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**Towards a Sequential, Integrated,
Sustainable Organization-
Stakeholder Relationship (Sisosr)
Model: A Strategic Perspective for
Building Stakeholder Partnerships**

**Yolandi Slabbert
Lecturer Department of Communication Science
University of South Africa (Unisa)
South Africa**

Athens Institute for Education and Research
8 Valaoritou Street, Kolonaki, 10671 Athens, Greece
Tel: + 30 210 3634210 Fax: + 30 210 3634209
Email: info@atiner.gr URL: www.atiner.gr
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**Towards a Sequential, Integrated, Sustainable Organization-
Stakeholder Relationship (Sisosr) Model:
A Strategic Perspective for Building Stakeholder Partnerships¹**

Yolandi Slabbert
Lecturer Department of Communication Science
University of South Africa (Unisa)
South Africa

Abstract

The success of organizations today is largely dependent on how stakeholders perceive the organization which could be ascribed to the turbulent external organizational environment; pressure on organizations to report on the social and environmental impacts of their organizational activities; prevalence of public activism, globalization, increasing emergence of organizational issues and crises, and the need for organizations to be regarded as good corporate citizens through ethical and socially responsible behaviour. This dominant focus on organizational stakeholders has provided ‘added impetus and importance to the role of corporate communication’ (Malmelin, 2007) which emphasises the significance of practicing communication strategically. Despite the current emphasis on stakeholder relations and management, a lack of research indicating how to *build* these relationships is evident from this existing literature. This paper aims to explore the lack of OSR building models that emphasise the elements and development of an organization-stakeholder relationship (OSR) and highlight the need for a generic, strategic, integrated approach for sustainable OSR to contribute towards organizational effectiveness. This will be done by an exploratory literature review to constitute a conceptual framework for OSR building which will further be explored among leading Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) listed, South African organizations, by means of qualitative one-on-one interviews to build towards a sequential, integrated, sustainable OSR (SISOSR) model that provides guidance on the process of OSR building. Simultaneously, this study will also highlight as a secondary aim the importance of practicing corporate communication strategically by emphasising the role thereof in OSR, as *stakeholder relations are the heartbeat of corporate communication* (Luoma-aho & Paloviita, 2010).

Keywords:

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¹This paper is based on the main qualitative findings of Slabbert’s doctoral thesis titled ‘A strategic sequential, integrated, sustainable organization-stakeholder relationship (SISOSR) model for building stakeholder partnerships: a corporate communication perspective’.

Introduction

According to Heath (2008), organizations should rely on the goodwill of stakeholders for survival, while Maak (2007) contends that ‘stakeholders expect organizations to take a more active role and thus acknowledge their co-responsibility vis-à-vis the pressing problems’. Goodwin (2003) argues that organization-stakeholder relationships (OSRs) should be proactively built with strategic stakeholders to achieve the long-term objective of creating value for both the organization and stakeholder. Ulmer, Sellnow and Seeger (2007) and Valackiene (2010) state that *partnerships* with strategic stakeholders should be built in order to maximise organizational performance.

An example of the movement towards stakeholder centricity in South Africa is that the King III Report, released on 1 September 2009, included for the first time a chapter to provide guidelines on how to govern stakeholder relationships, which all listed South African organizations on the JSE are supposed to apply to. The purpose of the King Report is to ensure that South African organizations are at the forefront of international governance standards (King III Report, 2009).

Numerous authors specifically highlight the significance of OSRs and corporate communication. For example, Luoma-aho and Paloviita (2010) maintain that stakeholder relations are the essence of corporate communication, while Thiessen and Ingenhof (2011) posit that stakeholder relationships can serve as a resource in any difficult corporate communication situation and that the function of OSR building should be fulfilled by corporate communication professionals. According to Cornelissen (2005), corporate communication is concerned with the organisation as a whole in relation to the central task of how the organisation is presented to its stakeholders.

Despite this acknowledgement of the significance of OSRs, there is a lack of research indicating how to actually *build* these relationships (Bridges & Nelson, 2000; Kim, 2007). Noland and Phillips (2010) argue that many studies focus on the ‘attributes of the organizations or the attributes of the stakeholders rather than on the *attributes of the relationship* between organizations and stakeholders’. According to the literature, future developments of the stakeholder theory should acknowledge that there is a lack of models to manage stakeholder relationships more efficiently (Freeman, Harrison, Wicks, Parmar & De Colle, 2010), which for the purpose of this study, begins with the way in which these stakeholder relationships are *built*. Against this background, the purpose of this paper is to address the research problem of *exploring the lack of existing OSR models to describe the OSR-building process and to address the need to develop a new model that offers a strategic, integrated approach for sustainable OSRs in order to build organization-stakeholder partnerships (OSPs) as a function of corporate communication to contribute towards organizational effectiveness*. To address this research problem a conceptual framework for OSR building will be devised based on an exploration of the literature and will further be explored in practice to build

towards a sequential, integrated, sustainable organization-stakeholder relationship (SISOSR) model.

Defining Key Concepts

The following key concepts need to be defined in the context of this study.

Corporate communication: It could be defined as *an umbrella term for all internal and external strategic communication with the core purpose of building and maintaining sustainable OSR with strategic stakeholders to contribute to organizational success.*

Strategic stakeholder: It is those *internal and/or external organizational groups that have a continuous high degree of stakeholder salience with which the organization shares a reciprocal interest that should be nurtured through proactive, mutually beneficial relationship building to ensure organizational survival.* This definition, however, requires the following considerations: Firstly, since this study proposes a *generic, holistic approach to OSRs that is not industry focused*, specific strategic stakeholders cannot be identified as the situation will vary for each organization, depending on the industry and the organization's business activities. Secondly, both internal and external stakeholders may be strategic. This reflects Freeman's (2010:26) call for integrated approaches to manage multiple internal and external stakeholder groups. Thirdly, since this definition proposes that strategic stakeholders are the most important stakeholders it suggests that organizations will only have a few strategic stakeholders.

Organization-stakeholder relationship (OSR): It constitutes a foundational OSR (basic OSR) and is defined as *the result of the management of common interests between the organization and strategic stakeholder(s) over time in order to achieve mutually beneficial goals through a high degree of reciprocity and continuous two-way symmetrical communication.*

A Conceptual Framework for OSR Building

The proposed conceptual framework for an eventual OSR building model holds the following characteristics: It is *sequential* as a three phase, process approach to OSR building will be presented where one phase is dependent on the successful completion of the previous phase. An *integrated* perspective will be provided whereby relational concepts that are often study independently will be integrated into one model. The framework will promote a *sustainable* process through the proposition of a partnership approach towards OSR building with strategic stakeholders in which the ideal conditions are presented to ensure that a basic OSR is maintained to grow and evolve into an eventual OSP. Although the framework will focus on strategic stakeholders, the framework will be *generic* and not applied to a specific strategic stakeholder group, industry or communication situation. The framework will promote a

proactive approach to OSR building. Therefore, the proposed framework is not focused on active publics and/or secondary stakeholders since the purpose of engaging with these groups are short term and there is arguably no need to build and maintain sustainable relationships with these groups. The conceptual framework will focus on promoting proactive OSR-building with strategic stakeholders, those stakeholders that will always be evident and relevant over time. The building blocks of the conceptual framework for OSR building are as follows.

Building block 1: Strategic communication foundation

The strategic communication foundation constitutes the foundational prerequisites that are essential for a successful OSR-building process, and includes the practice of *two-way symmetrical communication* and the integration of *essential corporate communication functions*.

