

Corporate Communication Leadership and Ethics in the Mud of Everyday Life

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Abstract: The ethical significance of corporate communication leadership in the mud of everyday life is the focus of this paper. In today's world, human institutions and organizations rely primarily on corporate communication leadership to shape the way the public looks at them. They do so through strategic planning and control of day-to-day communicative activities, both internally and externally. Using *Corporate Communication Crisis Leadership: Advocacy and Ethics* by Ronald C. Arnett, Sarah M. Deluliis, and Michael Corr (2017) as my starting point and drawing from everyday examples, I suggest that constructive corporate communication leadership ought to be prioritized, protected, and promoted in the mud of everyday life. Current corporate communication leadership deals with internal and external audiences in an era of ethical dispute, especially rooted in social justice questions concerning issues such as gender inequality, race-based discrimination, and access to healthcare. In this era, organizations value diversity, flexibility, and responsiveness. Attentiveness to these values is an important reminder that corporate communication leaders must pay attention to the issues that matter to their various audiences and the environment within which they exist and function. Such leadership takes time to emerge and develop.

Keywords: corporate communication; thoughtful leadership; communication ethics; organizations; institutions; mud of everyday life

Introduction

This essay discusses the significance of corporate communication leadership in the mud of everyday life. The discussion centers on the need to be attentive to the effects that strategic corporate communication decisions can have on the everyday lives of people, especially stakeholders who are directly connected to the organizations or corporate institutions that make such decisions. Another goal of

this paper is to honor the work and legacy of Ronald C. Arnett,³ whose scholarship on communication ethics and corporate communication leadership deals with issues that impact people in the mud of everyday life (e.g., Arnett 2022; Arnett, DeLuliis, and Corr 2017). Arnett demonstrates through his scholarship a commitment to the value of work and ideas. For example, Arnett (2018) traces the historical development of communication ethics, acknowledging the work done by previous scholars while offering his own thoughtful perspective and understanding of communication ethics.

Generally, institutions and organizations rely primarily on corporate communication to shape how they are perceived by the public through strategic planning and control of day-to-day communicative activities, both internally and externally. I liken these activities to human beings taking care of their bodies daily through personal hygiene, exercise, physical and mental healthcare, spiritual care, and interpersonal interaction. Organizations likewise take care of themselves to ensure their sustainability through planning, discipline, trust, ethical rhetoric, and a balance between safety and profit.

A key component of strategic corporate communication, especially in times of crisis, is leadership. I argue that the steps that organizational leaders take in critical strategic moments are significant and point to the ethical direction of the organization or institution. Therefore, I suggest that constructive strategic corporate communication leadership ought to be prioritized, protected, and promoted in the mud of everyday life.

My essay discusses the evolution of corporate communication as both a field of study and a practice that involves the ethical value of thoughtful leadership. The book *Corporate Communication Crisis Leadership: Advocacy and Ethics* by Ronald C. Arnett, Sarah M. DeLuliis, and Matthew Corr (2017) shows why corporate communication leadership is important. The ethical grounding and practical approach of this book makes it relevant for this discussion. According to the authors, ethical failure in leadership derives from flawed narratives, while constructive corporate communication leadership derives from the protection and promotion of essential ethical standards throughout the narratives that guide decision making at every level of the organization or corporate institution.

Corporate Communication: Evolution and Thoughtful Leadership

Current corporate communication leadership deals with internal and external audiences in an era of ethical dispute. In this era, organizations value diversity, flexibility, and responsiveness. Corporate communication leaders must pay attention to these values as well as issues that matter to various stakeholders and

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the environment within which they exist and function. Any individual, group, or institution that has a vested interest in an organization is a stakeholder. A stakeholder can affect or be affected by the actions of the organization.

Also, through corporate communication, organizations present themselves as important institutions of society. Thus, corporate communication has become central to many businesses and organizations due to an increasingly global and highly competitive marketplace. As a result, organizational leaders are tasked with the responsibility of coordinating the communicative affairs of their institutions.

