

A SEQUENTIAL INTEGRATED SUSTAINABLE ORGANISATION-STAKEHOLDER RELATIONSHIP (SISOSR) PROCESS FOR BUILDING ORGANISATION- STAKEHOLDER PARTNERSHIPS: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT

Although the concept ‘organisation-stakeholder relationship (OSR)’ is not new and has been researched extensively in the literature, limited attempts have been made to critically analyse existing viewpoints and propose a unified conceptual framework. The main research problem of this paper is to address this lack of a commonly accepted conceptual framework for organisational stakeholder relationships. This is done through a critical analysis of the different perspectives and existing conceptual frameworks by using a qualitative method whereby strategic stakeholder identification, OSR development and OSR maintenance are integrated to propose a conceptual framework, subsequently termed SISOSR to build organisation-stakeholder partnerships (OSP) with strategic stakeholders. This article is structured as follows: Firstly, the key concepts are defined; secondly the building blocks of the framework is presented based on sound theoretical constructs; and thirdly the SISOSR framework is graphically presented and discussed to elaborate on the proposed process of OSR building; followed by concluding arguments.

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INTRODUCTION

Organisational success is largely dependent on stakeholder perceptions which can be ascribed to various aspects, including the following: the turbulent external organisational environment; pressure on organisations to report on the social and environmental impacts of their organisational activities; prevalence of public activism, globalisation, increasing emergence of organisational issues and crises; and the need for organisations to be regarded as good corporate citizens through ethical and socially responsible behaviour (Jonker & Foster, 2002, p. 188; Burchell & Cook, 2006, p. 210; Steyn & Niemann, 2010, p. 106; Valackiene, 2010, p. 101; Goodman, 2006, p. 199; Malmelin, 2006, p. 298; Cornelissen, van Bekkum & van Ruler, 2006, p. 114). A dominant focus on organisational stakeholders is eminent in an environment characterised by active publics and demands for transparency to facilitate *dialogue* (Bishop, 2006, p. 217); and to build understanding and mutually-beneficial relationships (Grunig & Grunig, 1992, p. 289), or *two-way symmetrical communication*. The focus on mutually beneficial organisational stakeholder relationships (OSR) is emphasised by Johansen and Nielsen (2011, p. 206) who argue that “...traditional unidirectional means of stakeholder communication must be replaced or replenished by two-way communication”. Although this is emphasised by various authors (Grunig & Repper, 1992; Marra, 1992; Heath, 1997; Ulmer, 2001; Fearn-Banks, 2007; Alpaslan, Green & Mitroff, 2009; Rensburg & Cant, 2009), a lack of research exists on how to *build* these relationships (Bridges & Nelson, 2000, p. 106; Broom, Casey & Ritchey, 2000, p. 6; Ulmer 2001, p. 607; Kim, 2007, p. 167). One reason presented is that the core focus is on the measurement of the corporate communication discipline and the influence on public opinion, rather than stakeholder relationship building (Broom, Casey & Ritchey, 2000, p. 5).

Against this background, the main aim of this article is to *explore the lack of OSR building frameworks that emphasise the elements and development of an organisation-stakeholder relationship and the need for a generic, strategic, integrated approach for sustainable OSR to contribute towards organisational effectiveness*. This will be based on three aspects of studies on organisational stakeholders, namely: stakeholder identification (Mitchell, Agle & Wood, 1997; Kaler, 2002); stakeholder relationship development (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000; Ulmer, 2001; Hung, 2007); and stakeholder relationship maintenance strategies (Grunig & Huang, 2000; Hung, 2007). Hence an integrated approach to OSR building is proposed in which these aspects will be

seen as a holistic, sequential process to address the lack of current research on how to *build* OSR and to *develop* a framework to manage stakeholder relationships more sufficiently. The secondary aim is to address the importance of practicing corporate communication strategically by emphasising its role in OSR, or as Luoma-aho and Paloviita (2010, p. 49) states: *stakeholder relations are the heartbeat of corporate communication.*

KEY CONCEPTS

Key concepts that will be utilised throughout this article are defined in the following section.

Corporate communication

The proposed framework is built from a corporate communication perspective, whereby it is argued that corporate communicators should be responsible for building OSR. Various interchangeable terms for communication within the organisation exist of which the most prominent are business communication, management communication, organisational communication, public relations, corporate communication, marketing communication, integrated marketing communication and integrated communication (Reinsch 1991:306; Shelby 1993:242; Cornelissen 2005:34). For the purpose of this article, corporate communication will be the preferred term when referring to all strategic organisational communication with internal and external stakeholders and can be defined as a management function focused on building favourable, mutually beneficial relationships between the organisation and its strategic stakeholders (Cornelissen 2005:21).

