

View from the upper echelon: Examining dominant coalition members' values of openness and perceptions of environmental complexity and organizational autonomy

Christopher Wilson

Assistant Professor
Department of Communications
Brigham Young University

Corresponding author:
Christopher Wilson
Cell: (352) 219-4284
Office: (801) 422-0988
Email: chriswilson@byu.edu

Short Abstract

Drawing on insights from systems theory and research on relationships, this study identifies one value (i.e., organizational openness) and two perceptions (i.e., environmental complexity and organizational autonomy) that have the potential to influence dominant coalition members' decision making. The study adopts the upper echelons perspective from organization theory to examine the relationships among these variables.

Abstract

Purpose: Research has shown that decisions about how organizations practice public relations are ultimately the domain of the dominant coalition. However, scholarship has yet to fully examine the values and perceptions that influence dominant coalition members' public relations decisions. Therefore, drawing on insights from systems theory and research on relationships, this study identifies one value (i.e., organizational openness) and two perceptions (i.e., environmental complexity and organizational autonomy) that have the potential to influence dominant coalition members' decision making. In addition, the study adopts the upper echelons perspective from organization theory—which proposes that values serve as a filter through which decision makers form perceptions of their organization's operating environment—to examine the relationships among these variables. It also considers the impact of formal environmental scanning by a public relations department on dominant coalition members' values and perceptions.

Method: The population of interest for this study was dominant coalition members of for-profit businesses, government agencies, and tax-exempt nonprofits in the United States. Data were collected through a national survey employing a purposive sample of 201 dominant coalition members at three for-profit businesses, three government agencies, and four non-profit organizations. These organizations were from the West, Mountain West, Midwest, South, and Southeast regions of the U.S. Both online and paper-and-pencil surveys were used. There were 118 usable questionnaires (58.71% response rate).

Results: As predicted by upper echelons theory, dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness to the environment were positively related to their perceptions of environmental complexity. As predicted by systems theory and the power-control literature, dominant coalition members' perceptions of environmental complexity were positively related to their perceptions of organizational autonomy. Also, dominant coalition members at the 10 participating organizations placed a high degree of importance on organizational autonomy. In addition, the frequency of the public relations department's use of formal environmental scanning was positively related to dominant coalition members' perceptions of environmental complexity.

Practical Implications: This study suggests that organizational autonomy is important to dominant coalition members. Perceptions of autonomy can be a motivating factor in high-level decisions about public relations. These perceptions of autonomy are based on values dominant coalition members hold about being open to their organization's environment and about how complex that environment is. While it may be difficult to influence values, public relations departments can influence dominant coalition members' perceptions of the environment by frequently conducting formal environmental scanning. As a result, practitioners should use rigorous social scientific research methods that provide decision makers with actionable data instead of relying on informal methods and gut instincts.

Theoretical Contributions: This study contributes to the power-control literature in public relations by incorporating insights from organization theory that had not previously been adopted. Prior scholarship proposed that organizational autonomy and openness to the environment were important dominant coalition variables; however, only a few studies have attempted to measure either concept. The study developed and tested a new scale to measure perceived organizational autonomy. It also introduced a measurement scale from consulting practice to measure dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness.