represented a credible reference point to evaluate the lab and lab-related issues. Therefore, organizations must develop positive relationships with their employees in preparation for good OPR. As a result, employees will act as effective reference points for the publics they encounter.

#### *Summer Sundays as an Initial Forum for OPR*

Summer Sundays presented an opportunity for community members to interact with lab employees. The program consisted of a tour of lab facilities, presentations, and exhibitions, all designed to provide community members access to scientific knowledge. In this way, the Summer Sundays program was an educational communication strategy.

Most community members brought their families to the Summer Sunday event I attended. A number of senior citizens also came to the program. An employee volunteer I interviewed at the event confirmed that the two major groups who attend the events are parents with children and senior citizens. The community profile identified through secondary data from the Census 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.) indicated that Suffolk County is a family-oriented region (in 2000, 62% of the population were married couples with a family; and 31% had children under 18). There is also a significant senior population (senior citizens over 65 comprised 12% of total population in 2000) residing within the area.

According to the coordinator of Summer Sundays, the lab seldom built on-going relationships with individuals or groups from the community through this event. However, a community opinion survey revealed that those who visited BNL during events such as the Summer

Sundays are more informed about the lab and tend to have a positive attitude toward BNL (Brookhaven National Laboratory, 2001).

I heard similar opinions from visitors I interviewed at the event. A financial advisor who came to the event with his son told me, “Being here experiencing it gives you, you come to know that something good is happening here.” A dental assistant, attending with his children, said coming to the event helps him understand what BNL does, “it gives [him] a different perspective,” and it has a positive effect on his feelings about the lab. He explained that seeing the scientists, who looked like normal people, helped him feel closer to the lab. A retiree told me that, “People paying taxes want to see that they get results.” Coming to the event helped him understand what the lab does with his tax dollars.

Several community members found that the Summer Sundays provided educational entertainment. A mother who brought her two children to the event said, “It is a nice, free way to spend a Sunday afternoon.” Most parents regarded this event as an interesting learning experience for their children. Several children I talked with described the science programs provided by the lab as “fun” and “cool.” The most popular program was the Whizbang Show, a hands-on science show designed for young children. Summer Sundays allowed the lab to reach out to community members by providing educational programs to their children.

According to Sha and Meyer (2002), when children are used as vehicles for communication in public relations programs, educating the children is not the sole objective of the programs. The hope is that the children will also bring the message home to their parents and family members. BNL’s Summer Sundays events are one such public relations effort. A community member, who was also an educator, shared an opinion that supported Sha and Meyer’s theory. He said that the more the lab reached out to students through schools or educational events, the more students are

going to “report to their own parents and their families about what goes on at the lab, and the kind of things they learned about.”

Several CAC and non-CAC members mentioned the Summer Sundays program during my interviews with them. As one person said, “They have been quite open with us for a number of years, invited us up there more, they started a regular Sunday thing.” As this member’s response shows, the Summer Sundays program symbolically represented the lab’s openness toward the community.

Although the events may not have led to the development of on-going relationships with certain community groups, Summer Sundays were opportunities for community members and the lab to share positive experiences. These personal experiences provided at least an awareness of what the lab does, and established a foundation on which an on-going relationship might be built.

#### *Summary of RQ 5*

The findings suggested that when community members developed positive, individual relationships with lab employees, they used their relationship as a credible reference by which to evaluate the organization. For instance, community members were skeptical of the mass media messages they receive and considered the credibility of their envoys to make a balanced judgment. However, community members also exercised constructive skepticism toward the overall organization by cross-checking information against other sources available to them.

Nevertheless, I found that, when faced with negative information about the lab, community members were likely to give the benefit of the doubt to the lab if they had a positive relationship with the envoys. This inferred that developing positive EOR with employees is critical for an organization to build positive OPR, as employees become influential reference points by which publics can evaluate the organization.

Open house events such as Summer Sundays, though not a forum for long-term relationship building, allowed community members to personally experience the lab. These hands-on experiences made it possible for community members to develop an awareness of the lab and its activities. Educational entertainment programs at the event effectively engaged both children and their parents in the lab's scientific activities.

### Conclusion

In the previous section, I discussed, in detail, the findings related to each research question posed at the outset of the study. Research questions were developed to explore the associations among EOR, EPR, and OPR. According to Wolcott (2002), in the analysis phase, a researcher “follows standard procedure to observe, measure, and communicating with others about the nature of what is ‘there’” (p. 33). However, I have also provided some interpretation by discussing the findings of each research question. My interpretations will continue as I next discuss propositions of this study.

## IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to develop a normative theory of integrated internal and external relationship management. After reviewing relevant literature in various fields, I developed a theoretical framework for the study. I focused on an exploration of three key concepts, employee-organization relationship (EOR), employee-public relationship (EPR), and organization-public relationship (OPR). In the previous chapter, I discussed the findings of my research questions in detail. I used the data collected and analyzed in this study to accomplish my goal of developing a normative theory. In the next section, I expand upon my previous findings to build my theory.