Strategic Stakeholders

The terms stakeholder, public and constituent are often used interchangeably. Since organisational constituents are too broad (Grunig & Huang, 2000, p. 32) and organisational publics can only be managed reactively (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002, p. 324) which excludes relationship building, *stakeholders* will be used as the preferred term to refer to groups that are essential for organisational survival with which the organisation must proactively build mutually-beneficial relationships. Furthermore, the focus will be on *strategic* stakeholders specifically which are defined as *those groups that hold a continuous high degree of stakeholder salience with which the organisation*

share a reciprocal interest that should be nurtured through proactive, mutually-beneficial relationship building to ensure organisational survival. Stakeholder salience is a concept derived from Mitchell et al's (1997) theory of stakeholder identification and salience and refers to stakeholders with high power, legitimacy and urgency. It should be noted that the proposed framework is built on the argument that strategic stakeholders should take priority and that secondary stakeholder concerns should be managed based on an issue prioritisation approach which constitutes a different stakeholder management approach altogether. It is thus argued that the focus on secondary stakeholders will rather be to establish working relationships as oppose to building organisation-stakeholder partnerships (OSP).

Organisational stakeholder relationships (OSR)

In a search for a specific definition for OSR, researchers propose that for the purpose of this article a basic OSR is considered as a *foundational OSR*, and can be defined as *the result of the management of common interests between the organisation and strategic stakeholder(s) over time, to reach mutual-beneficial goal achievement through a high degree of reciprocity and continuous two-way symmetrical communication.*

Organisation-stakeholder partnerships (OSP)

OSP allow organisations “to build bridges with their stakeholders in the pursuit of common goals, whereas the traditional stakeholder management techniques only allow for the fulfillment of stakeholders’ needs and expectations” (Girard & Sobczak, 2011, p. 2). Three main concepts underlie OSP: firstly, Girard and Sobczak’s (2011, p. 3) perspective that stakeholder engagement is a *mutual process* whereby both the organisation and stakeholders are key initiators of engaging in one another’s business activities on OSP level, which therefore represents two-way engagement; secondly, *collaborative problem solving* as a key element of a relationship between the organisation and stakeholders, hence it is argued that through knowledge and learning, joint problem solving becomes evident where the organisation and strategic stakeholders move beyond a mere discussion to “...deep listening with empathy, expressing hidden assumptions, focusing on common interests and searching for conceptual breakthroughs” (Halal, 2010, p. 30); and thirdly, *stewardship* which is according to Kelly (1998) the ‘missing step’ in the communication process, and as argued by

Ledingham (2003, p. 192) and Waters (2009, p. 114) imply a *mutual* experience of responsibility, reporting and relationship nurturing. Based on these concepts, OSP is considered as the ultimate relational state and is defined as 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 organisation and strategic stakeholders join in collaborative problem solving to achieve a mutually desired end goal.*

THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF AN OSR BUILDING FRAMEWORK

Three building blocks are proposed to constitute an OSR building framework namely; a *strategic communication foundation*; a *conceptualisation of OSR building* and a *theoretical foundation*.

Building block 1: Strategic communication foundation

This building block of this framework is based on the integration of the following key corporate communication functions essential for successful OSR building:

Two-way symmetrical communication

The two-way symmetrical framework originated from the asymmetrical and symmetrical communication worldviews. A worldview can be defined as “the attitudes, views, beliefs or mindset of any individual or group of people” (Steyn 2003:57) towards a phenomenon, in this case, corporate communication. Grunig et al (2002, p. 548) argue that corporate communication makes an organisation more effective through the utilisation of two-way symmetrical communication to develop and maintain sustainable relationships with strategic stakeholders. In accordance, Waters and Lemanski (2011, p. 154) argue that strategic communicators should practice two-way communication if they aspire to build sustainable relationships between the organisation and stakeholders. Based on the definition of two-way symmetrical communication as a model that is focused on establishing balanced dialogue between the organisation and its audiences to encourage transparent, sincere and mutually beneficial relationships (Grunig & Grunig 1992:289) and other two-way symmetrical characteristics, two-way symmetrical communication is defined for the purpose of this study as *a model that stimulates conversation, interaction and feedback between the*

organisation and strategic stakeholders, identified through research, to establish a high degree of mutuality is regarded as the foundation and key to building stakeholder partnerships.

