The Impact of the Dominant Coalition on Health Care Public Relations Practitioners

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Abstract

This study is an exploratory investigation into the relationship between power, leadership, and membership in an organization's dominant coalition using Finkelstein's (1992) four dimensions of power, salient research in leadership theory, and input from public relations practitioners who work for Indiana Hospital Association members. This study ascertained to what degree health care public relations practitioners understand and participate in the dominant coalition of hospitals. This coalition is traditionally defined as the informal group of individuals who influence how an organization functions, how it responds in the time of a crisis and how it makes decisions regarding organizational policies and procedures.

Previous work in the field has discovered that the dominant coalition is important in shaping organizational policies and responses. Previous work has also demonstrated that a strong and steady public relations effort can mitigate potential problems between an organization and its many publics. In addition, a previous study involving members of the PRSA College of Fellows found that members of the College strongly agreed that the dominant coalition is a source of power for a public relations practitioner, but prestige power was the only significant predictor of tenure in the dominate coalition.

This body of research spawned the exploratory study to more closely look at one industry. The survey showed that neither membership in the dominant coalition nor time spent as a member was indicative of the level of the importance assigned to the dominant coalition. The results also showed health care public relations practitioners understand the concept and importance of the dominant coalition to their role and perceive there is an advantage of membership within the group. These practitioners also perceive experience and internal relationships were significant predictors of power. This demonstrates that dominant coalition membership can be gained through providing valuable skills and services to the organization.

This study contributes to the public relations body of knowledge by providing greater understanding of the antecedents of membership in the dominant coalition. The results reinforce that PR practitioners value membership in the dominant coalition and believe they can gain access through a combination of experience, expertise and organization-spanning skills regardless of their hierarchical position. This study deepens our understanding of the practice of excellent public relations by beginning to explore the importance of membership in this group to professionals in other functional areas of public relations beyond the pure corporate sphere.

Introduction

Public relations in the health care and life sciences sector is one of the fastest growing segments of our profession today. Within the Public Relations Society of America, the Health Academy is the association's largest professional interest section, including members from a wide range of roles within the sector. The pace of this growth can be seen in the Society for Healthcare Strategy and Market Development, a diverse group of health care professionals with roles in business development, marketing, planning, physician relations, sales, public relations and public affairs. It is one of eleven personal membership groups associated with the American Hospital Association and has grown since 1996 to more than 4,500 members. In an informational, non-scientific survey of its members in 2008, 20 percent said they are primarily public relations/ communications practitioners ; the third largest category behind marketing and planning (SHSMD, 2008).

Scholars have long held that public relations efforts are influenced by the culture of the organization (J.E. Grunig et al., 1992, Spicer, 1997). The unique culture of health care and life sciences makes it imperative for public relations practitioners within this sector to have influence in order to be successful. In the current state of our economy, that becomes even more important as Gordon & Kelly (1999) found in a national survey of the heads of public relations departments in hospitals. Using two scales unique to the study, the researchers determined that public relations departments must contribute to the organization's effectiveness in order to survive budget cuts and help the organization succeed.

Public relations scholars also accept the pre-eminence of a dominant coalition and its influence (cf. Berger & Reber, 2006; Berger, 2005; Bowen, 2006a, 2008a, 2008b; Dozier, 1984; Dozier & Broom, 1995; Dozier, L.A. Grunig, & J.E. Grunig, 1995; J.E. Grunig, 2006; L.A. Grunig, 1992; Lauzen, 1992; Lauzen & Dozier, 1994). The power-control perspective of public relations (cf. Berger & Reber, 2006; Dozier, 1984; Dozier & Broom, 1995; Dozier, L.A. Grunig, & J.E. Grunig, 1995; J.E. Grunig, 2006; L.A. Grunig, 1992; L.A. Grunig, J.E. Grunig & Dozier, 2002; Lauzen, 1992; Lauzen & Dozier, 1994) acknowledges the concept of power as an integral part of influence in an organization and of particular advantage to the public relations practitioner. However, the idea that a particular source of power might contribute to a public relations practitioners' inclusion in the dominant coalition has seldom been investigated in public relations, although this appears to be an emerging research area for some scholars (cf. Berger et al., 2007; Berger & Reber, 2006; Berger, 2005; Bowen, 2008a, 2008b, O'Neil, 2004).

Leadership, more commonly explored in the business literature, has been largely excluded from the dominant coalition equation in public relations research. What literature that does exist conceptualizes leadership as a process and merely notes that it offers a path to success (Berger et al., 2007; Bowen, 2008).

Our previous work [Blind Cite] involving members of the PRSA College of Fellows found that members of the College strongly agreed that the dominant coalition is a source of power for a public relations practitioner, but prestige power was the only significant predictor of tenure in the dominate coalition. While we believe these findings have merit on their own, we also acknowledge that the College is a unique group within PRSA and carries with it an inherent power of prestige. To that end, we wanted to expand our examination of the dominant coalition to assess a group of practitioners that are vital to the profession and yet not as exclusive as the College of Fellows. In other words, we wanted to assess the issue of power and the dominant coalition with a group of professionals more typical of public relations practitioners at large.

This study is an exploratory extension of that work investigating the relationship between power, leadership, and membership in an organization's dominant coalition. We seek to ascertain to what degree health care public relations practitioners understand and participate in the dominant coalition of hospitals. We use Finkelstein's (1992) landmark work on power here in an attempt to discern whether this concept from the management literature provides any additional granularity into how one gains entry into the dominant coalition. We also draw from some of the most salient work in leadership theory, specifically the work of Kanter (1992) and Binney & Williams (1995) in an attempt to determine whether certain leadership qualities can predict inclusion in the dominant coalition.

Literature Review

Dominant Coalitions

Influence within organizations has been a popular topic of exploration for business, psychology, and sociology for decades (cf. Brass, 1984; Gundelach & Tetzschner, 1976; Somech & Drach-Zahavy, 2002; Stevenson et al., 1985; Thompson, 1967; Vecchio & Sussmann, 1991; Wilkinson & Kipnis, 1978; Mintzberg, 1983). One of the most widely used concepts from this body of literature is Stevenson et al.'s (1985) concept of dominant coalitions, defined as "an interacting group of individuals, deliberately constructed, independent of the formal structure, lacking its own internal formal structure, consisting of mutually perceived membership, issue oriented, focused on a goal or goals external to the coalition, and requiring concerted member action" (p. 256).

This inner circle, or subset, of management most responsible for setting policy (Thompson, 1967) through its self-selecting and non-hierarchical nature is acknowledged as an important path to influence, power, and participation in decision making for the public relations practitioner (Berger, 2005; Berger & Reber, 2006, Bowen, 2006a, 2008a, 2008b; L.A. Grunig 1992; L.A. Grunig, J.E. Grunig & Dozier, 2002). In the landmark Excellence study, L.A. Grunig (1992) was among the first to recognize the importance of the dominant coalition as a means of gaining power within the public relations department. While Berger (2005) notes that dominant coalitions often shift and change over time, both he and L.A. Grunig (1992) acknowledge that having a "voice" heard by the dominant coalition is a critical dimension of a public relations practitioners influence within an organization.

O'Neil (2004) argued that public relations practitioners must rely on "upward influence tactics" (e.g., assertiveness, coalition, exchange of benefits) to "shape the negotiations process of the dominant coalition" (p. 29). Bowen (2006a) made the case that "inclusion in the dominant coalition is desired because the top communicator then plays a crucial role in strategic planning and organizational policy (p. 331). Berger & Reber (2006) noted that membership is "organizational power circles" provided the public relations practitioner several important advantages including signifying "that formal authority has been granted to the public relations professional" (p. 7). Further, they stated that "being present in strategic circles also provides professionals the opportunities to speak, advocate, debate, resist and participate in decision making" (p.7). Kanter (1977) found that membership in the dominant coalition provides regular access to decision makers and to more strategic information for use.

Dozier, et al. (1995) acknowledged the critical role of and demands placed by the dominant coalition in achieving excellence in communication. But in terms of achieving standing within the dominant coalition, the authors could offer only this advice:

Dominant coalitions tend to value and support communicators who first demonstrate their worth. Certainly, excellent communication programs first require cutting-edge expertise as a prerequisite to implementation. Top communicators can parlay such expertise to reposition the communication function if they can get the attention of dominant coalitions. (p. 104)

Contemporary research on dominant coalitions has examined the roles of gender (O'Neil, 2004), judgment and trust (Plowman, 2005), and strategic decision-making (DeSanto & Moss, 2004) in public relations practitioners' attempts to gain access to this important group of decision makers.

