Personal Relationship Strategies and the Outcomes of Personal Relationships in a Multi-Tiered Membership Organization

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According to the relationship management perspective in public relations, an organization's livelihood is affected by its ability to develop mutually satisfying relationships (Ledingham, 2003). Scholars have connected relationship evaluations with customer retention, employee retention, and rapid recoveries from crises (Ledingham, Bruning, & Wilson, 1999; Wilson, 2000; Yang & Mallabo, 2003). A public's opinions about the relationship it has with an organization affect its satisfaction with the organization (Bruning & Ledingham, 1999), its intentions (Bruning & Ralston, 2001), and its actions (Bruning, 2002).

Progress has been made to establish and develop theories within the framework of relationship management. Public relations scholars have produced empirically valid definitions of an organization-public relationship, relationship antecedents, cultivation strategies, and relationship outcomes (e.g., Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 2000; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Grunig & Huang, 2000; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998).

Within this relationship perspective though, there is only a small foundation of public relations scholarship about personal relationships. More research is needed to identify how an organization's employees can cultivate personal relationships with publics (Toth, 2000; M. Taylor, 2004). Moreover, there is limited information in public relations about the outcomes of strong personal relationships.

Ki and Hon (2007) pointed to the importance of identifying the outcomes of cultivation efforts. They stated, "If the ultimate goal of public relations is to build mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and its publics, then measuring the outcomes of those relationships provides an important indicator of public relations effectiveness" (p. 2, also see Lindenmann, 1998). Thus, more public relations research is needed to not only discover strategies for cultivating personal relationships but also for establishing the benefits of having strong personal relationships.

Furthermore, I could not find any published public relations study that focused on studying cultivation strategies and outcomes of personal relationships in a membership context. Most public relations studies about the cultivation of personal relationships seem to focus on the use of favors to cultivate media relationships (e.g., Jo & Kim, 2004, H. C. Shin, 1994, Sriramesh, Kim, & Takasaki, 1999). Exploring a construct in a new environment is an excellent way to build theory and to explore the ways a theory might apply to a particular context.

Consequently, in this case study, I examine ways that an organization's staff cultivate personal relationships with members of a health advocacy organization. From this investigation, I also identify relationship outcomes of strong personal relationships. This case study includes interviews with 39 staff people at national, state, and affiliate levels of the organization; 58 members; and 5 former members, for a total of 102 participants. As supplemental methods, I engaged in 49 hours of participant observation and studied the organization's documents.

Framework for Studying Personal Relationships

The study of the personal relationships that exist between individuals can be conceptualized as a component of the relationship that exists between an organization and a particular public, such as customers, donors, or employees (Toth, 2000). This kind of relationship is commonly referred to in the literature as an organization-public relationship (Broom et al., 2000).

There are three components of Broom et al.'s (2000) conceptualization of *organization-public relationships*. First, organization-public relationships involve repeated experiences of interaction, linkage, and exchange of information, energy, and resources. Second, they have characteristics that participants do not necessarily perceive. Third, although organization-public relationships evolve, people can discuss them at a single moment and monitor them over time.

Grunig and Huang (2000) took existing public relations literature from the excellence study, Huang's (1997) dissertation, and other sources and positioned it within a relationship management framework. They filtered this literature into antecedents, cultivation strategies, and outcomes for organization-public relationships.

Relationship antecedents consist of the reasons why organizations and publics form relationships with each other (e.g., Broom et al., 2000; Grunig & Huang, 2000; Thomlison, 2000). Grunig (2002) defined *cultivation strategies* as "the 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). The *(inter)personal influence model* and other strategies to cultivate personal relationships can be conceptualized as types of cultivation strategies. Broom et al. (2000) defined *relationship outcomes* as the consequences that alter the environment and secure, maintain, or adjust goals both within and outside of organizations. The next section is a review of the public relations literature about personal relationship strategies and outcomes.