As a field of study, corporate communication is multidisciplinary in nature. Theories of corporate communication are developed and tested through engagement with other fields, such as marketing, business communication, advertising, and public relations. In addition, corporate communication theory pays close attention to developments in the world of organizations. Corporate communication scholars “cannot ignore trends and developments that are taking place in professional practice, whether such trends are based on scientific research or on the needs of society or on trends among stakeholders” (Elving 2012, 71).

Furthermore, corporate communication derives ideas and theories from disciplines such as rhetoric, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, economics, linguistics, psychology, and management. Thus, corporate communication leaders rely on different methods, findings, and principles as they attempt to innovate in response to the changing times. Corporate communication as a discipline has evolved through important historical epochs to become what it is today. Henry Cohen’s (1994) excursion through the early history of communication from the beginning of the First World War to the end of the Second World War and his sustained effort to call readers’ attention to the intellectual contribution of the discipline helps to provide a context for renewed and more meaningful examination of matters that influence inquiry.

Cohen’s (1994) account of the early history and development of communication also highlights the discipline’s dependence on various fields of study to provide research models for communication. Based on this, I argue that corporate communication has played a critical role in human interaction and the success of companies, organizations, and corporate institutions from its inception. Between the Industrial Revolution and the beginning of the Second World War, the world witnessed the introduction of mass production and consumption. With greater competition and robust markets emerging, organizations employed communication to sell their products and promote themselves. A growing number of top companies began reassessing their communication budgets and approaches. Some moved away from the traditional functional approach of public relations and advertising to pursue internal and external corporate communication strategies.

Corporate communication strategies deal with issues arising from the increased awareness that an organization’s communication is a part of the whole organization, and that the relationship an organization has with its external public requires careful management. The task of corporate communication is part of

every employee's role and not simply the function of marketing or public relations departments.

The evolution of communication in terms of definition, scope, and organization as outlined by Cohen and covering the period between 1914 and 1945 coincides with a number of significant social, economic, and political developments. Some of these dynamics triggered the emergence and evolution of corporate communication as a field of study and practice. The character of communication as a discipline underwent marked intellectual changes following the end of the Second World War (Cohen 1994). The effects of the social scientific revolution were obvious and somewhat inevitable. As a result, the discipline previously designed as group or public discussion underwent a visible transformation. The field became more sophisticated, and scholars became more concerned with the theoretical foundations that underlie their work. The overarching concept undergirding this transformation was known as communication theory, which contains principles that show the depth and diversity of the field.

Corporate communication is often defined in terms of other communication practices, including marketing communication, organizational communication, and management communication, and is used as an umbrella term for a field of practice that draws on multiple communication and management activities (Shelby 1993). Increasingly, however, corporate communication is regarded as a discipline with a distinct rationale and ambition. With the progression of society from hunting and gathering to commercialization, trade, and industrialization, complex organizations have emerged. The need for communication to facilitate the functioning and survival of these organizations has become increasingly more evident. Significantly, "the traditional potency of the family, the church, and the local community suddenly seemed dwarfed by the sway of the giant corporations" (Marchand 1998, 2). This was an important point in human history, especially in the West. As a result, corporations turned to corporate communication for life and purpose.

The evolution of corporate communication as a field of study took place throughout the twentieth century in schools of communication and journalism but within the scope of public relations and public affairs (Argenti 1996). The development of corporate communication as a discipline and practice happened concurrently. Some large corporations even have their own departments of corporate communication. Many scholars take the notion of corporate communication for granted and define it only indirectly by listing the different types of activities it encompasses, such as crisis communication, media relations, community relations, investor relations, employee relations, public affairs, and other communication activities traditionally associated with the broad field of public relations. Without clearly articulating the differences, scholarly and professional literature seem to imply that corporate communication is a more contemporary and sophisticated version of public relations.