RQ1a: What is the relationship between perceived benefits of membership in the dominant coalition and the practitioner's view regarding their own membership in the dominant coalition?

RQ1b: What is the relationship between perceived benefits of membership in the dominant coalition and the number of years a practitioner has been a member of the dominant coalition?

Power

Berger & Reber (2006) argued, "power relations that weave through and around the practice of public relations must be examined and understood if the profession is to advance and achieve its greater potential" (p. 9). While scholars may separate the terms "power" and "influence," we agree with Berger & Reber (2006) that the two mean essentially the same thing and thus rely on their definition for this study: "The ability to get things done by affecting the perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, opinions, decisions, statements and behaviors of others" (p. 5).

Aldoory (2005a) recognized that although power, along with identity and difference, is a predominant concern of public relations practitioners and organizations, it has "not always been explicated, critiqued, and highlighted in public relations research" (p. 89). Despite its importance to the practice of public relations, power has been examined infrequently in the public relations literature. When studied, it has been investigated from a variety of perspectives, including individuals, groups, and organizational structures. For example, Serini, et al. defined power, whether personal or organizational, as "the heart of the sexual harassment issue" (p. 194) for women in the workplace. Christen (2004) investigated the role of perceived power as it relates to group dynamics in negotiations and found when a group's perception of its own trustworthiness is high, its own perceived power may lead to a stronger inclination to negotiate with another party. Lauzen and Dozier (1992) used environmental-imperative and power-control perspectives to study how consequences emanating from a firm's external environment can affect power for the public relations function. Berger & Reber (2006) examined power and influence within organizations, arguing that the use of traditional and nontraditional influence tactics including resistance, dissent and activism can help the public relations practitioner be successful in their organizational "power relations." Similarly, Spicer (1997) identified a number of organization power bases and called upon public relations practitioners to understand and effectively use organizational politics to their advantage.

Research focusing on the roles of gender, power, and influence in public relations is pervasive in the literature (cf. Aldoory, 1998; Aldoory, 2005b; Aldoory & Toth, 2002, 2004; Choi & Hon, 2002; Grunig, Toth, & Hon, 2000; O'Neil, 2003, 2004; Serini, et al., 1998; Sha & Toth, 2005). Power has been analyzed from a roles perspective (cf. Broom, 1982; Broom & Dozer, 1986; Toth & L.A. Grunig, 1993; Toth et al., 1998); in terms of differences between

organizations and their publics and supervisors and employees (cf. Aldoory, 2001b; Creedon, 1993); from a Postmodernist perspective (cf. Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002; Holtzhausen, 2000); using feminist theory and a structural framework (O'Neil, 2003) and as a part of advancing a feminist paradigm for public relations scholarship (Aldoory, 2005b).

O'Neil (2004) did not find any gender-based differences in how public relations managers use upward influence tactics. She concluded that power, rather than gender, had an intervening effect and was more predictive of upward influence tactic choice. Our primary focus in this research is the individual view of power and how practitioners seeking entry into dominant coalitions could use it.

Of particular interest to this work are Finkelstein's (1992) dimensions of power. He argued that the power a top manager possesses plays a key role in strategic decision making. He defined power as "the capacity of individual actors to exert their will" (p. 506) and identified four types, or dimensions, of power that top managers attain: structural, ownership, expert, and prestige. In turn, these dimensions of power allow them to manage the complex uncertainties inherent to organizations. The degree of uncertainty generated by an organization's publics is positively related to enactment of the manager role in public relations (Lauzen & Dozier, 1992). In turn, practitioners able to reduce uncertainty possess power in organizations (Crozier, 1964, as cited in Lauzen & Dozier, 1992).

Finkelstein's (1992) concept of structural power is the equivalent of formal organizational structure and hierarchical authority. It relates to the legislative right managers have to exert influence. The CEO has the greatest power, with each level of workers below him or her retaining gradually less power. Reliance on this power is tantamount to relying solely on the individual's rank order to prevail in a dispute. "The greater a manager's structural power, the greater his or her control over colleague's actions" (Finkelstein, p. 509). Rarely do public relations practitioners derive power from structural sources. Lauzen and Dozier (1992) instead suggest "top practitioners become powerful through the control of scarce and valued resources and through close liaisons with members of the dominant coalition" (p. 207). Feminist public relations scholars (L.A. Grunig et al., 2001; Hon, 1995; Hon et al., 1992; Serini et al., 1998; O'Neil, 2004) have found that female public relations practitioners typically have even less formal structural power than males, preventing some from advancing in the profession.

If a manager has the ability to act as an agent on behalf of shareholders, one has ownership power (Finkelstein, 1992). Power in this dimension accrues depending on where a manager falls on the continuum of the agent-principle relationship; in other words, ownership power flows from the manager's personal ownership interest in the organization and/or his or her associations with the owners of the firm (e.g., family relation to the founder(s)). Top managers with extensive share holdings will hold more power than others. Likewise, founders or relatives of the founder(s) hold powerful positions in the organization. Ownership power extends over the board of directors as well.

Finkelstein's (1992) explanation of expert power, which follows from the French & Raven typology (1959), has significant implications for public relations practitioners. Managers with the ability to deal with unforeseen events in the organization's operating environment and contribute to the organization's success have a valuable source of power. Likewise, a source of significant influence, particularly over individual strategic choices, is relevant or critical expertise. Managers with specialized experience in a particular area can be considered "experts" in that area. Plowman (1998) asserted that an increase in expertise will be accompanied by an increase in power. Conversely, he noted that a *lack* of expert power could be detrimental to

relationship building with the dominant coalition, warning that "when professionals in public relations do not have the expertise in their own field, it is difficult for them to persuade the dominant coalition to enact ill-conceived programs" (pp. 243-44). Both L.A. Grunig (1992) and Serini (1993) argued that expertise is a part of professionalism in public relations and agreed that practitioners with expertise are more likely to be influential with, rather than controlled by, upper management. Breadth of experience is an additional element of expert power (Finkelstein). Managers with broad backgrounds are typically better able to cope with multiple demands from multiple stakeholders. Highly developed contacts and relationships within the organization's sphere of operations are also important in helping managers deal with the exigencies of the operating environment and are thus sources of expert power (Finkelstein, 1992).

A case study by Plowman and Powelson (1998) supports this within the hospital industry. In a case study of a typical hospital, the researchers utilized interviews and document review to determine the public relations department leader was a part of the hospital's dominant coalition - primarily based on her expertise, experience and internal relationships. As a result, this helped her organization not only survive, but thrive during rapid organizational change.

Finally, Finkelstein's (1992) dimension of personal prestige, or status, can also be a source of power for the public relations practitioner. This dimension tends to include the executive's reputation, external contacts, and the ability to acquire information. For instance, the suggestion that a manager has superior qualifications and friends in high places, as well as the cachet of one's college degree, confers prestige power. Members of the managerial elite may garner prestige power by gathering information critical to operations. Typically, this is associated with relationships with entities external to the organization that affect it (e.g., government, financial institutions). This ability to function as a "boundary spanner" (Aldrich & Herker, 1977) enable elites to provide information critical to operations. As such, the elite's power is enhanced, particularly when the organization would not otherwise be privy to such information. J.E. Grunig & L.E. Grunig (1992) broadened the definition of boundary spanners to include anyone who has contact with both internal and external groups. Likewise, Leichty & Springston (1996) apply boundary spanning to the public relations function as communication activities that convey information and influence between one's internal group and external groups. Thus, by extension, these boundary spanning activities can be seen to confer prestige power. Prestige power can be gained by anyone with extensive contacts outside the organization (Finkelstein, 1992).

We examine the relationship between membership in the dominant coalition and Finkelstein's (1992) four dimensions of power in our second research question, which explores whether possession of any particular dimension of power (structural, ownership, expertise, or prestige) contributes to membership in the dominant coalition:

RQ2: Which sources of power would best predict an individual's membership in the dominant coalition?

Leadership

The concept of leadership is understood today, after much debate and a recent outburst of both scholarly and practitioner publications, as central to determining the success or failure of an organization (cf. Lennick & Kiel, 2005; Maxwell, 2006; Price, 2006; Sadler, 2003, Northouse, 2007). The term leadership is occasionally applied to an attribute of a person, but according to Sadler (2003), it is "more usefully employed to refer to a social process involving influence and

persuasion" (p. 15). Because influence and persuasion are in the province of public relations, leadership stands to have a direct impact on a practitioner's effectiveness within an organization. We use Northouse's (2007) definition of leadership here: "Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (p. 3).