### A Normative Theory of Integrative Internal and External Relationship Management

My theory of integrative internal and external relationship management is based on five propositions, each of which is discussed in the following. The propositions that follow establish

public relations' role as an integrative, internal, and external relationship management function. More specifically, the propositions deal with the associations among EOR, EPR, and OPR, and the resulting employee roles. They also identify the communication principles that should be used, and the organizational conditions under which public relations can enact its role as an integrative relationship management function. Evidence to support these propositions comes largely from the data collected through interviews, document analysis, direct observations, participant observations, and secondary data analysis.

*Proposition 1*

***When employees develop positive EOR and EPR, publics who interact with them are likely to develop positive OPR.***

The data gathered in this study supported this proposition. In my interviews with CAC and non-CAC members who interacted with envoys, I examined the quality of OPR between the lab and surrounding communities. Since CAC membership consisted of representative community groups on Long Island, their responses were particularly helpful in exploring the quality of OPR. I found that most of the community members interviewed had relatively positive opinions of the lab.

Aside from the control-mutuality dimension, members gave the lab credit for its commitment to the community, and experienced increased levels of trust and satisfaction. "Everything is a lot better than it was," one member told me. Another member said she felt the "relationship between the lab and [herself] is a friendly one." As for the control-mutuality factor, community members had mixed feelings, and were not sure to what extent their opinions counted. The lab and the community agreed that the community had a limited degree of control. Through data analysis, I concluded that both CAC and non-CAC members felt the lab succeeded in improving the once deteriorated relationship it had with the community.

At BNL, the development of positive OPR was due, in part, to the positive EPR created by the community outreach programs. The Envoy Program was especially successful at encouraging interpersonal communication between the employees and publics, and significantly contributed to the successful development of positive OPR during the crisis. Envoys facilitated understanding between the lab and the community. When community members developed positive relationships with the envoys, they had considerable confidence in the information and opinions the envoys shared about the lab. “I am looking at it [the lab] more as a open-minded [person], see what’s interesting about it, look into it, more than jumping into conclusions.” Most community members, like this one, said that their trusting relationship with the envoys enabled them to give the lab the benefit of the doubt in the face of negative press. The members would simply double check the facts before making hasty judgments. Hence, the lab benefited from the trust publics had in the employees with whom they interacted.

According to the Community Involvement manager, most of the employees who volunteered for the community outreach programs were respected members of the surrounding communities. The CEGPA division intentionally recruited employees who already had good relationships with the external publics. For example, at the outset of the Envoy Program, employees who were considered to have good reputations within the community, or who were seen as opinion leaders, were recruited as ambassadors to their communities. However, the program also recruited employees with the potential to become good ambassadors for the lab.

Through programs such as the Envoy Program, the lab built onto existing positive EPR, and initiated the development of positive EPR. In this regard, employee volunteers spanned the gap between the organization and its environment. Employees drew their community relationships into the organization, and extended their organizational relationships out to the community.

In order for an organization to draw employees' positive EPR into the organization, the organization itself must have positive EOR. This study supported my argument because lab employees who spanned the gap did have positive EOR. BNL employee participants showed high levels of affective commitment to the organization. Employees were quite satisfied with their jobs, although there were some concerns about the decrease in employee benefits and the changes under the new management.

The following response from an employee illustrates these concerns: "Things have been cut back, not as many services are being provided, and part of that is cost. So there has been a change... Even though it has changed a lot, compared to the outside world, it still is a very, very good place." The employee retention rate was impressive, with more than 20% of employees staying with the lab for more than 10 years (Brookhaven National Laboratory, 2003b). This high retention rate substantiated the lab's positive EOR with its employees.

The typology of the organization partly explains the level of satisfaction and retention rate among employees. Although it is a government organization, the lab, which is managed by a consortium of a pharmaceutical company and an academic institution, is similar to a university. The lab's cutting-edge facilities presented an ideal setting for scientific research. "I think they let me do what I want to do. I mean, I can choose my research project. I am satisfied with what I do," one scientist told me. The technicians and operation staff offered similar responses. One technician said, "I get up very few times that I feel like I don't want to come to work." An operation staff member responded in much the same way by saying that the lab was "a very interesting place to work at," and there were "[a] lot of different opportunities to interact with people and expand my knowledge in things."

Overall, the study showed that the positive link between EOR and OPR occurred when committed, individual employees were capable of developing positive EPR. As a result, external



publics who came in contact with these employees were more likely to develop positive relationships with the organization. However, the interconnections among EOR, EPR, and OPR warrant further explanation.

The associations among the three concepts are not necessarily sequential. It cannot be argued that an employee's good EOR always leads to the sequential development of positive EPR and OPR. This is only one of several different possibilities. For instance, it is possible that even when EOR is positive, negative EPR and OPR might occur. In such a case, a good employee might be content with his organization, but may not be a respected member of his community, and is, therefore, unlikely to contribute to positive EPR and OPR.