Although corporate communication used to be a rather vague term referring loosely to messages from major corporations, today it designates a specific way of thinking that may be applied to many, if not all, sorts of

organizations. Most of the basic concerns of corporate communication have remained the same over the years. Corporations began to present themselves as vital and benevolent parts of society. In the academy, departments began to argue about who should control corporate communication education. According to Paul A. Argenti (1996), the quarrel has been among business, communication, and journalism schools. Each school claims that corporate communication logically belongs to it. While expanding their scope of study, communication schools began to claim that corporate communication properly belongs to their discipline. Then, business schools entered the debate by focusing on corporate communication as a subset of management communication. Wherever the home of corporate communication may be in the academy, its purpose remains the same.

From the beginning, the aim of corporate communication in theory and practice has been social legitimacy (Christensen, Morsing, and Cheney 2008). The goal is to manage all communication that involves an organization as a corporate entity. These include promoting, publicizing, and generally informing relevant individuals and groups in society about the organization's affairs. Rather than pursuing different identities in relation to different audiences or letting different departments handle their communication autonomously, the vision of contemporary corporate communication is to manage all communication under one banner. Corporate communication is ultimately about organizations and how they respond and adapt to the world around them by means of communication.

The idea of corporate communication may be likened to a body in search of a soul. In their 2008 work, Christensen, Morsing, and Cheney used this metaphor to describe corporate communication as a body with a voice and the ability to express itself. According to them, early corporate communications campaigns were like a "quest for a corporate soul" (15). This is because "toward the end of the nineteenth century, a growing number of voices in the USA regarded the big business corporation as a 'body' without a soul" (15). Thus, the distinct nature of corporate communication has less to do with the growing number of communication functions and disciplines it claims to subsume than with the vision it provides for contemporary management. The corporate communication process ensures that the interests of the organization are served but in a manner that guarantees a healthy relationship with all stakeholders. It is about strategy, image and reputation, vision, mission, stakeholders, persuasion, and meaning making.

Corporate communication differs from other types of communication management not simply because it claims to include a broader range of communication activities or to address more audiences across formal organizational boundaries but also because its *raison d'être* is to organize the corporation's communication activities as one coherent entity (Jackson 1987). In contrast to other types of organizational communication like advertising, employee communication, and technical communication, which typically address very specific audiences with discrete messages, corporate messages speak to many audiences at once in the hope of establishing and maintaining a favorable and coherent corporate reputation across different stakeholder groups.

The broad and somewhat diverse field of corporate communication is thus characterized by a common mindset, a certain way of thinking about and approaching an organization's communication shaped by images and ideals of unity, wholeness, and totality. In many ways, this mindset corresponds with the etymological roots of the adjective "corporate." Derived from the Latin *corpus*, "corporate" suggests a collective entity united into one body (Christensen, Morsing, and Cheney 2008, 6). Thus, labeling communication as "corporate" invokes a bodily metaphor of unity and totality. When we conceive of communication as a specifically corporate endeavor, we refer to the efforts of organizations to communicate as whole, total, and "bodily" entities (Christensen, Morsing, and Cheney 2008). In practice, this vision of wholeness unfolds into a goal of projecting a consistent and unambiguous image of what the organization "is" and stands for.

Although their formulations differ, corporate communication scholars argue fervently that organizations should aim for a unified, consistent voice across different markets and audiences. For example, Cees B. M. van Riel (1995) defined corporate communication as "an instrument of management by means of which all consciously used forms of internal and external communication are harmonized as effectively and efficiently as possible," with the overall objective of creating "a favorable basis for relationships with groups upon which the company is dependent" (141). Joep Cornelissen (2008), on the other hand, defined corporate communication as a management function that offers a framework and vocabulary for the effective coordination of all means of communication with the overall purpose of establishing and maintaining favorable reputations with stakeholder groups upon which the organization is dependent. The key task of corporate communication, therefore, is to flesh out the profile of the company behind the brand, to minimize discrepancies between different markers of corporate identity, to define and assign communication responsibilities across the organization, and to mobilize support behind corporate initiatives. Corporate communication, accordingly, defines a whole range of new managerial activities focused on the integration, coordination, and orchestration of an organization's communications.