- Two-way symmetrical communication:

The literature indicates that two-way symmetrical communication is characterised by a consideration of stakeholder interests when making organizational decisions; responsive communication and timeous feedback; collaboration and negotiation; interdependency; message consistency; openness; truthfulness and fundamentality; mutual understanding and shared vision; and collaborative problem solving (Bishop, 2006; Burchell & Cook, 2006; Grunig, 2006). This study supports Johansen and Nielsen's (2011) perspective that '... traditional unidirectional means of stakeholder communication must be replaced or replenished by two-way communication', which implies that two-way symmetrical communication will represent an interactive communication process concerned with establishing a balanced dialogue *between the organization and strategic stakeholders* in order to stimulate transparency and sincerity with a view to building mutually beneficial OSRs (Lubbe, 1994). Furthermore, according to Grunig, Grunig and Dozier (2002), corporate communication can only contribute towards organizational effectiveness by practising two-way symmetrical communication to build and maintain OSRs. Two-way symmetrical communication therefore provides the fundamental grounding for the successful implementation of a sustainable, partnership approach to OSR building.

- Essential corporate communication functions for OSR building:

a) *Research: environmental scanning and evaluation research*: Bruning (2002) argues that to build mutually beneficial OSR the communication needs of stakeholders have to be fulfilled, which is made possible through research which consists of *environmental scanning* and *evaluation research*. Environmental scanning is research aimed at detecting problems and assessing the status quo, whereas evaluation research is aimed at evaluating the planning, implementation and effect of corporate communication strategies (Dozier & Repper, 1992). Both environmental scanning and evaluation research will arguably be relevant throughout the OSR- building process. *Evaluation research* is accepted in this study as a two-pronged approach where it should,

firstly, be applied during the strategic stakeholder identification phase of the proposed model to determine these strategic stakeholders' needs and expectations. Secondly, evaluation research also becomes relevant during OSR maintenance to determine whether these relational needs and expectations are being met to sustain the OSR and thus to ensure that the OSR grows in intensity to an eventual OSP. *Environmental scanning* should be applied as a continuous process throughout the OSR-building process to detect issues of concern that could harm the OSR-building process.

b) Issues management: It can be defined as a process that manages impeding issues and their potential to interfere with the operations of the organization (Heath, 1997). It will be proposed that issues management should be conducted throughout the OSR-building process. Issues that have been identified through environmental scanning, which could range from active publics, potential crises and/or conflict resolution between relational parties, should be managed and resolved to avoid damaging the OSR-building process.

c) Reputation management: According to Romenti (2010), corporate communication plays a crucial role in developing an organization's reputation by listening to stakeholder expectations, addressing these concerns with planned strategies and establishing sustainable relationships with strategic stakeholders. For the purpose of this study, Thiessen and Ingenhoff's (2010) perception that reputation management is the aggregate of individual perceptions of an *organization's past performance and future outlook* and that reputation management is regarded as '*relational capital*' that strengthens relationships and builds trust; it is the organization's 'reservoir of goodwill' is supported. From this perspective it is argued that a positive organizational reputation is a prerequisite for adequate OSR building with *strategic* stakeholders, and that corporate communication professionals should also manage the reputation of the organization throughout the OSR-building process.

d) Knowledge sharing enabled by a culture of knowledge: Knowledge sharing implies that stakeholders are recognised 'as *partners* who create both economic and social value through *collaborative* problem solving' (Halal 2001). It is argued that knowledge sharing occurs on the foundation of an internal organizational culture that allows employees to create, share and utilize knowledge (Ribiére & Sitar, 2010). Knowledge sharing is proposed as an element to build sustainable OSRs. It is argued that knowledge sharing between a strategic stakeholder and the organization will only occur once a mutually beneficial OSR has been established.

Building block 2: Theoretical foundation

This foundation represents an integration of the most prominent theories and concepts utilized in OSR building literature and includes Freeman's (1984) stakeholder concept from a normative, relational perspective; Ferguson's (1984) relational paradigm and Ledingham's (2003) theory of relationship management, which, in essence are encapsulated by Grunig's (1984) excellence theory.