In their extensive research on leadership, Bennis & Nanus (1985) identified five leadership myths. First is the myth that leadership is a rare skill. Bennis & Nanus opined that although great leaders may be rare, anyone has the capacity to be a leader. More importantly, they have found that a person might be a leader in one organization, but not in another. These authors concluded that leadership opportunities are plentiful and available to just about anybody. The second myth they challenged was that leaders are born, not made. Bennis & Nanus asserted that the major qualifications and aptitudes of leadership can be learned, and everyone has the capacity to learn them. Third is the myth that leaders are charismatic; some are, but most are not according to Bennis & Nanus. Fourth, and of particular interest to this study, is the myth that leadership exists only at the most senior levels of an organization. Bennis & Nanus believed that, in fact, the larger the organization, the greater the opportunity to lead. Finally, the researchers found that leadership is commonly equated to controlling and directing. They instead discovered that "leadership is not so much the exercise of power as the empowerment of others" (as cited in Sadler, 2003, p. 8). Their extensive study of leadership revealed that one's ability to lead directly correlates to one's ability to inspire; orders do not allow people to use initiative and experience (Bennis & Nanus, 1985).

Berger et al. (2007) interviewed 97 top U.S. public relations leaders, all arguably members of the dominant coalition. In addition to excellent communication skills and a proactive approach, these leading practitioners commented that the leadership characteristics they exhibited were instrumental in helping them overcome negative stereotypes of the profession.

Bowen (2008) examined the qualitative data provided by an international survey funded by the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) Research Foundation (Bowen et al., 2006). In addition to the open-ended responses from 1,827 respondents, she also conducted 32 long interviews with executive practitioners and examined data from four focus groups, one of which was exclusively executive-level practitioners. Her analysis found that leadership (conceptualized as the process of leading) played an important role in helping the executives gain membership in the dominant coalition. Bowen went on to say:

> Although it can be an impressive way to enhance authority and credibility with the dominant coalition, a strong sense of leadership is less of a route of access and more a method of gaining credibility with the CEO once access has already been granted….Still, leadership skills do play a part in dominant coalition access and inclusion, and perhaps can enhance the ability of public relations professionals to remain in the dominant coalition once access has been granted (p. 51).

Berger & Reber (2006) reported on their 2003 online survey of public relations professionals, academics and graduate students in their book *Gaining Influence in Public Relations*. Among the recommendations of the executives they interviewed was the creation of more institutes dedicated to leadership development. The researchers noted that "the influence and effects of leadership – good and bad – cannot be overstated" (p. 236). In their mind, leadership issues are central to the legitimacy and credibility of the public relations profession.

Sadler (2003) opines that in the evolving nature of business today "Demonstrated flexibility and empathy, while remaining true to the core values of the organization and finding ways to circumvent unpredictable impediments, will be characteristic of tomorrow's leaders" (p. 153). In a huge study of 30 years of Fortune 500 companies (1965 to 1995), Collins (2001) found that one of the drivers to lasting transformation of performance he called 'level 5 leadership' was critical to success. Level 5 leaders, says Collins, "are characterized by a seemingly paradoxical combination of humility and shyness on the one hand (Ying) and willfulness and fearlessness on the other (Yang)" (as cited in Sadler, 2003, p. 155).

This new kind of leader is best exemplified through Kanter's (1992) model. Kanter (as cited in Sadler, 2003) notes that these new leaders need to develop the following knowledge, skills, and abilities: a) The ability to operate without the might of the hierarchy behind them; b) the knowledge to compete so as to enhance cooperation; c) the ability to operate with high ethical standards; d) the humility that accepts there is always more to learn; e) the awareness of the importance of process as distinct from substance or content; and f) the ability to derive satisfaction from achievement of results.