With corporate communication, corporate institutions and organizations present themselves as social institutions with responsibilities and aspirations beyond commercial activities. A central characteristic of corporate communication as a field of research and practice is thus that it conceives of the organization as a single unit in communication with stakeholders. It is not individual managers, buildings, advertising campaigns, or interactions with employees that communicate in and of themselves. Rather, these are all seen as parts or fragments of the same communicating organization as a unit of analysis.

Wim J. L. Elving (2012) observes that organizations are well suited as laboratories for studying human communication and behavior. The introduction of information and communication technologies and the globalization of business in a networked society have created a need for monitoring and responding to the demands of consumers, employees, and other stakeholder groups. Activities such as coordination, knowledge creation, decision making, shareholder value, and

responsible citizenship are possible through communication. The term “corporate” might imply an excessive focus on profit, shareholders, and business, but it also refers to other organizations such as municipalities, governments, nonprofit organizations, hospitals, and universities. Even industrialized societies are presenting themselves as models of civilization. For such societies to achieve their egalitarian ambitions, they must allow for multiple voices and honor their various parts.

Corporate communication theory and practice is much more sophisticated today than it was at its inception. Some of the factors responsible for the complexity are external while others are internal. The external changes include advances in technology and the multiplication of stakeholders due to human progress. Internal changes are more strategic in nature and derive from the approaches practitioners want to adopt. Corporate communication serves other practical purposes, such as leading, motivating, persuading, and informing the public. The understanding of corporate communication as theory and practice is important because the two are interwoven. As a theory, it is both an art and a science built on concepts about communication that are developed and tested over time. As a practice, it follows new trends and best practices in the field. Corporate communication scholars rely on issues and developments taking place in the marketplace to generate new ideas in research that, in turn, drive practice. Also, corporate communication theory and practice is driven by a variety of subjects. Therefore, corporate communication gets more complex as the global business environment continues to develop.

An analysis of the corporate communication environment shows the importance of corporate communication and what it seeks to accomplish. As already discussed in this section, corporate communication has evolved over time and is concerned with both theory and practice. It involves both scholars and practitioners who operate within a certain environment, whether that environment is a community, country, organization, or field of study. Additionally, analyzing the corporate communication environment gives structure and meaning to what it seeks to accomplish. It helps decision makers to know the “why” of their actions. For example, Joel Bakan’s (2004) book *The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power* examines the history and character of the modern business corporation as a benevolent part of society. Bakan contends that corporations pursue their own economic self-interest without regard for the interests of individuals and society. Bakan, therefore, suggests that governments should regulate and control the actions of corporations, such as corporate reputation and stakeholder communication, for the good of society. Such demands, whether they come from scholars or interested stakeholders, require a response from corporations that operate in this environment.

According to Michael B. Goodman (1994), corporate communication exerts substantial influence in all transactions, from dealing with simple customer questions to the pressure of negotiating multinational mergers or restructuring a large corporation. To be successful, these tasks require the theoretical knowledge and practical acumen of the people involved. However, while people are essential for corporate communication, there are other elements involved in the

communication process that are equally important. In contemporary times, there are concerns surrounding issues such as diversity, sexual harassment, racism, terrorism, politics, and the environment that corporate communication cannot ignore. Organizations are sometimes compelled by stakeholder expectations to take a stand on such issues. Other times, the organizations themselves are proactive and respond to these issues through various strategic messages like mission statements, press releases, or by sponsoring events and programs that promote or resolve these concerns.

Organizational culture is another element that is important for corporate communication. Goodman (1994) argues that a strong corporate culture creates “a recognizable and positive perception of the company among its suppliers, vendors, and customers” (4). Stakeholders do not only expect to hear companies or organizations speak to issues—they also want to witness actions. Hence, companies must match their rhetoric with actions that support what they claim to represent. In their chapter “Justifying Corporate Communications,” Christensen, Morsing, and Cheney (2008) address the question, “How do contemporary organizations justify their engagement with corporate communications?” (112). In other words, what is the rationality behind the “bodily” pursuit in today’s communication?