It is argued that the *stakeholder concept from a normative, relational paradigm*, which is orientated towards establishing OSRs in an ethical and morally acceptable framework removed from economic interests (Donaldson & Preston, 1995), makes a fourfold contribution to OSR building. Firstly, it emphasises the need for a wider, stakeholder mindset in the organization and promoted proactive OSR building. Secondly, it highlights the fact that the success of the organization depends on collaboration between the organization and its strategic stakeholders. Thirdly, it emphasised that an OSR should be based on ethical principles, which make the practice of two-way symmetrical communication relevant. Lastly, it underscores the fact that management decision making should contribute to elevating the corporate communication function as the means for OSR building, to the desired strategic level. In conjunction with the stakeholder concept, the collection of ideas and propositions put forth by *Ferguson's relational paradigm* can be regarded as the starting point and foundation for the development of corporate communication as OSR building function. Ferguson (1984) argued that the relationship between the organization and publics should be the unit of analysis as opposed to focusing on the organization and its publics as distinct entities. The *relationship management theory* makes an affirmative contribution to this study because it helps to define the function of corporate communication, it provides a process for determining the contribution of corporate communication to achieve organizational goals and it emphasises that corporate communication should focus on establishing mutual understanding and benefits for both the organization and stakeholders (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000).

The *excellence theory* is an umbrella term for an integrated collection of middle-range theories that were utilized in a study at the IABC Research Foundation to explain the value of corporate communication to an organization and to identify the specific characteristics of corporate communication that contribute to organizational effectiveness (Grunig & Grunig, 2008). It could be argued for the purpose of this paper that the implementation of an excellent communication function supports the principles of the stakeholder concept, the relationship management paradigm and relationship management theories because it allows the development of strategic communication programmes for various strategic stakeholders (the stakeholder concept); it focuses on the *relationship* between the organization and stakeholders (the relationship management paradigm); and it proposes a two-way symmetrical communication process to allow the establishment of mutually beneficial OSR (the relationship management theory and stakeholder concept). Furthermore, the excellence theory specifically emphasises the need to practise corporate communication strategically and the way in which corporate communication can contribute to the overall strategic management of the organization. Hence, it is posited that the implementation of an excellent communication function is not only a prerequisite for OSR building, but it also encapsulates the essence of the stakeholder concept (from a normative paradigm and relational perspective), relational paradigm and the relationship management theory.

Building block 3: Conceptualization of OSR building

The third building block of the proposed conceptual framework constitutes the *OSR-building process* and is specifically concerned with the actual phases and subphases of the proposed conceptual framework for OSR building.

- Phase 1: strategic stakeholder identification

Based on an exploration of various stakeholder categorisation and mapping techniques and theories the following methodology for strategic stakeholder identification is proposed for this study: Strategic stakeholders should have stakeholder salience (mutual power dependence, legitimacy and urgency); the benefit of building an OSR with strategic stakeholders should outweigh the costs; and a high level of involvement in one another's business activities should exist.

- Phase 2: OSR development

The following factors are considered in this phase: OSR antecedents; OSR elements; the unique proposition of an OSR development continuum consisting of four OSR types; and stakeholder engagement as an OSR outcome.

OSR antecedents: It is evident from the literature that prior to the development of an OSR, various *OSR antecedents* exist (Kim, 2007), which are essentially those conditions on which an OSR depends. According to the literature, the following four OSR antecedents are prevalent: trustworthiness, organization-stakeholder association, mutual consequence and expectations (Kim & Radar, 2010) which will be explored to serve as a subphase preceding *OSR development* for the proposed OSR-building model.

OSR elements: The following are considered as elements of an OSR, namely trust, control mutuality, relational satisfaction, relational commitment and mutual understanding (Stafford & Canary, 1991; Grunig & Huang, 2000).

OSR development continuum: Studying the elements of an OSR also necessitates an investigation into existing OSR types. Since the proposed OSR-building model will provide a partnership approach to OSRs, an *OSR development continuum* that highlights four unique OSR types is proposed. It is argued that an OSR could grow in intensity over time from a *foundational OSR* (a basic OSR as defined earlier) to a *mutually beneficial OSR* (an OSR characterised by a high degree of reciprocity, compromise and true concern on the part of the organization and strategic stakeholder for the wellbeing of one another) to a *sustainable OSR* (a relational state in which the organization and strategic stakeholder act in the best interest of each other evident through shared meaning and decision making to achieve mutually-beneficial objectives; both the organization and strategic stakeholder(s) observe the benefit of cooperatively working towards attaining relational objectives), and ultimately to an *OSP* (a foundational OSR practiced over a long period of time to reach the level of two-way engagement, characterised by a mutual experience of stewardship, where both the organization and strategic stakeholder join in collaborative problem solving to achieve mutually desired end goals). This OSR development continuum is in line with an OSR characteristic mentioned earlier, namely that a relationship is a process and evolves in intensity over time. The relationship can also be defined at different points in the OSR