In another case, an employee may not have good EOR, but manages to develop a good relationship with an external public. This employee is less likely to relay as much positivity about the organization as he would if he had positive EOR. However, the positive EPR will cause the public to seriously consider the employee's negative opinions of the organization. Consequently the public's level of trust in the organization will be reduced. In this scenario, although EPR is positive, it does not lead to the development of positive OPR.

Given the complex dynamics of the EOR-EPR-OPR link, the quality of both EOR and EPR must be positive to ensure the development of positive OPR. In the following propositions, I clarify how the development of positive EPR should occur.

*Proposition 2*

***Employees' positive EOR motivates them to proactively develop positive EPR.***

Organizational scholars believe that committed employees who have good relationships with their organizations will “go above and beyond the norm in doing the little things that help organization[s] function effectively” (Niehoff, Moorman, Blakely, & Fuller, 2001, p. 93). Niehoff et

al. further maintained that committed employees “can serve as public relations representative[s] outside the organization” (p. 93).

A top manager informed me that, during the tritium crisis, many concerned employees volunteered for community outreach activities. “When the lab was going through a difficult time period of very negative feelings from the community, it was very important to me to try to help get the word out,” one employee told me. Five years after the crisis, approximately 15% of the employees (approximately 400) still volunteer for various community outreach programs. In this study, the data suggested that at BNL, employees’ high level of affective commitment indicated they had positive EOR. Their commitment led them to willingly engage in proactive relationship building with the publics.

As was argued in Proposition 1, when committed employees go outside the organization, their positive attitudes are expected to facilitate the development of positive relationships with external publics. Employees I interviewed were also cognizant of the ways in which the quality of their EOR could affect OPR. “If you're not happy in what you're doing, you can't project that same image to the outside people. People will see through it very easily. You can't fake it,” Most other employees also believed that the publics would easily interpret the positive attitude she or he had about the lab.

As Brief (1998) explained in his theory of “caught attitudes,” publics can recognize the attitudes of employees they encounter, and will adopt employees’ attitudes. In other words, external publics easily identify the level of commitment or quality of EOR an employee has. The “emotional contagion” theory suggested by Hatfield, Cacioppo, and Rapson (1994) is also relevant. According to this theory, one “catches” a person’s feelings through interaction with that person. Scholars argue that true emotions “leak” through even when people try to hide them in interactions with others (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992; Ekman, 1985; Ekman, Friesen, & O’Sullivan, 1988).

Similar responses were found among the community members. For example, the abovementioned community member said his experience with the envoy affected his view of the lab in “a favorable position.” This member’s envoy confirmed the shift in his opinion of the lab. The envoy said that, in the past, the community member would “joke all the time about ‘Oh you glow in the dark.’ I don’t hear the joke that he used to make anymore.”

Positive employee EOR may not instantly cause external publics to change their attitudes or behavior towards the organization. However, at the very least, community members recognize the employees’ commitment to the lab, and develop positive cursory impressions or evaluations of the organization. Therefore, identification and recruitment of genuinely committed employees is critical for the development of positive EPR. Aside from the employee’s level of commitment, there are several other factors to consider when recruiting employees for public relations activities.

*Proposition 3*

***Positive EPR occurs when employees use symmetrical cultivation strategies to build individual relationships with the publics and have a dual commitment to the organization and the publics.***

As was discussed in previous sections, the envoys were capable of using symmetrical cultivation strategies. Paired with community members’ responses, the data indicated that the envoys’ use of symmetrical strategies contributed to the development of positive relations between the two. Strategies such as openness, access, responsiveness, and respect were used by the envoys in their role as the “ears” of the organization.

I found that the interpersonal nature of the outreach programs made it easier to implement the symmetrical principles of communication. This was due in part to the distinctive character of interpersonal communication compared to mass-mediated communication. Often, organizations communicate carefully planned and refined messages through mass-mediated channels. These

messages often leave audiences feeling that the organization is on the defensive, especially when the messages deal with negative situations.

In this study, community members expressed skepticism toward mass media messages. A member told me, “If you are trying to promote it [the lab] through newspapers or whatever, people are going to be skeptical. People are just gonna say ‘Oh they are trying to win us over.’ And if they don’t believe what they read in the newspaper, you might be undermining what you’re trying to do.” An envoy also shared his observation about mass-mediated communication: “What you hear and read about in the media, that’s nice, but sometimes I suspect at best it’s [describing negative events] a lot worse than [it really is]. Usually when people want to know, they want to hear from people.”

Given the casual nature of interaction in the Envoy Program, unrefined, rather than mass-mediated, messages were inevitably exchanged. Envoys were able to offer an insider’s perspective rather than an official, sanitized view of the organization. Community members used their interpersonal relationships with the envoys to cross-reference what they saw or heard about the lab in the news media.

This point is illustrated by a community member who read a story about possible water contamination around the lab. “[I thought] ‘Gee...let me ask her [envoy]. She can maybe shed some light on the water situation.’ And she [envoy] started explaining about all the studies that they had done. She showed me articles that were written, and so it helped clear up the concerns that I had.” In this way, envoys contributed to the personification of the organization. An employee explained the personification process in the following way: “[Being an envoy] is also being able to provide a face to the lab as an entity, and you are a person who knows how to go about the system and as a contact, able to give information.” Community members also felt the envoys made the organization more approachable by, as one member phrased it, “putting a face” on the lab.

The use of interpersonal communication and symmetrical cultivation strategies at the employee level often resulted in the development of positive personal relationships. I found that when employees and community members developed positive personal relationships with one another, publics were more inclined to trust the envoys. In other words, when envoys were viewed as friends and neighbors rather than organizational representatives, the envoys' level of credibility with the publics increased. Even before the crisis, many employees already had positive relationships with community members. As the following quote from an envoy indicates, the lab took advantage of these existing relationships:

I think it was a good thing to have the Envoy program. Because again, it's the people [employees] that are already active. You are not seeing people coming out of the woodwork wondering who are you, and why are you here? It's 'You've always been here and, O.K., if you work for them and still working for them, and you are saying these, maybe there are some truth to it. Then I won't necessarily listen to the media,' and you are trying to bridge the gap between what's in the paper and what the facts are, and they can see that we are O.K. I think that's how you build trust. I don't think the lab director could necessarily have done that on his own.

Other envoys developed friendships with community members through repeated interactions with them, even when no prior relationship existed. One envoy told me that, after four years of interaction with a property owners' association, she has built personal relationships with them. "I have a very strong relationship with them. When I moved out of the area and said I am not going to be insulted if they wanted someone else to replace me [as an envoy], but they didn't want that. They don't seem to want me to go." She also receives invitations to the community groups' social gatherings, such as the annual tea parties. When I interviewed a community member with whom this envoy interacts, the member described how her organization "adopted" the envoy. Whether employees had existing personal relationships with the community members before becoming envoys, or developed them after becoming an envoy, these relationships were an important basis upon which community members evaluated and processed information about the lab.

Positive EPR also seemed to contribute to the dual commitment employees had to the organization and the publics. “I am also a member of the community, so I think I have the trust of the group that I am a part of them [community],” “We are them [community],” was a common response from several envoys. Envoys were interested in maintaining their personal reputation as trusted and respected members of the community. “I don’t see myself as somebody who will say BNL has no fault. I am not the management saying, ‘We’ll do whatever we can.’ I will say what I know and find out for them so that they can talk to somebody who knows,” an envoy told me.

Envoys were successful at developing positive EPR partly because their dual commitment to the organization and the community allowed them to remain objective. Had the dual commitment not existed, community members would have regarded the envoys as an extension of a publicity effort, and would not have trusted the envoys nearly as much. A community member supported this notion saying, “Most companies will protect their own selves and will tell you what you want to hear. Knowing [envoy name] gets me inside, telling me right out and upfront what really is going on. And if she says nothing, I would take her word, because I do trust her.” Another envoy also explained that the “Envoy Program works because you are viewed as neighbors. Otherwise it’s viewed as PR from the lab and that doesn’t work as well.”

In conclusion, three factors must be considered to develop positive EPR for public relations purposes. First, employees who encounter the publics must be competent in symmetrical cultivation strategies. Second, employees should have the potential to build positive personal relationships with the publics. Third, employees should have a dual commitment to the organization and the publics.

*Proposition 4*

***Employees who participate in symmetrical public relations activities to cultivate relationships with external publics also feel empowered inside the organization, which enhances their EOR.***

This study showed that, as in Proposition 1, the organization's public relations programs benefited from existing positive EPRs. I also argued that employees should have positive EOR for the organization to optimize the positive link between EPR and OPR.

In general, organizational communication scholars argue that positive EOR is developed mainly through internal communication systems or programs. However, this study found that enhancement of EOR can also occur through employees' participation in external communication activities. The study also found that involvement in public relations activities empowered participating employees, leading to the enhancement of EOR. The following response from an employee illustrates how empowerment occurs:

When you do good to your community, you do good to yourself, too, because you feel good about what it is that you are doing, and you are forging relationships with people [other employees who volunteer] you work with, you probably didn't know that you have similar interest. It is just another way that people [employees] can bond. It's good for employee morale.

According to Spreitzer (1995), employee empowerment has four components: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. Meaning is "the value of a work goal or purpose, judged in relation to an individual's own ideals or standards" (p. 1443). The following responses from envoys verified the existence of this component. "I think it [Envoy Program] facilitates two ideals I have. I want people [within her community] to feel comfortable [about the lab] and, you know, I want to help the lab." Another envoy explained that the program was "morale boosting because it's like I have more purpose in what I'm doing in my job."