Justifying corporate communication requires an understanding of the corporate communication environment. Christensen, Morsing, and Cheney (2008) believe that “communication is consequential, and the reading of a situation has implications for the solutions we are able to envision” (113). Hence, a clear understanding of the corporate communication environment means the ability to describe its reality through the best possible frame. Christensen, Morsing, and Cheney define framing as “the way we think about, approach, and talk about an issue, acknowledging that these are not neutral undertakings because they help shape perception of the issue” (113). Analyzing the corporate communication environment allows us to openly discuss and challenge or support its ideals. There is so much invested in the corporate communication environment. The corporate communication process and its actions are related to economics, society, and humanity at large. Knowing its importance helps with understanding its concepts and purpose.

Corporate communication thus becomes the solution to the limitations of the corporate communication environment. In today’s complex and ever-changing world, organizations are faced with ongoing issues such as globalization, uncertainty, and turbulence. Hence, there is an obvious and persistent demand for current corporate communication theory and practice to be flexible. Organizations themselves are complex bodies with many parts. Therefore, although the project of corporate communication pursues standardization, it simultaneously must cultivate *internal* differences to see observable differences in its *external* environment. Also, the notion of integration is challenged by findings that organizations contain buffers and loose couplings, just like a complex living organism (Christensen, Morsing, and Cheney 2008, 177). A healthy combination of tight and loose couplings enables the organization to develop close relations with its environment and at the same time protect itself against external

uncertainty. In a tightly coupled system, the different parts of an organization are standardized, while in a loosely coupled system, the different parts of the organization are flexible and adaptable.

In corporate communication, stakeholders are not dormant recipients of corporate messages but active participants in a process that builds both commercial and social relationships. Corporate communication is a valuable tool for enhancing a company's reputation and fostering relationships with stakeholders. Therefore, organizations must understand and be able to work with these different groups of people, however varied and complex they may be. To ensure their survival and maintain their vitality, contemporary corporate organizations must appreciate and nurture both their collective and individual parts.

Exemplar of Corporate Communication Leadership in the Mud of Everyday Life

The "mud of everyday life" is a phrase used by Martin Buber and adopted by Arnett in his teaching and scholarship. In *Between Man and Man* ([1947] 2002) and *I and Thou* ([1937] 1958), Buber used the phrase to refer to the everyday creaturely life of man that does not separate existence from its world or isolate the self into a freely moving I. For Arnett, a scholar on Buber, the metaphor "mud of everyday life" refers to the practical and often messy realities of daily human existence. This understanding is central to Arnett's work in communication ethics (e.g., Arnett 2012, 2013, 2017). For Arnett, meaningful dialogue and communication ethics are grounded in the complexities and challenges of everyday life. I use the same metaphor in this paper to suggest that ethical behavior emerges from navigating, not avoiding, the challenges of everyday life.

An example of corporate communication leadership in the mud of everyday life can be found in the communication response(s) to the BP *Deepwater Horizon* crisis that happened over a decade ago. Using this crisis as a classic case study, Arnett, Deluliis, and Corr's (2017) *Corporate Communication Crisis Leadership: Advocacy and Ethics* explicates the dangers of corporate communication leadership failure and provides us with theoretical foundations as well as practical pathways to constructive corporate communication leadership built on tenacious advocacy and ethical rhetoric. The perspective of this book challenges some conventional corporate communication practices, such as extreme focus on profit and withholding or distorting information to protect the image of an organization. This book helps further expand upon the importance of corporate communication leadership in the mud of everyday life.