development process (hence the proposition of four OSR types across the OSR development continuum, whereby a foundational OSR will be presented as a basic OSR and OSP as an advanced OSR). This OSR development continuum will also be aligned with the phases of the proposed OSR-building model. It is also suggested that a foundational OSR is predominantly initiated by the organization and as the OSR strengthens partial mutual initiation will be evident and full mutual initiation from both the strategic stakeholder and organization at OSP level is evident.

Stakeholder engagement as an OSR outcome: Various theorists argue that once an OSR has been established, certain *OSR outcomes* will exist, which may include control mutuality, trust, satisfaction and commitment (Grunig & Huang, 2000). Since the outcomes are accepted as OSR elements for the purpose of this study, *stakeholder engagement* is uniquely explored as an OSR outcome and a subphase after OSR development, whereby the organization starts to engage stakeholders in its business activities (Noland & Phillips, 2010). Stakeholder engagement will be regarded as a more advanced OSR activity which requires an OSR to be in place to ensure stakeholder engagement because the process of stakeholder engagement is a strategy to strengthen the foundational OSR into a mutually beneficial OSR. It is further proposed that *two-way engagement* will be experienced at OSP level, whereby both the strategic stakeholder and organization involve one another in their business activities.

- Phase 3: OSR maintenance

The OSR development continuum proposes that once a foundational OSR has been established, it should be nurtured to grow in intensity to evolve into a mutually beneficial OSR, a sustainable OSR and ultimately an OSP. This perspective is sometimes contradicted in the literature, as many theorists argue that an OSR is dynamic and in continuous flux (Rensburg & Cant, 2009) and cannot be maintained. However, for the purpose of this study, maintenance encapsulates the nurturing of an OSR. This is in line with Stafford and Canary's (1991) perspective that a continuous relationship requires maintenance – especially when a staged, process approach is proposed for OSR building. As mentioned previously, *evaluation research* should also be conducted during this stage to determine whether relational needs are being met. Possible *symmetrical conflict resolution strategies* (which also forms part of issues management) could also be considered as part of OSR maintenance.

Research Methodology

Although Slabbert's doctoral thesis used triangulation as research design (quantitative web-based survey and one-on-one interviews), only the key findings of the qualitative results of Slabbert's study will be reported due to the limitations of this paper.

The population of Slabbert's thesis comprised leading South African organizations listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE). The rationale

for selecting these organizations was that listed South African organizations are expected to apply the principles of the King III Report (King III Report 2009), which, among others, include the principles on governing stakeholder relations, as mentioned earlier. It was therefore assumed that these organizations would have sufficient stakeholder relations management strategies in place to enable the researcher to glean key insights. To specifically obtain a population of *leading* listed South African organizations, the *Financial Mail* Top Companies SA Giants for 2011 (SA Giants, 2011) was utilized, which is an index that ranks 200 South African organizations on the basis of their total assets. The sample of the study comprised 53 senior communication professionals (the collective term used for executives responsible for stakeholder relations and management) from leading listed South African organizations in the *Financial Mail's* SA Giants list for 2011. Only 36 respondents completed the web-based survey and eight participants of this realised sample agreed to participate in the follow-up interviews, which included two senior communication professionals from Absa, Barloworld, Reunert, Clover Industries, Life Health Care, Liberty Holdings and two senior communication professionals from First National Bank. The nonprobability sampling methods employed to constitute the realised sample were both *purposive* and *convenient*.

A combination of Creswell's (1998) analytic spiral and Marshall and Rossman's (1999) analysis process was used to analyse the interview data. Trustworthiness was presented as an alternative for establishing reliability and validity in qualitative research and was established through the elements of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson & Spiers, 2002).