Binney & Williams (1995) describe the effective leader of tomorrow as one who both leads and learns. Identified for the purposes of this study as the Leader/Learner, Binney & Williams see this kind of leader as one who approaches leadership from a confident 'knowing' position, but being willing at the same time to remain open to challenges and new ideas. Leader/Learners exhibit four characteristics:

a) Operational credibility, which is a function of having a deep understanding of the business, its products and the issues to do with it;
b) Being 'connected to their organization – being in close touch with employees and customers;
c) Leading by example: If leaders practice 'Do as I say' rather than 'Do as I do,' they will fail to be effective;
d) Consistency under pressure: For example, in being willing to communicate bad news as well as good news. (as cited in Sadler, 2003, p. 159)

In our final research question, we add leadership to our equation to determine whether a particular type of power or a certain leadership style makes a greater contribution to membership in the dominant coalition:

RQ3: Which is a better predictor of tenure in the dominant coalition – power or leadership?

RQ4: Do any leadership variables predict how strongly a participant rates their membership in the dominant coalition?

Method

Sample

We conducted an online survey of public relations practitioners who were employed by members of the Indiana Hospital Association. These practitioners were chosen because the association represents nearly all of the hospitals within Indiana and would give a strong cross-section of facilities including rural, community and academic medical centers. Since the 1925

Middletown Studies, Indiana has often been labeled as where "average Americans" live and work. Using the Indiana Hospital Association was the best way to reach the largest numbers of health care practitioners in Indiana, who may be thought to represent the average health care practitioner. It was also a way to choose health care practitioners regardless of their membership in public relations, communications, marketing and other associations and organizations. After receiving university-level IRB approval for the research project, we forwarded a copy of the survey instrument to Marcia Couet, the organization's Director of Communication, who then sent a blast e-mail to the association's membership.

E-mail survey requests were sent to all 140 public relations practitioners who were employed by members of the association in November 2008. We received 48 responses, for a 34 percent response rate. The association sent three additional follow-up e-mails to its membership.

Instrument

The survey instrument mirrored that used in the researchers' previous College of Fellows study and comprised 46 questions divided into 3 sections: 9 items regarding the dominant coalition, 16 items regarding sources of power, and 14 items regarding perceptions of one's own leadership style (called "effectiveness" on the survey). The remaining 7 items captured demographic and descriptive data. The dominant coalition items were drawn from the work of Stevenson, et al. (1985).   Items regarding organizational influence were based on Finkelstein's (1992) four dimensions of power, and items regarding effectiveness were grounded in leadership theory research conducted by Bennis & Nanus (1985), Binney & Williams (1995), Sadler (2003), Collins (2001) and Kanter (1992). Where appropriate, survey statements were accompanied by a 7-point agreement scale, with 1 indicating strongly disagree and 7 indicating strongly agree.

Data Analysis Procedures

Upon the completion of the collection process, we received a total of 48 usable surveys. Missing data points were replaced using means substitution. No more than 10 percent of any one variable was replaced in this fashion.

The survey consisted of three specific areas: items outlining the presence, value of and membership in the dominant coalition, items outlining the sources of personal influence for the participant and items addressing the participant's leadership (referred to in the survey as (effectiveness) as a public relations practitioner. To create variables from each of these groups, we conducted several factor analyses.

The first analysis on dominant coalition consisted of five items that loaded into two factors, which collectively accounted for 80.8 percent of the variance. The first factor consisted of three items and accounted for 48.9 percent of the variance (eigenvalue= 2.45). The items spoke to the importance of access to and influence within one's own group (e.g. "Being a member of the dominant coalition can help the public relations practitioner gain a seat at the decision-making table.") The second factor contained 2 items and accounted for 31.9 percent of the variance (eigenvalue= 1.60) and spoke to the power associated with membership in the dominant coalition (e.g. "Membership in the dominant coalition can be a source of power for a public relations practitioner.")

The second analysis dealt with sources of influence from which the individuals felt they drew their power within their organization. We selected those items that were of greatest interest to this study and conducted a second factor analysis and after removing two cross-loading items,

four variables emerged that accounted for 67.2 percent of the variance. In the process, we split the "prestige" power variable into three parts based on the data.

