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❖ **Harrison, Kim – *Strategic Public Relations: A Practical Guide to Success* – Palgrave Macmillan, South Yarra, 2011, pp. 900 ISBN: 9781420256383**

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In this substantially revised second edition of a 2008 original (Century Consulting Group), Kim Harrison sets out to address both academic requirements and those of the national professional body: the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA). Harrison notes that the book is not intended as an introduction to public relations, but assumes fundamental knowledge of the discipline. He also declares that the publication addresses both theory and the practical factors that equip students to enter the profession. These aims have been met quite well. That noted, the title of the book does suggest a profound focus on strategy and it here that the reviewer offers a more qualified recommendation.

The book's opening chapter focuses on definitions of public relations, though never identifies the common themes that underpin almost all public relations endeavour – the development, maintenance and defence of reputation. Significantly however, Harrison observes that PR practitioners are increasingly aligned with the management of organisations and therefore need to take a strategic approach to their work. He also observes that organisations and practitioners alike are increasingly aware of the importance of non-financial assets (here he mentions reputation, the greatest of these), and that there is a new focus on triple-bottom-line reporting. While this may have been linked to notions of return on investment (ROI) which Harrison gets to in his chapter 12, the point is nonetheless one well made – even though this is only one aspect of stakeholder communication that impacts on organisational reputation. The concluding section on the challenges faced by professional communicators is particularly apposite, and promises to inform a focus on strategy.

Harrison's second chapter (I do not propose to trawl through them all) considers the history of public relations, while the third gets to the meat: the theoretical foundations of the discipline and practice. Here, Harrison rehearses the key theories – Grunig's models; systems theory; the hypodermic model; Maslow's hierarchy, framing and agenda-setting theory; and the theory of social exchange – before moving to some less well-known (but nonetheless crucial) cultural theories. While there is a sense that these theories and models somehow inform PR strategy and practice, beyond a discussion of each there is no attempt to interrogate the underlying dynamics of strategic endeavour and to *foreground* the role of theory as a driver of strategy. This is something missing from discussion about communication strategy generally and there is no development of this key concept in Harrison's otherwise excellent chapter on strategy development in the context of a communications plan.

Within this chapter however, there is an intuitive sense of the need for coherence and structure that theory, when properly mobilised, can provide. While this chapter reverts to the usual 'aims, objectives, project, campaign, program' paradigm that focuses on process and tactics rather than on strategic progenitors, there is however, an important departure. On page 331 Harrison observes that it is important that communication strategy be tied to corporate plans. In a sense this highlights a consciousness of grand strategy – see Botan & Hazleton, *Public Relations Theory II*, 2006 p. 223ff) – the top tier of a strategic hierarchy that inevitably informs all subsequent strategy and tactical endeavour. But the ball is dropped as Harrison then segues to implementation, outcomes, and assessment.

Where the (perhaps inaptly) named *Strategic Public Relations* is on far firmer ground is in the territory of ethics and in the nuts and bolts of implementation, outcomes, and assessment. Chapter 11 titled 'Implementation of a Communication Plan', ironically positions Maslow's hierarchy as a driver of certain key messages but the emphasis here is on the less 'strategic' persuasion-focused elements of a plan rather than on mobilising theories that have far-reaching significance in terms of encompassing (or framing) an entire program. Still, the discussion is more than useful (in fact uncommonly clear), and to a relative novice, Harrison's work on the use of language would be particularly valuable. For instance, few public relations publications consider New Critical technique as important to the business of framing – page 377 for example, considers the power of metaphor.

Strategic Public Relations' chapter on measurement and evaluation is very strong, and offers perspectives on a topic that is, more often than not, dealt with on a 'once over lightly' basis. Of particular interest is Harrison's work on ROI. Over three informative pages (pp. 421-423), the author defines ROI, discusses the connection between communication and improved performance and cautions against a slavish focus on ROI in its narrowest sense.

With the exception of a chapter on creativity (which I address shortly), the balance of *Strategic Public Relations* traverses mundane topics that are nonetheless, of interest to all professional communicators. These include: the development of an annual communication plan; the dynamics and processes of internal communication; dealing with the media; marketing communication; sponsorship and corporate philanthropy; community engagement/relations; corporate social responsibility; crisis communication; and government relations.

In concluding this review, I return to the notion of creativity in a public relations context. While Harrison's perspectives here are entirely valid, missing is the idea that it is in the development of a strategic framework itself (often interdisciplinary in nature), that creativity might best be exhibited. As an epigraph to his chapter on creativity, Harrison appropriately quotes Alan Rosenspan who argues that 'creativity is ... the art of problem-solving.' So it is, except that strategic endeavour (that which addresses a problem), is both an art and a science. What Harrison's book does not get to then, is the idea that at the heart of all strategic endeavour is an artful impulse or intuition – the inspired choice of a model or theory that in some sense encompasses a problem – buttressed by an immutable set of powerful, intersecting strategic principles. As a 'practical guide to success' then, *Strategic Public Relations* works well enough. In fact, given its enormous range and its cogent discussion around tactics and process especially, it might be said to work very well indeed and may be recommended as a first/second year text. But as a guide to strategic design, it must be said that it is far less useful. But then the definitive book on communication strategy is yet to be written.

About the reviewer

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