The BP *Deepwater Horizon* disaster happened on April 20, 2010, in the Gulf of Mexico near Louisiana. At the time of the disaster, 126 workers were on board the *Horizon*. By the time the rescue operation was over, eleven workers were unaccounted for, hundreds of families were emotionally affected, and a nation was confronted with a crisis. Seven years later, Arnett, Deluliis, and Corr (2017) returned to this crisis with constructive scholarly insight to examine thoroughly

the root causes of the disaster. With the view that crisis is generally not spontaneous, they traced some of the warning signs that signaled the inevitability of escalation. Key among the warning signs was a narrative of profit, developed over time, that eclipsed a commitment to safety.

The fundamental argument of the authors is that tragedies such as the BP *Deepwater Horizon* disaster have pragmatic implications and significant lessons for corporate communication ethics. They present the BP crisis as a warning against unproductive issue, argument, and conflict engagement. They also suggest a corporate communication environment that is attentive to communication ethics in action. Communication ethics allows the interplay of narrative setting and everyday practices to create a space where constituencies develop, refine, and mold an understanding that reflects appropriate reactions to issues.

According to the authors, issues make up the fundamental stage that carries the possibilities for actualizing arguments, conflicts, and crises in the marketplace. They can spiral into arguments when public deliberation and advocacy concerning a particular problem or opportunity has not yet reached a satisfactory solution. Arguments that are ignored escalate into conflicts between and among internal and external organizational stakeholders. Conflicts within and between organizations and stakeholders define and redefine shared interests, values, and obligations. Crisis is the final step, evolving from issue, argument, and conflict.

Corporate Communication Crisis Leadership offers us a lens through which we can understand how issues that are not properly addressed can escalate into crises, such as the BP *Deepwater Horizon* disaster, the 2008 financial crisis, the COVID-19 global pandemic, or the war in Ukraine. In general, the book identifies corporate greed as a precursor to many of the missteps and ethical failures that have resulted in unimaginable physical, financial, emotional, and sometimes spiritual pain for society and stakeholders.

Corporate Communication Crisis Leadership also provides readers with a series of theories and strategies that can help stop issues from becoming a devastating crisis. These recommendations present organizations with ideas that can alter at any critical moment the progression from issue to crisis. They invite organizational leaders to commit to changing the narratives that guide their decision making and to transform their communication with stakeholders from thoughtlessness to thoughtfulness.

The first recommendation is to seek clarity. This involves explaining issues, arguments, conflicts, and crisis in their proper context. The act of clarifying demands that organizations frame meaning, highlight the significance of that meaning, and offer a strategic path to discern what matters for internal and external constituencies. Clarity of issues, argument, conflict, and crisis help organizational leaders to attend to locality, context, and industry. Issues emerge within an environment and are always composed of interested constituents that organizations cannot ignore. Such stakeholders shape the significance, texture, and understanding of issues and help leadership to recognize issues as foreground situations that consist of historical context, organizational mission, corporate and

industry identity, and an organizational culture shaped by a shared value system. A failure to attend to issues leads to argument, conflict, and ultimately crisis.

The second recommendation is that corporate communication leadership should align theoretical and strategic perspectives with the mission and direction of organizations in order to counteract thoughtlessness and unreflective behavior.

The third and final recommendation is communication ethics in action in which the authors offer the BP crisis as an example of thoughtlessness. For Arnett, communication ethics in action requires thoughtful, reflective engagement with conflicting perspectives and contrasting standpoints.

I suggest that constructive corporate communication leadership ought to be prioritized, protected, and promoted in the mud of everyday life. Communication ethics leadership drives meaning and purpose in the everyday mud of life, and corporate communication leadership cannot presume that meaning and purpose always stay with people. Hence, *Corporate Communication Crisis Leadership* is an invitation to advocate tenaciously for corporate communication with an ethical foundation. The mud of everyday life is composed of challenges such as the BP *Deepwater Horizon* crisis. A true understanding of the world around us and ethical behavior in times of such crisis must move us to engage with, rather than avoid, the everyday life challenges before us. Such an engagement will lead to meaningful dialogue and create an environment in which corporate communication grounded in communication ethics and the values that matter can emerge and thrive.

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