In the empowerment theory, competence refers to "an individual's belief in his or her capability to perform activities with skill," (Spreitzer, 1995, p. 1443). The envoys clearly

considered themselves capable of listening and facilitating objectively. Envoys also showed self-determination, which reflects “autonomy in the initiation and continuation of work behaviors and processes,” (p. 1443) because they voluntarily participated in outreach programs for the long term.

Programs such as the Envoy Program provided opportunities for employees to fulfill the social responsibility of the organization. This meant that employees helped the organization improve by enabling it to make well-informed decisions. Employees believed they were making an impact, a concept Spreitzer described as “the degree to which an individual can influence strategic, administrative, or operating outcomes” (p. 1443).

Public relations programs that encouraged employee involvement were effective in creating a sense of community not only between the employees and the publics, but also among participating employees. Employees learned how their roles in the community fit with the mission of the organization. As Kruckeberg and Stark (1988) put it, public relations facilitated communication and helped to “build sense of community among members of an organization and the community public” (p. 71).

This empirical study showed how the synergy between internal and external public relationships occurred. More specifically, the study confirmed that, as a communication management function, public relations can help an organization to simultaneously build better OPR and EOR by involving employees in its activities.

*Proposition 5*

***The dominant coalition’s support for public relations, and participation in public relations activities, are critical to the effective management of EOR, EPR, and OPR.***

For an organization to successfully build positive, long-term relationships with its internal and external publics, and for public relations to contribute to this task, the public relations function must be prepared. In the case organization, I found that much of the structure of the communication



management function, and its models of communication, reflected the leadership's view of communication.

The dominant coalition supported the case organization by assuring that the ALD of the CEGPA division attended management meetings and reported directly to the lab director. Prior to the management change, BNL's communication functions were scattered throughout the laboratory, making it difficult for the lab to coherently communicate with its external publics. After the management change, the communication function was integrated into one directorate. Jack Marburger's support for the CEGPA directorate was often mentioned by the CEGPA staff.

The current lab director's description of the value of public relations provides evidence that support from top management continues. "I think a national lab has to have a person who has a very broad perspective, and they are on the table all the time saying that, 'I think what you are suggesting is good, but here is how the public will perceive it.'"

The public relations division played a key role in fostering a climate of positive relationship building with its external publics by providing information, resources, counsel, and rewards according to the symmetrical communication principles. For instance, the public relations division was responsible for such organizational practices as the one-on-one training of high-level managers in community involvement procedures. The public relations division also managed rewards such as the annual luncheon and appreciation plaques for employee volunteers.

In addition to its support of public relations, the leadership's communication behavior greatly affected the climate of positive relationship building. Jack Marburger's legacy of relationship building proved the effect leadership can have on an organization. Employees and community members alike viewed visible leadership communication as an indication of the organization's commitment to community relationship building, which in turn affected the level of trust in the organization.

According to Allert and Chatterjee (1997), a leader must competently exhibit “the innate traits of optimism, cleverness, creativity, pragmatism and vigilance,” (p. 15) in order to instill trust in his or her internal and external stakeholders. Based on the results of this study, I argue that a leader should be also competent in using symmetrical cultivation strategies.

The study offered evidence to support my argument. For instance, the rebuilding of the community’s trust was in part due to Jack Marburger’s ability to use symmetrical communication strategies. He listened and responded personally to community concerns through his active participation in the community outreach programs. In addition, the lab leadership consistently participated in community meetings and other community outreach efforts which were guided by the symmetrical principle of listening.

In conclusion, in order for an organization to successfully build positive internal and external relationships, the leadership of an organization must first recognize and champion the value of relationship building and the public relations function’s role therein. In addition, the leaders should be an integral part of an organization’s public relations activities because their impact on the publics’ views of the organization is significant.

#### Limitations

Although data gathered in this study were rich, investigation of other similar organizations would have provided further insights. Investigation of for-profit organizations would also have elicited valuable, comparative results. However, important insights were made into the employees’ role in the development of OPR. In addition, the participating organization has been recognized for its excellence in community relations programs, making this an exemplary case study. Furthermore, my study is worthwhile in that I gained access to, and conducted on-site field research of, a government science organization. Public relations scholars have not extensively researched this type of organization in the past.

If a researcher is given permission to name the organization at the outset of a study, the result could be positive researcher bias. However, in my case, the organization's permission to name it in the report was given at the end of the study; and that decision was made before reviewing the completed study. This helped me to attain adequate distance as a researcher. However, the possibility of researcher bias should be acknowledged. As was discussed in previous chapters, BNL provided the researcher access to its internal meetings, documentations, and opportunities to interact with the top managers through social events such as the director's reception. Although I made a conscious effort to maintain appropriate distance as a researcher by keeping a research journal and reminding myself of the research questions, the openness and support for my research may have influenced me to make favorable interpretations.