The first variable accounted for 25.1 percent of the variance (eigenvalue= 3.26) and contained four items that spoke to the individual's expertise and skill as a practitioner ("I derive a great deal of my influence within the organization from my expertise in public relations."). The second variable accounted for 15.1 percent of the variance (eigenvalue= 1.96) and contained three items that spoke to influence garnered through the prestige that results from relationships with external sources, such as friends in other companies or professional relationships with outside stakeholders ("I derive a great deal of my influence within the organization from my membership on outside boards (for-profit and non-profit."). The third variable contained three items (variance= 14.6 percent; eigenvalue= 1.90) that spoke to the prestige power that accrued based on an individual's ability to work with others inside the office or how the individual had relationships with multiple people throughout the organization ("I derive a great deal of my influence within the organization from my boundary-spanning role in the organization."). The final variable contained two items (variance= 12.4 percent; eigenvalue= 1.61) and spoke to influence garnered through prestige power gained by having a degree from a prestigious institution or being a member of high-level groups ("I derive a great deal of my influence within the organization from having a degree from an elite university or college.")

The third analysis contained items that examined what the individual felt contributed most to his or her effectiveness as a public relations practitioner. The factor analysis accounted for 57.4 percent of the variance and yielded two variables.

The first variable accounted for 33.6 percent of the variance (eigenvalue=3.36) and contained items related to what we will define as a Level Five management style (Collins, 2001; Kanter, 1992).

The second factor contained four items and accounted for 23.8 percent of the variance (eigenvalue= 2.38) and spoke to a Leader/Learner style of leadership (Binney & Williams, 1995).

In each case, we created variables out of the items by summing the items associated with each variable and dividing by the total number of items in the variable.

In addition, we had several single item demographics, including gender, age, years in PR and years in health care PR. We also had items that asked whether the participants felt a dominant coalition was present their workplaces and if they felt they were part of the dominant coalition.

Results

Research question #1 asked what the relationship is between perceived benefits of membership in the dominant coalition and the number of years a practitioner has been a member of the dominant coalition. To begin our analysis of this question, we began by conducting a correlation matrix that included the years the individuals stated they believed they were members of the dominant coalition and the two dominant coalition benefit variables we had constructed (dominant coalition power and dominant coalition access). This correlation matrix revealed no significant correlations between the years spent in the dominant coalition and either of these variables (ps > .2).

To more fully confirm these findings, we took all six items that helped comprise the two variables and placed them in a correlation matrix with the years spent in the dominant coalition

variable. Again, no items significantly correlated with the years spent in the dominant coalition (all ps > .2). Thus we conducted no further analyses regarding this question.

Research question #2 asked which sources of power would best predict an individual's membership in the dominant coalition. To assess this, we used the item that asked individuals to rate how strongly they believe they possess membership in the dominant coalition and used Finkelstein's four sources of power as predictor variables within a linear regression. Again, we split the "prestige" power variable into three parts based on the data.

The regression was strong and predictive, even with the small sample size (adj. R-square= .38, p < .001). Of the four influence variables, expertise was the strongest significant predictor (beta= .54, p < .001) with internal relationships also serving as a significant predictor (beta= .30, p < .05). Neither external relationships nor prestige were significant predictors (ps > .2).

Research question #3 asked whether the power variables or the leadership variables would significantly predict the number of years the participants reported spending in the dominant coalition. To examine this, we conducted a correlation matrix that included the four power variables and the two leadership variables along with the item measuring the number of years the individuals reported spending in the dominant coalition.

The matrix revealed only one significant correlation between the years in the coalition and the other six variables; the influence based on experience variable (r= .30, p < .05). No other correlations were significant.

However, we did assess as part of a post hoc analysis any additional correlations among the remaining six variables. Interesting, we found the Level Five variable was significantly negatively correlated with the prestige variable (r= -.32, p < .05). Additionally, the experience variable strongly correlated with the Leader/Learner variable (r= .43, p < .01).

Research question #4 asked whether any of the leadership variables would predict how strongly participants believed they were members of the dominant coalition. A correlation matrix revealed that neither variable correlates with the membership variable (ps > .2).

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to analyze to what degree the dominant coalition was a key component of the lives of health care public relations practitioners. In a variety of ways, the results here were both interesting and reassuring.