Reporting and Discussion of Key Findings

The key findings from the one-on-one interviews pertaining to the three building blocks and subsequent amendments to the proposed conceptual framework to build towards a SISOSR model are as follows:

- Participants indicated that *ethics and values* should be integrated as an essential corporate communication function of the proposed strategic communication foundation. One participant stated that '...relationships cannot be built with contrasting ethics and values between the organization and stakeholder'.
- Based on comments of participants that 'it is necessary to establish what these identified strategic stakeholder perceptions of the organization are' and '...a stakeholder dipstick analysis was conducted...we went out to the market and measured the perception of the organization among stakeholders, which turned out to be very different from what we perceived it would be', it is proposed that a *strategic stakeholder perception analysis (SSPA)* should be included in the strategic stakeholder identification phase of the proposed model because it will be necessary to study the perceptions

of the strategic stakeholders prior to OSR building as this could influence the relationship-building approach. It should be noted that although it was argued earlier that the aggregate perceptions of all internal and external stakeholders should be positive (positive organizational reputation), the specific perceptions of the *strategic* stakeholders should be determined by means of this analysis. The SSPA will also inform the proposed OSR antecedents. Furthermore, it is possible that the SSPA will also detect certain stakeholder issues that could be addressed in the *stakeholder engagement* phase of the model.

- Some participants stated that ‘a platform is required to start engaging’ and ‘our stakeholder engagement process is very issue orientated...instead of focusing on the day-to-day interactions, we focus on the deep seeded stakeholder issues that are relevant to stakeholders and will impact our business strategy’. This implies that organizations have to take stock of the foundational OSR once it has been built. This means that the organization needs to conduct *OSR evaluation* to identify strategic stakeholder issues that could be addressed in the stakeholder engagement phase of the model to further strengthen the OSR. It should be noted that this ‘stakeholder issue identification’ is separate from the environmental scanning and subsequent issues management process of the organization as a whole, which focus on identifying any organizational issues that may hinder the OSR-building process. Identifying stakeholder issues in OSR evaluation will identify pertinent areas on which stakeholders would like to focus, for example, employees who have identified the need for a career development programme in the organization. The sole purpose of OSR evaluation is to detect stakeholder issues as a means to strengthen the OSR. Further evaluation research, as proposed by this model, will still have to be conducted during OSR maintenance to measure the OSR quality and to determine whether relational expectations are being met.
- The interview participants indicated that although most stakeholder relationships are built from an organization’s outward perspective, an OSR can also be initiated by stakeholders and not only the organization, as suggested earlier. One interview participant indicated that the initiation of an OSR also ‘depends on who has the resources’. The initial proposition of *organizational initiation*, *partial mutual initiation* and *full initiation* of the OSR-building process will be replaced with *mutual organization-stakeholder initiation* throughout the OSR-building process. Although it often happens that an organizational-outward approach will be followed, that is, where the organization is the driver of the OSR, this may be reversed in some instances, depending on the particular organization and industry. Since this model adopts a generic, cross-industry approach, it will have to make provision for the possibility that the organization may also be approached by a strategic stakeholder.
- Besides the OSR elements proposed earlier, a *reciprocal value system* was also emphasised as a key OSR element by some participants: ‘One cannot build sustainable OSR when relational parties have conflicting values’.