Another limitation I experienced involved the recruitment of community members for interviews. I resided at the organization, so employees were easily accessible. However, recruiting the community members who interacted with the employees I interviewed was a difficult task. Overall, I conducted 27 interviews with community members. Had more community members been interviewed, I might have recorded additional, insightful findings for the study. I do believe, however, that my interviews with community members reached a saturation point, as described by Strauss and Corbin (1998). Toward the end of my interviews with community members, I found that interviewees repeatedly discussed similar themes and categories and that no significantly different data were emerging. I believe I was also able to gain additional insights on community member perspectives through my interviews with employees who interact closely with the community.

## Implications for Public Relations Theory

### *Employees' Role in PR*

To this point, public relations scholars have limited their focus to a discussion of the methods and impact of employee communication (Jo, Shim, & Kim, 2002). Jo et al. argued that, considering the importance of employee relationships to an organization's effectiveness, the scope of study should be expanded. They called for a redefinition of employee communication under the relationship theories. In this study, I applied the relationship management theory to employee communication and further advanced the discussion in the public relations field.

In addition to expanding the scope of study on employee communication, this study empirically demonstrated how committed employees become a valuable asset to public relations functions. Furthermore, the study showed how positive, internal relationships significantly influenced the development of positive OPR and delineated public relations' contribution to this process. Most importantly, I found that employees were empowered by their participation in public relations activities.

The results of this study suggest that public relations can and should be responsible for creating synergy between internal and external relationships, without encroaching on other organizational functions. For instance, I do not suggest that public relations should oversee human resource responsibilities such as benefits, salary, or recruitment of employees. As J. Grunig and Hunt (1984) suggested, I propose that public relations become the integrated communication management function for all stakeholder relationships.

### *Relationship Management in Public Relations*

#### *New Cultivation Strategies*

This study provided empirical data on the associations between cultivation strategies and resulting relationship outcomes. Interviews with employees and community members confirmed

that symmetrical strategies were, in fact, effective in building positive relationships. New cultivation strategies such as visible leadership, face-to-face communication, listening, responsiveness, patience, and educational communication, were identified in this study.

This study identified the critical importance of visible leadership. Both employees and publics felt the communication behavior of the organization's leadership affected the evaluation of OPR. In particular, the leadership's communication behavior had a direct effect on community members' level of trust and commitment. To this point, the public relations field has not extensively studied the communication behavior of leadership and its impact on relationship outcomes. Results of this study indicated the need for further exploration of leadership's role in relationship management.

BNL used ongoing communication and patience as key public relations strategies. Positive relationships can only be expected to evolve when long-term efforts are in place. For instance, the CAC and the Envoy Program have existed for over four years. Educational communication was another strategy relevant to the scientific context of the organization. The organization needed to interpret advanced scientific concepts to community members in order to prevent the misunderstanding or mystification of activities at the lab. The study showed that misinformation can cause a public relations disaster for a science organization. Results of this study provided a more extensive understanding of science communication than had previously been available in the field of public relations.

In order to effectively explore cultivation strategies, organizations must carefully consider the type and context of the organization. The case organization was a government lab in which profit-making was not a major concern. In a non-profit, risk communication setting, relationship management theories in public relations were effective in explaining the organization's communication behaviors and outcomes.

### *Coorientational Knowledge*

Scholars such as Aldoory (2001) and J. Grunig and Huang (2000) called for a more “coorientational” study of relationships in public relations. This study contributed to the development of coorientational knowledge in relationship management because interviews were conducted with the two OPR parties—organizational employees and community members. This qualitative research study is unique because it explored both sides’ stories. I also believe this research to be one of the first public relations studies to attempt an examination of the individual relationship pairs.

### *Heuristic Value*

This study is also significant in that it examined the initiation, development, and cultivation of OPR in a real-life setting. The study closely followed the methods by which public relations practitioners, non-public relations employees, and publics engaged in the relationship building process. The study should, therefore, provide valuable insights to students and scholars interested in discovering this theory at work in a real-life setting.

In many ways, BNL can be considered an atypical organization that had a more excellent public relations department than other organizations. Because of its uniqueness and excellence, the case was especially important for developing a normative theory that can provide a model for other organizations to emulate.

I believe my study has deepened the discussion of the linkage theory suggested by other disciplines. Based on the findings presented in this study, scholars in other disciplines, such as management and organizational psychology, might further investigate the complex associations among employees, publics, and organizational effectiveness. As was discussed in my study, the interconnectedness of these three concepts is not sequential or linear, and therefore requires careful consideration to develop advanced linkage theories.

## Implications for Public Relations Practice

The study has several implications for the public relations practice. These implications might be particularly relevant to risk communication practice because the case organization was a non-profit entity that experienced a major, environmental crisis. However, I believe the results of this study might also be useful for those for-profit organizations cognizant of their responsibility as corporate citizens, and who wish to build positive relationships with their non-consumer publics.