Public Relations Research About Personal Relationships

As mentioned by Toth (2000) and Rhee (2007), few studies have focused on the personal dimension of organization-public relationships, with the exception of studies about the personal influence model and conflict management. Although Ledingham, Bruning, and their co-authors write frequently about the "personal" dimension of relationships, their conceptualization of the personal dimension of relationships is about an organization mimicking the elements of personal relationships – instead of focusing on the human relationships between an organization's staff and publics (e.g., Bruning & Galloway, 2003; Bruning & Ledingham, 1999).

Strategies to Cultivate Personal Relationships

Based on a study in India, Sriramesh and Grunig (1988) identified the *personal influence model* as a way to cultivate relationships between individuals to achieve an organization's objectives. According to Huang (2000), the personal influence model emerged in authoritarian cultures as a way to cope by exploiting individual relationships. Examples of personal influence practices include providing entertainment, food, drinks, and gifts (e.g., Huang, 1990; H. C. Shin, 1994; Sriramesh et al., 1999).

Scholars have introduced several terms within their research about personal influence. J.-H. Shin and Cameron (2003) referred to personal influence practices as *informal relations*. Huang (2004) referred to these practices as *social activities*. In addition, Huang (2001) introduced the Chinese concept of *mianzi*, which she defined as *facework* in English. This concept involves helping people look good by protecting their dignity, which is casually known as *saving face*. Facework can be viewed as performing a favor to develop personal relationships, so it fits within the personal influence model.

Huang (2001) positioned *facework and favor* as culturally specific considerations; however, researchers have applied these concepts in various geographic cultures. For example, Kovacs (2003) identified the importance of facework for activist organizations in Britain, which has a different culture than East Asian countries. She noted that activist organizations need to take an uncompromising stance in public (to save face) but could privately cede ground when discussing solutions that are in "the public interest."

Furthermore, I argue that Downes' (1998) study is an example of the use of favor in U.S. culture. Downes studied public relations practices between Capitol Hill press secretaries and reporters. According to Downes, press secretaries provide reporters with inside information about Congressional representatives from other offices. One participant said, "I pass on a lot of things to them – especially things that don't involve my boss … that gives them a leg up on the competition, and they, in turn, feel favorably disposed to me" (p. 278). Downes' (1998) study contradicts Jo and Kim's (2004) assertion that "preventing negative publicity by using personal relationships with journalists does not correspond to Western principles of public relations" (p. 301). Thus, evidence of face and favor exists in various cultures.

Toth (2000) divided the personal influence strategy into the categories of personal influence and interpersonal influence. She stated that efforts to develop individual relationships for the benefit of an organization and its publics are *interpersonal influence* strategies. Attempts to cultivate individual relationships for the sole benefit of the organization are *personal influence* strategies. Toth conceptualized these constructs on a continuum, with interpersonal influence in the center and an organization's personal influence and a public's personal influence on opposite ends. Interpersonal strategies are ideal for relationship building (Toth, 2000).

Outcomes of Personal Relationships

Scholars have begun to identify the outcomes of personal relationships. These outcomes include trust (Chia, 2005; Rhee, 2007), an increase in media coverage (Downes, 1998; Jo & Kim, 2004), a decrease in negative media coverage (Downes, 1998; Jo & Kim, 2004), and success with political achievements (Kovacs, 2003; Wise, 2007).

Research Questions

The goals of this study are to make theoretical and practical contributions to the public relations literature about strategies to cultivate personal relationships and outcomes of personal relationships. To achieve these goals, I chose to investigate the personal dimension of organization-public relationships in the fresh context of the relationship between staff of a multi-tiered health advocacy organization and the organization's members. I refer to the *health advocacy organization* in this study as *HAO* to maintain confidentiality. The following research questions structure this study:

RQ 1: How are personal relationships with members cultivated in HAO?

RQ 2: What are the outcomes of personal relationships in this case study?

Methods

Focusing on one case enabled me to obtain depth by at least partially controlling for the contextual differences. A qualitative case study involves intense, extended contact with people to learn how they produce meaning in a particular environment from common situations (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Active Interviewing

I used *active interviewing* in this study because it can be especially conducive for building rapport, for identifying critical information, for digging deeply into surface answers, for testing rival explanations, and for making the process more meaningful to participants by ceding power (see Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Active interviewing strays from a strict question-and-answer format. Active interviewers have the option of responding to participants' answers by offering comments, such as empathic statements or helpful information, as opposed to only responding with follow-up questions and probes. Participants then react to an interviewer's comments, making the process a conversation.