In examining the first research question, we found that time spent as a member of the dominant coalition was in no way indicative of the level of importance assigned to the dominant coalition. We believe this to be a reassuring finding and a case in which non-significant statistical outcomes led to important realizations. The lack of predictive data, coupled with the mean scores associated with the dominant coalition variables (DC Action M= 5.96; DC Influence M= 5.89), demonstrates the participants' clear understanding of the importance of the dominant coalition. Regardless of whether the participant is a member of the dominant coalition or the length of the participant's tenure in the coalition, the participant recognizes its vital nature. In other words, the dominant coalition isn't a group in which only its members tout its value. Thus, continued study of the dominant coalition is in the best interest of those seeking to better understand organizational interactions and is of special interest to public relations practitioners who hope to help guide those interactions.

The analysis of data for the second research question also provided some reassuring information. Of the four types of power we analyzed (expertise, prestige, internal relationships

and external relationships) experience and internal relationships were significant predictors, with expertise being the stronger of the two predictors. Neither the prestige of an exclusive degree nor the sense of having friends in high places outside of the organization predicted the outcomes. In this, we see that public relations practitioners are relying on the bedrock of the profession when it comes to becoming valued members of the coalition: their skills and their ability to communicate. This demonstrates that membership in the coalition is not a function of elitism or of "who you know" in many cases, but that membership can be gained through providing valued skills and services to the organization and confirms previous research on the subject (Berger et al., 2007, Bowen, 2008).

      The confluence of power, influence and the dominant coalition we studied in the third research question yielded some interesting results. Power as a result of experience was significantly correlated with the dominant coalition, leading us to surmise that with experience comes access. In addition, our post hoc analyses found that certain leadership styles are more or less likely to rely on certain types of power derivatives. The Leader/Learner is likely to rely on the power of experience, while the Level 5 leader is likely to eschew power derived from prestige. This would seem to make sense intuitively as the Leader/Learner approaches effective leadership from the standpoint of knowledge including understanding the business inside and out and being plugged in internally and externally with what's going on. The Level 5 Leader, on the other hand, is not the type of leader who is interested in prestige. This type of leader tend to shun publicity and place their ambitions for the company above self, giving credit to others for successes, while taking full responsibility for failures.

      Taken as a whole, our results suggest that the dominant coalition is a real phenomenon, recognized as important by those in organizations from which a dominant coalition has emerged. Furthermore, the public relations practitioners surveyed here value membership in the dominant coalition and believe they can gain access to it through a combination of experience, expertise and organization-spanning skills. Thus, PR practitioners who seek to influence the direction of the organizations they serve appear to be capable of gaining access to this "shadow cabinet" of decision makers, regardless of their hierarchical position, which is critical for those in this profession who often must prove themselves to senior leadership before earning access to and influencing the c-suite.

      This study has a number of drawbacks, the first and most obvious being the sample size. With this limited sample, it's difficult to provide wide-reaching conclusions, however, what we have revealed here is a valuable first step in this research. Even with this small sample, we've found significant outcomes that fall in line with the larger framework from which we've drawn our research ideas. Second, the limited number of respondents prohibits us from running additional analyses. Our earlier work (BLIND CITE) demonstrated gender differences in the types of power used by PR practitioners in order to influence the dominant coalition. However, we received only nine male responses, making gender analyses impossible. Furthermore, we need to better collect and parse demographic data so that we can more fully analyze differences based on degree type, matriculation source, current position, years within a particular field and so forth. This will allow us to better build models that will help us point practitioners in the right direction when it comes to how best to used specific sources of power and influence based on their background and skills.

      That said, we believe this data reveals important patterns in terms of the sources of power utilized by practitioners, particularly in the healthcare field, and a better sense as to how to gain access to the dominant coalition. In identifying these patterns, we broaden our understanding of

the unique roles both power and leadership play in gaining and maintaining membership in the dominant coalition. This data also adds to the growing body of evidence that membership in the dominant coalition is a critical issue for public relations practitioners.

There is still much to be done to understand the dynamics of gaining and maintaining membership in the dominant coalition. We need to understand whether these patterns remain consistent regardless of functional area. In addition, examining membership of the public relations practitioner from the perspective of others in the dominant coalition could be quite telling. We also need to continue exploring whether there are gender differences in the types of power used by PR practitioners to influence the dominant coalition. In addition, we need to continue to examine the impact of leadership on inclusion, but in terms of key leadership competencies. It's not enough for public relations practitioners to desire membership in the dominant coalition; we must determine the most effective and permanent means with which to gain admission. Only then can we fully secure our rightful place as a part of the strategic management team.

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