### *Becoming the Hub of Information and Support for Relationship Building*

Results showed that public relations practitioners should acquire the network centrality explained by L. Grunig and Dozier (1992) to enact their role in strategic relationship management. According to L. Grunig and Dozier, network centrality means being at the right place at the right time within the organization. If a department performs activities critical to the survival and growth of the organization, it is likely that department will be perceived as more important than others.

As was seen in this case study, the PR division facilitated the relationship between the employees and the publics. Employees regarded the public relations staff as communication counselors when they encountered problems with external publics. In this way, the public relations division relayed coherent messages about the organization's mission and values both inside and outside the organization and contributed to the development of positive internal and external relationships.

Public relations was able to create a positive climate for external relationship building by providing communication training to employees. As a result, the public relations directorate was indispensable in the effective relationship management of strategic constituents. Practitioners might use the findings of this study to position their departments in the center of the organizational network.

### *Interpersonal Communication*

Findings on the effectiveness of interpersonal communication also provide insights for public relations professionals. As the study shows, interpersonal communication facilitated the implementation of symmetrical principles, and addressed the shortcomings of mediated communication. For instance, interpersonal communication programs effectively overcame the publics' increasing skepticism of mass media messages and enhanced the chance of developing trustful relationships. If public relations professionals wish to develop long-term, experiential relationships with their publics, they should incorporate interpersonal communication methods into their program planning, rather than focusing solely on the use of mass mediated communication and the production of well-refined messages.

### *Role of Crises in Public Relations*

According to L. Grunig, J. Grunig, and Dozier (2002), public relations benefits organizations because it contributes to effective management of crises. L. Grunig et al. further explained that a crisis often is the triggering event that motivates an organization to develop an excellent public relations department. Particularly, they explained, "activism pushes the organization toward excellence as they try to cope with the expectations of their strategic constituencies" (p. 477). This clearly was the case for BNL. This study showed that when public relations practitioners help an organization to effectively deal with crises through communication, it is possible to generate increased appreciation and support for the public relations department within the organization.

In this regard, the study also provides guidance and insights on how practitioners can use crises or activist pressure to generate understanding and support for their work. More specifically, public relations practitioners could adopt some of the programs examined in this study to deal with crises or activism.



### *Employee Communication Revisited*

Results of this study indicated that the quality of an organization's relationships with its employees affects the way publics evaluate the organization. The findings of this study can be used to convince top management of the importance of employee participation in public relations. The study also details how such public relations programs can contribute to positive relationship building with employees.

This study suggests that public relations practitioners should go beyond the traditional approach to employee communication, which mainly focuses on the production of employee publications. In developing effective public relations programs that incorporate employee involvement, public relations practitioners could adopt the framework of the Envoy Program examined in this study.

### Directions for Future Research

As discussed in previous sections, this case study was confined to a non-profit setting in which the bottom-line is not of primary concern. Relationship building processes may be quite different in a for-profit organization. In this sense, in-depth case studies on for-profit organizations may provide new information about employees' roles in public relations processes.

By conducting focus groups with employee volunteers and non-volunteers, one could further explore reasons why or why not employees volunteer in community outreach programs in organizations. Comparative results of such a study could provide further insights into designing successful community outreach programs.

Another course of study would be to conduct quantitative research to explore the interrelations among EOR, EPR, and OPR. Future study might also involve quantitative research to explore the relationship between the various types of cultivation strategies and resulting relationship outcomes. In this study, symmetrical strategies were found to be effective in developing positive

relationships. However, public relations professionals might find guidance for the development of effective communications programs through an exploration of specific cultivation strategies that elicit positive ratings of each of the four relationship dimensions. Further research might also be conducted on the communication behavior of leadership and its impact on relationship building with publics.

### Concluding Remarks

In this research, I explored the critical roles employees play in the process of building relationships with external publics. I also developed a normative theory of integrative internal and external relationship management.

This case study showed that employee involvement in public relations efforts enables an organization to develop authentic relationships with external publics. Individual interaction between employees and publics creates meaningful experiences for both parties. I also found evidence that employee involvement in public relations contributes to the development of positive internal relationships. In this regard, public relations can be viewed as a means to employee empowerment.

At the outset of the study, I discussed the argument made by scholars in various disciplines that creating synergy between internal and external relationships is critical to the accomplishment of organizational goals. These scholars debated which organizational function should be responsible for creating such synergy. This case study demonstrates that public relations is one organizational function that can significantly contribute to the creation of such synergy through strategic communication management.

## APPENDIX A

### INTERVIEW GUIDE

#### *Non-PR employees, PR practitioners, and Top managers*

- \* Interview guides were developed for semi-structured qualitative interviews. During actual interviews, modification of questions or asking new questions was necessary. I used this protocol as a guide rather than a strict list of questions to be covered. Probes were used only when the participant's response did not lead to relevant information or when time permitted.

#### General Question

1. Which community relations program do you participate in? What is your position in the program and what are your responsibilities? When did you start participating in the community relations program?