- Strategic stakeholders must be included as part of the evaluation research during OSR maintenance to determine whether relational needs and expectations are being met: ‘...include stakeholders to see whether relational needs are continuously being met’.
- According to some of the participants, the practice of stakeholder inclusivity in a partnership entails appointing *stakeholder panels* at organizational board level, which means that representatives of each strategic stakeholder group would be *actively involved* in decision making to represent their respective stakeholder groups. Inviting stakeholders to participate in such panels would promote *collaborative problem solving*, which was proposed as an element of an OSP. This implies that the proposed definition of OSP has to be amended to highlight this stakeholder inclusivity: An OSP is a *foundational OSR practiced over a long period of time to reach the level of two-way engagement, whereby stakeholders are actively involved at organizational board level to promote a mutual experience of stewardship and collaborative problem solving*.
- Participants indicated that ‘part of stakeholder methodology is to prioritise issues’. It should be noted that the partnership approach towards OSR building proposed by the SISOSR model is applicable to an organization’s *strategic* stakeholders specifically. The secondary stakeholders of the organization should be managed on a ‘prioritisation of needs and/or issues’ basis, since there may not be a need for the organization to maintain these relationships. However, to successfully address these secondary stakeholder issues, partnerships with the organization’s strategic stakeholders should be in place, which could serve as the necessary basis for addressing these secondary stakeholder needs and/or issues. Although some of the principles of the proposed SISOSR model will remain applicable, the successful management of secondary stakeholder needs and/or issues constitutes a different approach and stakeholder management model altogether. Furthermore, the emergence of active publics also requires a reactive management approach, which is a topic for possible future research.

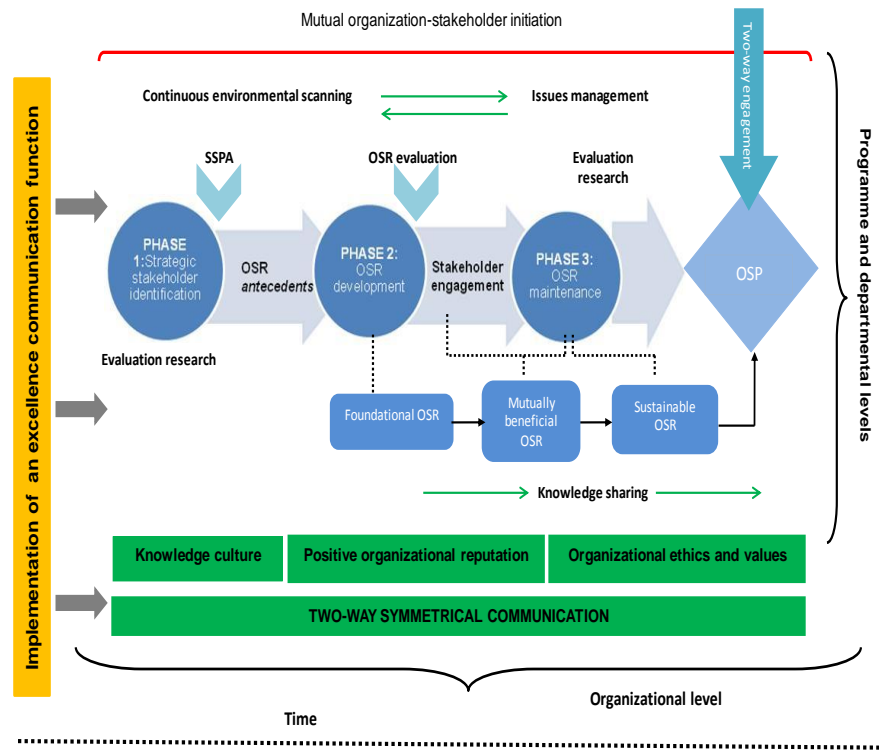
Based on the literature and key findings from the interview, Figure 1 provides an illustration of the proposed SISOSR model for building stakeholder partnerships.

Figure 1 indicates that a partnership approach to OSR building with strategic stakeholders requires the establishment of a knowledge culture in the organization and ensuring a positive organizational reputation that is aligned with the organization’s ethics and values. The corporate communication department requires the integration of the excellence communication function, which is made possible by adopting a two-way symmetrical communication worldview which the executives of the organization share. Continuous environmental scanning should be conducted to detect issues of concern which should be managed to avoid organizational crises and the emergence of active publics that could damage the OSR-building process. The actual OSR-building