Knowledge transfer enabled by a culture of knowledge

Since this study is focused on establishing mutually-beneficial relationships, *knowledge transfer* as an element of knowledge management literature, is considered. For the purpose of this study, the *communication* component of knowledge management will be addressed through the transfer of knowledge between the organisation and strategic stakeholders to contribute towards *sustainable* OSR building. For the purpose of this study ‘knowledge transfer’ will be used to refer to knowledge sharing at individual *and* group level. It should however be noted that knowledge transfer could only occur if a culture of knowledge is integrated in the organisation; thereby a culture that “...enables and motivates people to create, share and utilise knowledge” (Rivière & Sitar, 2010, p. 36). It is argued that knowledge transfer will occur once mutually-beneficial OSR have been built – it therefore plays a role in building *sustainable* relationships and eventual stakeholder *partnerships*. The reason that knowledge transfer only occurs upon the existence of a relationship to establish sustainability within a relationship, is that individuals will only share knowledge when reciprocity, a good reputation, altruism and most importantly, *trust* have already been established (Rivière & Sitar, 2010, p. 38).

Reputation management

Thiessen and Inghoff (2010, p. 9) regard reputation management as “relational capital” that strengthens relationships and builds trust; it is the organisation’s “reservoir of goodwill”. To highlight the prominence of stakeholders in reputation management, Romenti (2010, p. 306) argues that corporate communication plays an important role in developing the reputation of an organisation through listening to stakeholder expectations, addressing these concerns with planned strategies, and establishing sustainable relationships with strategic stakeholders. The relevancy of reputation management for the purpose of this study is that “the cultivation of relationships is considered the basis for building a strong and consistent reputation” (Romenti, 2010, p. 310). However, reputation management will also be regarded as an *initial* and *continuous* process within the proposed stakeholder relationship building framework, since stakeholders would not build relationships with an organisation which has a poor or damaged reputation; hence, a positive organisational reputation is required as a starting point for building OSR.

Research: environmental scanning and evaluation research

In order to build mutually-beneficial relationships with strategic stakeholders, the communication needs of stakeholders have to be fulfilled, which is made possible by *research* (Bruning, 2002, p. 45). Research can be divided into two key categories (Dozier & Repper, 1992, p. 186; Macnamara, 2003, p. 330): firstly, research focused to detect problems and to assess the status quo, namely *environmental scanning*; and secondly research aimed to assess the planning, implementation and effect of corporate communication strategies, namely *evaluation research*. Environmental scanning is open and explorative in nature in which the strategic function of scanning lies in the *early detection of emerging problems* and determining the sum of known issues in the environment (Dozier & Repper, 1992, p. 187). Environmental scanning could be employed to serve as an important element of the stakeholder identification phase of the framework to identify strategic stakeholders with which the organisation aspires to build mutually-beneficial relationships, detect issues of concern and the subsequent emergence of publics that could damage OSR at any time of the relationship building process; and/or obtain more detailed information about a certain stakeholder group, public or issue of concern. In order to ensure that stakeholders' relational needs are being met, Bruning (2002, p. 45) argues that organisations must ensure that both the *communication needs*, and *relational communication needs* are being met which is enabled by *evaluation research*, which could serve to identify strategic stakeholders' needs and relational expectations during the stakeholder identification phase of the framework and as a measure of relational quality as part of OSR maintenance.

Issues management

Issues management is defined as a process that manages upcoming issues and their potential to interfere with the operations of the organisation while keeping the need of the organisation to orchestrate its interests with its stakeholders in mind (Heath, 1997, p. 5). The relevancy of issues management from a stakeholder perspective is hence that it serves as *a proactive, continuous process to manage and resolve issues of concern, detected through environmental scanning, prior to developing into full blown organisational crises and to, most importantly, avoid the formation of or to manage reactive publics and situations that might harm organisation-stakeholder relationship building and/or maintenance*. The study therefore supports Hung's (2003, p. 25) argument that "...for an organisation.... conducting environmental scanning and issues management in their

strategic planning process will help them identify more specifically the publics involved, and the issues that have great impact now or in the future.”

Building block 2: Conceptualisation of OSR building

This building block is the essence of the proposed framework as it highlights the key phases of the framework aligned against an OSR development continuum. The following three prominent phases of the framework are relevant:

Phase 1: Strategic stakeholder identification

The applicability of the criteria for strategic stakeholder identification constitutes the strategic stakeholder identification methodology to both the organisation and stakeholder as indicated in Table 1. This methodology is based on the integration of Mitchell et al’s (1997) theory of stakeholder identification and salience (TSIS); the cost-benefit analysis (Grunig & Huang, 2000, p. 32) and the situational theory of publics (Grunig, 1983).