I conducted 102 interviews that ranged from five minutes in length to three hours. The length depended on participants' answers, whether the interviews occurred toward the beginning or toward the end of data collection, and participants' interest in talking with me. Most interviews lasted an average of 40 minutes. Once I thought I had heard a full range of answers to the interview questions (and hence reached a point of saturation with the data), I started spending an increasing amount of time on testing emerging themes. Toward the end of data collection, I only asked screening questions to identify whether a person's initial answers suggested a difference from the data I had collected. If the answers did not seem new, I asked participants if there was anything that they wanted to communicate to HAO and concluded the interview.

Of the 102 interviews, 21 were screening interviews that did not develop into full interviews, and there were 81 full interviews. Interviews by e-mail occurred with 13 participants who preferred e-mail to other forms of discussion. Interviews by phone occurred with 65 participants, and 24 in-person interviews were conducted. All interviews were audiotaped, although the recorder malfunctioned for four interviews, which resulted in a reliance on notes during data analysis. Prior to the interviews, I pre-tested the questions through two interviews.

Participant Observation

A secondary method I used was *participant observation*, which consists of attending and analyzing social activities of a person or group to gather research (Wolcott, 2001). Lindlof and B. C. Taylor (2002) presented five levels to describe the amount of participation that a researcher could adopt. The role relevant to this study is the participant-as-observer category. In this role, I acknowledged my identity as a researcher and maintained a balance between participating in some but not all activities and routines.

I completed 49 hours of participant observation over a four-month time period. I spent most of my time helping with an awareness walk. Other activities involved national staff meetings, a conference call with HAO executive directors, a holiday party at the national office, a university outreach kit, and a project involving pitching a health report to the media. Through these activities, I developed trust for the organization and an understanding of its culture. In addition, I believe the staff developed trust in me, based on the openness of the interviews that followed.

Document Analysis

Another supplemental method I used was document analysis. To gain a foundation of understanding about the organization's history and culture, I reviewed the last two years of the national organization's magazine. I also studied other membership materials, such as national, state, and affiliate Web sites, welcome kits, and videos. I examined internal proposals, reports, and training guides, in addition to strategic planning documents, such as the bylaws and strategic plan.

Recruitment, Sampling, and Access

Because I had previously worked with HAO for a research project, I gained permission to study the organization from a staff member who I already knew. To obtain depth, I focused on one of HAO's state organizations and the affiliates within it. A membership staff person selected the organization by choosing one that had strong member retention, as defined by annual membership renewals. I contacted the state organization via e-mail and scheduled a phone call with the executive director. The state executive director was in the process of training his successor after several years in his role with HAO and more than 30 years in the particular health area. I interviewed the state executive director for nearly three hours.

With regard to recruitment, the state organization's staff members were consistent with the national organization's assessment of exceeding expectations. I sent the state organization a check for $500 and worked with a staff member who did a random selection of names from the database. I asked her if she could send $500 worth of mailings, including her labor for putting them together. She did not charge for her labor, and the state organization even contributed its own money to increase the number of potential participants.

The staff member sent letters to 1,920 people in its membership database. I had set up a toll-free phone number for potential participants to call, and most people from the state contacted me in this manner; some e-mailed. Although I preferred phone calls for the interviews and expressed this preference, I let people respond to e-mailed questions. Upon receiving the letter, some participants wrote an e-mail describing their experiences with HAO. Some agreed to answer follow-up questions via e-mail.

I started by interviewing a senior manager from the national office for three hours over a two-day period. Following our last interview, this person sent an e-mail to the national staff to recruit participants for me. As I established a weekly presence at the national office through volunteer work, additional opportunities became available, such as joining a conference call with executive directors from HAO state organizations and affiliates.