process requires formal methods to identify strategic stakeholders, in which evaluation research plays a critical role to identify relational needs and expectations, followed by a strategic stakeholder perception analysis (SSPA) to determine the perceptions of these strategic stakeholders of the organization, since this could affect the OSR-building approach. This analysis will also inform the various OSR antecedents on which a foundational OSR will be built. Once a foundational OSR has been established, which could be initiated either by the organization or the stakeholder (mutual organization-stakeholder initiation), it should be evaluated to identify stakeholder issues to engage stakeholders. This method is congruent with the process of knowledge sharing between the organization and strategic stakeholders to strengthen the relationship into a mutually beneficial OSR. The OSR should further be maintained to allow the mutually beneficial OSR to evolve into a sustainable relationship. It is essential during OSR maintenance to conduct evaluation research to determine whether relational expectations are being met to allow the sustainable OSR to further grow into a partnership. At OSP level, both the organization and stakeholder act as stewards for each other and collaborative problem solving and two-way engagement are promoted by stakeholders who become actively involved at organizational board level, which emphasises *stakeholder inclusivity*. The principles of the strategic communication foundation (building block 1) are applied on organizational level; the theoretical foundation (building block 2) are applied on organizational, programme and departmental levels and; the conceptualization of OSR building (building block 3) are applied on programme and departmental levels. Lastly, Figure 1 highlights that these OSPs are built *over time*.

Executive buy-in of such an approach to OSR building driven by corporate communication could have the following implications in practice: A substantial change in the mindset of the organization at board and executive level is required because the corporate communication department in the organization needs to be expanded and elevated, since, according to one interview participant, 'stakeholder relations takes time and resources'. In line with the issues relating to the credibility of corporate communication, the term 'corporate communication' should arguably be replaced with the term 'stakeholder relations' in order to emphasise more effectively corporate communication's required contribution in the organization and to start moving away from the perception of corporate communication as a predominant media, publicity and messenger function. Lastly, all strategic stakeholders should be of equal importance to the organization – hence no prioritisation criteria (which are more applicable to secondary stakeholders and/or active publics) are suggested for *strategic* stakeholders. Hence, a different stakeholder specialist (referring to senior communication professionals) should be appointed for each strategic stakeholder group to ensure simultaneous OSP building with all strategic stakeholders and that these OSPs with strategic stakeholders could be essential to effectively address secondary stakeholder claims and/or to manage active publics.

Figure 1. A Sequential, integrated, sustainable OSR (SISOSR) model for building OSP



Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

The following limitations apply: The SISOSR model could be regarded as normative as it portrays the ideal OSR development process; the qualitative results of the study cannot be generalised since non-probability sampling was utilized; and since this study proposed an OSR building approach for strategic stakeholders, it tended to give a one-sided approach. Although organizations need to be able to manage a web of stakeholder claims, OSPs with strategic stakeholders should be in place as a necessary foundation to successfully prioritise secondary stakeholder claims and manage the emergence of active publics.

The following recommendations could be made for future research: The principles of this model could be used as a basis for a customised OSR-building model for a specific strategic stakeholder group, organization and/or industry; a longitudinal study could be conducted to test the workability of the SISOSR model at a specific organisation; more insights in terms of OSR building in practice could be obtained with a larger population; this model

could be used as a basis for the development of a model for working relationships with secondary stakeholders that should adopt an issue prioritisation approach or active publics that require a reactive management approach; and the perspectives on OSR building could perhaps be obtained from external PR/communication agencies, as various organizations make use of such external sources as oppose to in-house corporate communication departments.

Conclusion

This study aimed to address the lack of models to describe the OSR building process through the proposition of a SISOSR model whereby strategic stakeholder identification, OSR development and OSR maintenance should be combined into one model to offer a phased, step-by-step guideline for OSR building. The SISOSR model could also lay the necessary foundation to develop working relationships with secondary stakeholders and/or to manage active publics. Since this study was approached from a corporate communication perspective, it should be emphasised that the value of corporate communication, as an OSR-building function contributing to organizational effectiveness could be elevated to a strategic function.

The key essence of this paper is probably best explained in the words of Maak (2007): ‘... businesses and their leaders are increasingly held accountable for what they do – and fail to do so by multiple stakeholders and society at large ... good stakeholder relationships are key to organizational viability and business success’

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