Table 1: A methodology for strategic stakeholder identification

	Criteria	Organisation	Strategic stakeholder
Stakeholder salience	Mutual power-dependence	Both the organisation and stakeholder are dependent on another to achieve relational objectives. The organisation relies on stakeholders to ensure future existence and stakeholders require the input of the organisation to achieve their end-goal. From this perspective, both the organisation and stakeholder holds power.	
	Legitimacy	Strategic stakeholders’ actions should be socially acceptable and in line with the organisation’s values.	This links with the argument that a positive organisational reputation is required as a pre-requisite for OSR. A stakeholder will be more likely to engage with an organisation that is legitimate and socially acceptable.
	Urgency	Corporate communication managers should identify stakeholders with urgent claims, which are often characteristic of a strategic stakeholder.	Stakeholders are more likely to engage with an organisation that recognises the urgency of their claim and attend to these claims in a timeous manner.
	Benefit must exceed cost	The benefit of the OSR must exceed the time, effort and other costs to both the organisation and stakeholder.	
	High level of involvement	Both the organisation and stakeholder must have a mutual interest in one another, which links to the argument posed earlier that a high degree of reciprocity should be evident.	

Evident from the above table is that strategic stakeholders have a high degree of stakeholder salience, the benefits of relationships with strategic stakeholders will outweigh the costs and a high

level of involvement should be evident. Although the corporate communication manager will utilise these criteria to identify strategic stakeholders, it is proposed here that these stakeholders should similarly experience these criteria to ensure the sustainability of OSR.

OSR antecedents

Various theorists explored the *antecedents or precursors* of OSR (Broom et al, 2000, p. 16; Ledingham, 2003, p. 195; Kim, 2007, p. 170). It is argued for the purpose of this article that certain conditions are necessary prior to the OSR development phase, and hence, OSR antecedents will be accepted as a pre-phase for OSR development.

Antecedents are those conditions on which OSR depends (Dimmick, Bell, Burgiss & Ragsdale, 2000, p. 131) which include opinions, motivations, needs and behaviours that are packaged as contingencies or causes in the development of OSR (Broom et al, 2000, p. 16). The antecedents of OSR provide the motivation why stakeholders choose to be associated with an organisation and what benefits stakeholders aspire to derive from the relationship, which also affects the OSR quality (Sevick Bortree, 2011, p. 44). Antecedents are the first phase of a relationship, since these elements cause the development of OSR (Kim, 2007, p. 170). Seltzer and Zhang (2011) considered time, interpersonal trust and party identification or association as key antecedents in developing relationships in a political context. *Time* refers to the fact that relationships evolve over time and grow in intensity (Seltzer & Zhang, 2011, p. 28). *Interpersonal trust*, which has also been recognised by Hendricks (2004, p. 39), is the expectation that both relational parties are motivated to take one another's interest into account, which links with reciprocity and mutuality defined earlier. Lastly, *party association* refers to a sense of attachment to and identification with a political party (Selzer & Zang, 2011, p. 28). These antecedents have been adapted for the purpose of this article: The concept of time is not applicable as an antecedent for this study, but rather considered as a key element across the entire OSR building framework, as it is argued that OSR grows in intensity over time and because trust is developed over time (Rayman-Bacchus, 2004, p. 32) only a sense of trust could be experienced at this stage of the OSR building framework. Furthermore, since this study is focused on OSR and not on relationships on an individual level, interpersonal trust was replaced with *trustworthiness*. Greenwood and Van Buren (2010, p. 429) argue that organisational trustworthiness "...refers to a virtue or set of virtues held by the organisation, reflecting its

worthiness to be trusted.” Similarly, the organisation should also regard the strategic stakeholder as trustworthy to stimulate reciprocity and mutuality. Lastly, party association could also be replaced with *organisation-stakeholder association*, which implies that both the organisation and stakeholder should be able to resonate with one another. In conjunction with these antecedents, *mutual consequence* (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p. 12) and *expectations* (Broom et al, 2000, p. 17; Kim & Radar, 2010, p. 62) could also be added. *Expectations*, which are influenced by perceptions, attitudes, feelings and knowledge about one another, highlight that each relational party has certain expectations prior to an OSR which could either be met or not be met (Kim & Radar, 2010, p. 62).