Participants

Most of the participants with whom I talked were Caucasian women, which reflected the dominance of this demographic's participation in the state organization at the time of the study. Seventy-five percent of participants were women, and 25 percent were men. Ninety percent of participants were Caucasian, including 68 women and 24 men. Five percent were African American, including two men and three women. In addition, five women of other races were interviewed (detailed information is excluded to protect their identities). Most staff members were Caucasian, and most were over age 35. State and affiliate staff included 5 men and 12 women, and most were Caucasian. Members included 48 women and 10 men. Nearly a third of members who were interviewed were younger than age 35, and a little more than 10 percent were at least 70 years old. Former members in this study included 2 men and 3 women. Most former members who were interviewed were Caucasian and between ages 50 and 75.

Data Analysis

Like many qualitative researchers, I adopted a constructivist philosophy in my analysis by embracing multiple perspectives, voices, and interpretations in a contextualized way (Charmaz, 2002). I completed data analysis procedures on a computer, which allowed me to frequently reorganize and synthesize the data. I engaged in *line-by-line open coding*, which involves breaking down data sentence by sentence, comparing them, and placing them into categories (see Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Following Wolcott's (2001) advice, I started with a few categories that facilitated the sorting of data. Every time I found a theme, I went to a data analysis document I created, which listed each research question. When I found themes during open coding, I copied an excerpt from the transcript and either placed it in an existing category or created a new category. When producing a new category, I included an excerpt that represented the category and labeled it with a phrase. As the data analysis document grew in length, I began collapsing categories and producing subcategories within each research question.

Axial coding was helpful by clarifying categories and by improving the organizing scheme (see Charmaz, 2002). After open coding and axial coding, I tested patterns by looking for negative evidence, and I attempted to account for differences (see Miles & Huberman, 1994). I also engaged in *pattern matching* by comparing results to existing theory (Charmaz, 2002). Themes were either revised or fortified by turning to data from participant observation and document analysis (see Miles & Huberman, 1994). Field notes were primarily used to verify and challenge the analysis produced by the interviews, and they sometimes resulted in adding probes to subsequent interviews. I shared my results with all participants via e-mail and mail and invited their feedback. Their responses supported the accuracy of the results.

Results

The first research question is "How are personal relationships with members cultivated in HAO?" The HAO staff cultivate mutually beneficial relationships with members, so the strategies presented here represent interpersonal influence rather than personal influence. The results to this question are organized by the categories of interpersonal influence strategies and management strategies.

Interpersonal Influence Strategies

The HAO staff go outside of their job requirements to directly engage with members, help members with tasks, socially construct relational bonds with members through constitutive rhetoric, facilitate relationship building among members, and engage in a four-step process to cultivate relationships in diverse communities.

Direct engagement. Although HAO's national staff primarily work with the leaders of HAO state organizations and affiliates, national staff members step outside of their job descriptions to assist members who contact them for help. A HAO national executive stated

> I think you'll hear this when you talk to other staff people – each of us has a handful of people that calls us when they're in crisis, when there's something to talk about, whenever. And we're not necessarily the best person for them to be calling, but we're the person they call. So there's a dad in New York whose son has been in and out of the hospital the last couple of years. … He calls because he wants somebody to help him write these letters and tell him he's doing the right thing, and you know, he always calls at the wrong time, but he's kind of my guy! …For whatever reason, they've kind of attached themselves to you, and you can't say "no." How do you say "no" to somebody who is working that hard?

The HAO staff cultivate personal relationships with people who contact them for help, even when they are not the most appropriate people in the organization for people to call. The executive is also pen pals with a man whose wife and son are ill to let him "know the [HAO] family is there for him." The executive explained, "We don't regularize or systematize or refer people on." The practice of responding to members' concerns directly rather than referring members to the appropriate staff in the organization creates a sense of caring.

Many members expressed their gratitude for the staff's help and evaluated HAO positively for its assistance. Describing her state organization and two state affiliates, Kristen remarked, "They are just phenomenal people. I can call them anytime for anything." Kristen called HAO and received help with navigating the system when her son was at risk.