#### Organizational Climate

1. How important do you believe it is for the organization to build positive, long-term relationship with its community? Why do you think so?
2. What are the tools, technology, and other resources provided for employees like you who participate in community outreach efforts? What are the rewards?

#### Relationship Dimensions

1. Within the community, with whom do you interact with? Could you give me the names of community groups (or individuals)? Is this group (or individuals) important to your organization? Is this group (or individuals) important to you? Why?
2. Do you feel that you have a relationship with the community group (or individuals)? Why or why not? What initiated the development of a relationship between you and the organization?
3. Please describe your relationship with the community group (or individuals)?

#### Probes

- a. Control Mutuality: To what extent do you believe that community members are attentive to what you say? Why? To what extent do you feel you have any control over what community groups (or individuals) do that affect you? Why?
- b. Trust: Would you describe things that a community member(s) have done that indicates it can be relied on to keep its promises or it does not keep its promises? How confident are you that the community group (or individuals) has the ability to accomplish what it says it will do? Can you give me examples of why you feel that way?
- c. Commitment: Can you provide me any examples that suggest that the community group (or individuals) want(s) to maintain a long-term commitment to a relationship with you or does not want to maintain such a relationship?

- d. **Satisfaction:** How satisfied are you with the relationship that you have had with community groups (or individuals)? Please explain why you are satisfied or not satisfied.

*Cultivation Strategies*

4. Let's talk about things that you have done to develop and continue a long-term relationship with the community groups (or individuals). These strategies to cultivate a relationship could be communication strategies, attempts to resolve conflict, or attempts to show concern for the interests of community members. Please provide as many examples as you can.
5. Can you tell me about your interaction with community members? In what kind of settings do interactions take place? What do you normally talk about in those interactions?
6. Please think of a time when, you had a particularly satisfying (dissatisfying) interaction with a(n) (member of community). When did the incident happen? What specific circumstances led up to this situation? Exactly what did the community member say or do? What did you say or do?
7. To what extent do you think different communication strategies to cultivate a relationship affect the resulting quality of relationships? What types of strategies do you think are most effective? Can you provide examples of strategies that you used that damaged the relationship?
8. What did you learn from these interactions and how do you think it affected community members' perception about the organization?

*Synergy among Internal and External Relationships*

1. How would you describe your relationship with the organization?
2. Organizational commitment:
  - What does it mean for you to work for this organization?
  - How much do you identify with your organization's goals and values?
  - Would you be willing to invest extra effort in your work for the organization? Why or why not?
  - How long would you like to maintain your membership with this organization?
  - What would be the consequence of leaving or staying with this organization?
  - Do you feel any sense of obligation to stay with the organization?
3. Do you think the quality of relationship you have with the organization affect the way you interact and develop relationships with community members? Why? or Why not?

## APPENDIX B

### INTERVIEW GUIDE

#### *External Publics*

#### General Questions

1. Which community organization do you belong to? Could you tell me a little bit about your organization?
2. What is your position in that organization and what are your responsibilities?
3. For how long have you participated in BNL's community outreach program(s)?

#### Relationship Dimensions

1. Would you begin by telling me what are the first things that come into your mind when you hear the name of this organization? What else do you know about it?
2. Do you feel that you have a relationship with this organization? Why or why not? What initiated the development of a relationship between you and the organization?
3. Please describe your relationship with the organization?

#### Probes.

- a. Control Mutuality: To what extent do you feel you have any control over what the organization does that affects you? Why?
- b. Trust: Would you describe things that the organization has done that indicate it can be relied on to keep its promises, or that it does not keep its promises? How confident are you that the organization has the ability to accomplish what it says it will do? Can you give me examples of why you feel that way?
- c. Commitment: Can you provide me any examples that suggest that the organization wants to maintain a long-term commitment to a relationship with you or does not want to maintain such a relationship?
- d. Satisfaction: How satisfied are you with the relationship that you have with the organization? Please explain why you are satisfied or not satisfied.

#### Synergy among Internal and External Relationships

1. Can you tell me about your interaction with employees? In what kind of settings do interactions take place? What do you normally talk about in those interactions?
2. Please think of a time when, you had a particularly satisfying (dissatisfying) interaction with a(n) employee. When did the incident happen? What specific circumstances led up to this situation? Exactly what did the employee say or do? What did you say or do?

3. What did you learn from these interactions and how do you think it affected your perception about the organization?

*Cultivation Strategies*

1. Let's talk about things that the employees have done to develop and continue a long-term relationship with you. These strategies to cultivate a relationship could be communication strategies, attempts to resolve conflict, or attempts to show concern for the interests of the community. Please provide as many examples as you can.
2. To what extent do you think different communication strategies used by employees you interact with affect the resulting quality of relationships? Can you provide examples of strategies that these employees have used that damaged the relationship?
3. Do you think the quality of relationship you have with the employees affect the way you relate to the overall organization? Why or why not?

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