Task sharing. For a couple of members I interviewed, HAO staff cultivated personal relationships and demonstrated that they genuinely care by helping members with personal ambitions and duties. Sarah has a physically demanding job, which has been more difficult with age, and she is pursuing a career as an author. She believes that HAO "definitely" cares for her. She explained, "They've been generous with mentioning the book in the newsletter. They're very supportive, very encouraging. They haven't even seen the manuscript for [my book], and they're thrilled." Helping members pursue their dreams is one way that the staff cultivate personal relationships.

The staff even help members with mundane tasks. Members seem to particularly bond with HAO when the staff personally shares chores with them that have no relation to HAO. For example, Caitlin stated, "They helped us move because I'm a member of [HAO]. One of the gentlemen rented a U-Haul truck." In another case of meaningful gestures, the affiliate president drove some members in his car to safe territory and helped them receive care when a natural disaster caused an evacuation.

Constitutive rhetoric. The HAO staff use a family metaphor to make people feel like they are and will always be unconditionally accepted and cared for. When asked how HAO demonstrates its long-term commitment to members, Amber replied

> HAO talks a lot about itself as being a family, and there is no longer-term relationship than family. So I think that with that very analogy and with that expectation, we're all in this. We're united by something that we have in common

> in the way that a family is – we have some of the same weird relationships that families have, but we're sort of there for one another.

In casual discussions with Amber during participant observation, she mentioned how HAO "gets in your blood," which also alludes to the family metaphor. Even some former members carried the family metaphor with them, referring to the termination of their relationship with the organization as a "divorce."

Peer linking. The staff not only cultivate relationships with members, but they also facilitate relationship building among members. Kate, a member, discussed how the organization helped her bond with other people at the organization's national convention. She said

> At the [HAO] national conference, everyone wears a nametag around their neck that says your first name in big letters and then your last name and where you are from in smaller letters, so everyone calls everyone else by first names. After asking about someone's hometown, the next question is usually, "What's your diagnosis? What are you taking for it? How's it working for you?" Everyone is so open and sharing of information. It is just so "normalizing."

By helping members build relationships among one another, HAO hopes to create a strong sense of community in its organization.

Hat-in-your-hand. Adriana presented a four-step process that has helped affiliates begin to cultivate relationships with diverse communities. She defined the first step in the following way:

> First you need to understand who it is you're trying to reach. Where do they live? Which neighborhood? What are the important places for them? Get to know as much as you can about the community. That's step one.

After identifying characteristics of the community, people can proceed to the second step. Adriana said the second step is to "establish relationships." She stated, "Really find people in those communities who will get you entry. You really need someone to become your [HAO] leader. Even sometimes [to tell you] what to say and to give you credibility." Lightly laughing, she reflected, "If you are going to an all-black neighborhood and you're a white person, it's not going to work." She suggested that in this scenario, a black person could accompany a white person from the community, who could vouch for the white person's credibility and trustworthiness.

Adriana said that successful affiliates "join coalitions and create opportunities to get to know the community." She said, "They get the community to know them before they even think, 'This is what we're going to do.'" For example, an affiliate in one state is reaching out to the American Indian community by working with a member of the Cherokee tribe who is engaging tribal leaders in discussion. Adriana also said that in some cases, the staff can find people with whom to partner in their own organizations.

The third step is to listen. Adriana stated, "You cannot come and tell me what my problem is. You have to come and listen to what I think my problem is, so you know better how to approach me with your agenda." Thus, communities know their own needs, and outsiders must listen to those needs and respond to them.

The fourth step is perseverance. Adriana commented, "Sometimes, you can do everything right, and for six months, nobody will show up, but guess what, seven months, people start coming." Organizations need to continue to attempt to engage with diverse communities, even when their efforts result in no gains after six months.

Management Strategies for Cultivating Personal Relationships

Two strategies were classified as management strategies because they do not involve direct engagement with the public examined in this study. These two strategies include investment in the local level for building relationships and targeting "aware" affiliates for personal help with relationship building in diverse communities.

Investment in local level for relationship building. The national and state offices drive resources to the affiliate level to cultivate relationships. For example, the national office created a template for an awareness walk that helps the local level develop social bonds among members, raise money for local services, and recruit members. In addition, the national office has regional representatives who resolve local challenges, including interpersonal disagreement. Alex, a state staff member, stated, "[HAO's] philosophy is that the strength is in the affiliates. …So it's not at all like big brother. It's sort of like mom."

A national staff member hoped that the state and affiliate leaders would spread good messages about the national organization to the grassroots. She explained, "There's just sort of a sense that builds – yeah, those are good guys: rah rah [HAO] national." This sense likely builds among highly involved members; however, most grassroots members I interviewed who did not have leadership positions and who did not attend the national convention did not experience this level of trickle-down, as suggested by their reluctance to evaluate the national organization beyond reflecting on the national office's membership magazine.

For example, Samantha does not interact with the staff at the state or national organization. When asked about her thoughts concerning the state organization, Samantha said, "I don't really deal with them, so I don't really know." She also said that she did not have any feelings about national, although she does enjoy the publications, noting, "I think they're great." For many members, personal interaction in HAO is important to providing a sense of having a relationship with an organization.

I talked with Benjamin, a national staff member, about members' hesitancy to judge a level of the organization without working with it closely. Benjamin responded, "It all makes sense. I think a lot of people develop a sense of trust at the local level." Instead of focusing on the national or state levels, the organization drives resources to the local level and relies on the local level to do the heavy lifting in cultivating member relationships.

Targeting of aware affiliates. With more than a thousand affiliates, achieving the goal of requisite variety (in this case, having the diversity of the membership reflect the diversity of the community) is no easy feat. The organization shares diversity tips through conventional venues, such as meetings, publications, and conferences. For deciding where to place limited personal attention from the national level, Adriana follows a strategy that her professor taught her. She stated, "I had a professor of mine. He would have a drawing. He used to say, 'We have two options. Trying to fight people you'll never change and trying to focus on people you might change.'" She then presented her professor's analogy, which guides her today:

> You're going to a prom. You have people who are on the stage. You have the band here that is playing. And you have people who are first row, dancing. You don't have to worry about them. They are already sold on your idea. Then you have people who are sitting on the side. They are not sure whether they want to join in the dance or not. And then there are people outside the dance floor: Don't even look at the ones outside. They're not even coming in. Focus on the ones that are sitting on the sides, deciding whether to dance or not. … If a lot of these people on the sidelines join us, eventually the group outside should be smaller and realize, "Oh, we better get inside."

Adriana gives priority to affiliates who express interest in diversity initiatives, rather than focusing on affiliates who are running with their own plans or affiliates who do not express interest. Adriana incorporates messages about diversity in HAO's materials, and she noted that directly working with affiliates who are uninterested would be a wasteful investment of her energy.

Personal Relationship Outcomes

The second research question is "What are the outcomes of personal relationships in this case study?" The relationship outcomes of cultivating personal relationships in this study include affective commitment, political leverage, social capital, and member recruitment and retention.

Affective commitment. Personal relationships between staff and members, in addition to personal relationships among members, can result in developing an emotional bond with the organization. Ken said that when people contact him for help, he needs to give them emotional support, in addition to skills and knowledge for navigating the system. He explained, "One way to do that is to become their friend or someone who they call and trust."

Representing a member perspective, Gertrude said that she appreciates the organization because of "the camaraderie." She explained, "We've been through hell together, and we have such strong bonds." The deep disclosure that occurs is one reason why lasting bonds develop. From what I could assess from my participant population, many if not most staff members seem to share the illness that members or members' loved ones have, or staff members have a family member who has the illness, or all of the above.

Political leverage. Personal relationships with people in the health system enable staff to obtain political leverage and deliver relatively quick results that members are unlikely to receive elsewhere. Roger stated

> I have personal relationships with the chairs of the Departments of [health name omitted] from all [of the medical universities in the area], as well as with the heads of major community agencies, the public providers, insurance companies. … If there is a problem in accessing services for an individual in [my city], it is highly likely that I have a personal relationship with someone who can break down any existing barriers. If I don't have this – I know who does! Such is the nature of how things are accomplished in a large urban area. It may take me a few e-mails or phone calls – but I *will* get some satisfaction for the individual in need. … Because of my personal relationships with this cadre of individuals, I am in a unique position to persuade them to fulfill needs.

Echoing this theme, Ken stated, "When something happens here, everybody knows me, and I know everybody in the system. So it's pretty easy for me to make a phone call." Thus, the personal relationships that HAO staff have provide political leverage for delivering results to members. Members appreciate the effort. Sarah praised HAO because the staff "will bend over backwards trying to resolve your current problem."

Social capital. Another valuable outcome of personal relationships is social capital. Explaining the value of relationships, Amber stated

> It means that if we want something from one another, it's much easier to get it in all directions, because the relationships are there, and you don't have to negotiate every transaction. … It greases the wheels somebody needs to … get going on. It's much easier to come out and go zero to 60 rather than taking the slow ramp up. … It encourages growth in the organization.

Amber explained that part of the failure of a policy change that the national office tried to implement for state organizations and affiliates was that the national executive director at the time (who was later asked to step down) "had no relationships in the field."

In contrast, the current executive director of the national office started at the state level as an executive director for six years. He also worked for HAO in policy and research roles. She stated that he has "sterling grassroots credential. …People know him; they already trust him." The current executive director of the national organization emphasizes the importance of face-to-face interaction for building trust and regularly visits HAO state organizations throughout the country.

Member recruitment and retention. Personal relationships between staff and members, in addition to personal relationships among members, can also help with recruiting and retaining members. Amber stated, "If there's this sense of connectivity, then people want to draw other people in. If it feels like it's hard work and it's hostile, you don't bring other people into that fire. The organization is then ever shrinking."

Some former members who participated in this study ended their participation due to not getting along with other members. For example, Doris felt alienated when members crossed her privacy boundaries by asking what she felt to be invasive questions. She recounted that members said something like "'Ew, that drug,' and they make a face, and they moan." Good relationships can attract members and poor relationships can hurt an organization's retention.

Discussion

This study resulted in the discovery of strategies for cultivating personal relationships, and it resulted in identifying outcomes of personal relationships in the context of the relationship between a health advocacy organization and its members.

Strategies for Cultivating Personal Relationships

This study produced interpersonal influence strategies and management strategies for cultivating personal relationships. Listed below are interpersonal influence strategies:

- *Direct Engagement:* Regardless of executive status in the organization, a staff person responds to a person's request if he or she can, instead of passing the person to someone else in the organization.

- *Task Sharing:* As identified by Hon and Grunig (1999), task sharing involves partnering with someone to help with a personal duty, such as helping someone move or promoting a person's book.

- *Constitutive Rhetoric:* Constitutive rhetoric is an established strategy in the rhetoric literature that involves presenting a public's identity and ideology within a message (Charland, 1987). Thus, publics are constituted within communication in a way that displays what they should do to uphold their identity. For example, the 1984 Macintosh commercial used constitutive rhetoric to build an anti-establishment identity for Macintosh users (Stein, 2002). In this case study, HAO used constitutive rhetoric to refer to staff and members as part of the HAO family. By constituting staff and members as family members, participants were expected to treat one another as family, and they could expect that the people in the organization would always be there for each other.

- *Peer Linking:* An organization engages in peer linking by cultivating relationships among members of a public, which can in turn bond members to the organization through their shared experiences with it. For example, peer linking could occur by bonding employees together, customers, or in this case, members. Peer linking can contribute to retention.

- *Hat-In-Your-Hand:* This term represents a four-step process for cultivating relationships with diverse communities. The first step is to get to know as much as possible about the desired outreach community. The second step is to partner with a member of the desired community and humbly approach community members together. This person could already be a member of the organization, or this person could be found through associations that are based on aspects of people's identities, such as gender or race. The third step is to listen to the needs of desired communities. The fourth step involves sustaining efforts, even when improvement is not readily attained. Of course, evaluating unsuccessful efforts would also make sense.

In addition, listed below are management strategies for cultivating personal relationships.

- *Investment in Local Relationships:* A multi-tiered organization drives resources to the local level so that the local level can cultivate strong relationships. In this case study, most members evaluated their relationship with HAO based on their experiences with their affiliates – with the exception of highly involved members who made separate assessments about each level of the organization. One staff person posited that trust is built at the local level.

- *Targeting Aware Affiliates:* When deciding which local affiliates to target for personal attention in launching campaigns to build relationships with diverse communities, HAO focuses on the "aware" affiliates who are interested in engaging in diversity outreach but are stopped by constraints. HAO finds that the affiliates who are actively interested in diversity outreach and who are not impeded by constraints will engage in diversity outreach anyway. HAO believes that giving personal attention to uninterested affiliates is not as useful in achieving requisite variety as spending time with aware affiliates.

Outcomes of Personal Relationships

Identifying outcomes of personal relationships provides evidence for the importance of studying cultivation strategies. This study found the following outcomes of personal relationships:

- *Affective Commitment:* Someone who has a high level of affective commitment feels emotionally bonded to the organization (Allen & Meyer, 1990). In this study, strong personal relationships between staff and members resulted in strong emotional bonds for numerous participants in this study. Furthermore, strong personal relationships among members also resulted in many members having high levels of affective commitment for the organization. Mowday, Porter, and Steers (1982), in addition to Gruen (1997), found that affective commitment results in increased participation in a relationship with an organization.

- *Political Leverage:* A staff person with political leverage can use his or her personal relationships with institutionally powerful people to break down barriers and deliver results. In this case, the organization's staff use their personal relationships in the field to overcome obstacles in the health system that members encounter.

- *Social Capital:* According to Lin (2002), social capital refers to "the resources embedded in social networks accessed and used by actors for actions" (pp. 24-25, cited in Ihlen, 2005). In this study, social capital interfered with the former executive director's ability to obtain "buy in" from members, and social capital is one reason why the current executive director has been effective with helping the organization grow and evolve.

- *Member Recruitment and Retention:* Personal relationships can help draw people into an organization and motivate them to stay in the organization. Conversely, unpleasant relationships tend to repel people from an organization.

An important note about these outcomes is that the benefit to the organization seems to be affected in at least some cases by whether people with the personal relationships stay in the organization. Just as people "take their rolodexes with them" when moving to other jobs, their departure can also affect the degree to which publics feel connected with an organization, the amount of political leverage that can be exercised within an organization, an organization's social capital, and even member recruitment and retention. Thus, retaining employees is especially important.

Future Research

This study suggests several areas that would be useful to explore. Exploring the interaction between the outcomes of personal relationships and an organization's reputation would be enlightening.

Furthermore, research in other regions with various types of publics – not just the media – would assist in understanding how to cultivate personal relationships, and it would help with identifying the outcomes of personal relationships.

In addition, further study of how to build and use social capital would be valuable. Scholars should keep in mind that relationship management is the basis for studying social capital. When thinking of social capital as an outcome, it should be understood to function like the construct of reputation: To affect the outcome of social capital, one must manage the underlying relationships (see Grunig & Hung, 2002). Social capital cannot be managed directly (see Yang & Mallabo, 2003).

Another insightful area would involve investigating the barriers to cultivating strong personal relationships and identifying strategies to overcome those barriers in the context of organization-public relationships. In addition, further exploration into efforts to diversify a membership base by cultivating personal relationships could result in great value.

Limitations

Although many of the cultivation strategies and outcomes likely apply to various contexts, some of them may be specific to the context of an advocacy organization that has a grassroots culture and layers of leadership, such as local, state, and national offices. Also, this study represents findings about the organization-public relationship among members in one state area of the national organization I studied. Although focusing on one area enabled depth, it also narrowed the results. Thus, this study did not capture nuances in cultivating personal relationships among different regional cultures of the same organization.

Also, the overwhelming majority of participants were white women, which significantly limits the range of experiences represented. One benefit of studying an organization that lacks requisite variety and seeks it is the ability to investigate the organization's efforts in this area. Studying successes with multicultural outreach was a serendipitous research opportunity.

Finally, conducting participant observation at all levels of the organization or at least at the affiliate level would have enabled a more comprehensive view than confining participant observation to the national office. During interviews, people described their versions of interactions. Witnessing the interactions and having the opportunity to identify and interview people on all sides of the interactions would have provided encompassing insight.

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