Phase 2: OSR development

An *OSR development continuum* is proposed which highlights that a foundational or basic OSR evolves in intensity *over time* to reach mutually-beneficial OSR, sustainable OSR and eventually OSP. It should be noted that this proposed sequential development of OSR is *normative*, and OSR will not always develop in such linearity. However, the purpose of this article is to highlight the conditions necessary for a sustainable OSR development process to establish OSP. Although ‘continuum’ for the purpose of this study does not necessarily imply the conventional meaning of the word, thereby representing extreme opposites at each end point (Yan & Curtin 2010:537), the end points of the proposed continuum will represent differences in terms of the intensity and strength of the OSR. Hence, it is proposed that a foundational OSR represent a basic OSR on one side of the continuum and an OSP will be regarded as the ultimate relational state.

Two-way symmetrical communication is at the centre of OSR building in the proposed OSR development continuum – it *stimulates conversation, interaction and feedback between the organisation and strategic stakeholders to establish a high degree of mutuality*. *Time* is an important consideration for this continuum to illustrate how a foundational OSR builds in intensity to reach OSP. Ledingham, Bruning and Wilson (1999) indicate that more time in an OSR provides more opportunities for interaction and hence, leads to a better understanding of each others’ perspectives which strengthens the OSR (Sheltzer & Mitrook, 2009, p. 7). Furthermore, the length of time in OSR has an influence on the loyalty of strategic stakeholders to the relationship (Coombs, 2000, p. 88). In this article, Hendricks’ (2004, p. 122) viewpoint that “a successful relationship is built over time” is thus supported.

The OSR development continuum proposes the following sequential development of an OSR over time and constitutes the following OSR types to reach OSP:

- *Foundational OSR*: This was defined earlier and refers to the initial OSR built through two-way symmetrical communication;
- *Mutually-beneficial OSR*: This relationship represents an acknowledgement that the organisation and strategic stakeholder are “inextricably tied together” which represents a collaborative orientation and a sense of mutual association (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 25), that the mutual benefit for both relational parties is clear and a high degree of reciprocity is evident.
- *Sustainable OSR*: This relationship emphasises that the organisation and strategic stakeholder move beyond achieving mutual objectives and focus on building towards OSP, thereby shaping and guiding organisation-stakeholder interaction to build towards long-term competitively advantaged OSR to contribute towards innovation and progressive decision making (Rensburg & Cant, 2009, p. 52).
- *OSP*: As defined earlier, an OSP represents the ultimate relational state whereby a foundational OSR grew in intensity over time to establish an advanced OSR that embodies stewardship, collaborative problem solving and two-way engagement.

Since this study is concerned with OSR building, the following are regarded as key elements of a foundational OSR:

- *Trust*: Various theorists regard trust as a critical element of OSR (Hung, 2003, p. 10-11; Goodman, 2003, p. 200; Rayman-Bacchus, 2004, p. 21;31; Greenwood & van Buren, 2010, p. 427). Trust is defined by Grunig and Grunig (1998, p. 4) as the extent to which both the organisation and stakeholders display a willingness of vulnerability towards the other’s behaviour and the level of confidence that one relational party will take the other’s interests into account when making important decisions. According to Hon and Grunig (1999, p. 3) trust refers to one relational party’s “level of confidence in and willingness to open oneself to the other party” that requires a mutual sense of integrity (Goodman & Hirsch, 2010, p. 37).
- *Control mutuality*: According to Stafford and Canary (1991 p. 224) control mutuality refers to the agreement between relational partners as to who will be responsible to decide on relational

objectives and behaviour; the issue lies within whether both partners agree that “one or both may rightfully influence the other.”

- *Relationship satisfaction*: When experiencing relationship satisfaction, it implies that the benefits of engaging in this relationship outweigh the costs (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p. 3), which also encapsulates the principle of the cost-benefit analysis considered in the stakeholder identification methodology where it was argued that OSR can only be beneficial if the benefits of the OSR exceed the compromises made to engage in the OSR.
- *Relational commitment*: It refers to the expectation that a relationship will continue or the degree to which a relational partner wants to stay in a relationship will continue (Hung, 2003, p. 12). Meyer and Allen (1984:375) identify two types of commitment, namely *affective* commitment, a sentimental affiliation towards an organisation; and *continuance* commitment which is experienced when stakeholders “feel committed to their organisations by virtue of the costs that they feel are associated with leaving.”
- *Mutual understanding*: This can include mutual legitimacy, mutual satisfaction, mutual consequence and mutual dependence, which implies that both relational parties have the same level of power in achieving relational objectives, and a reduced potential for exploitation is evident (Rusbult & Arriaga, 1997, p. 229). It also highlights that the message must be formulated “in such a way that the recipient understands it as closely as possible to the intended meaning” (Du Plessis, 2006, p. 197) to reach a *level of shared meaning* towards the achievement of relational objectives.

Stakeholder engagement

Various theorists explored *relational outcomes* in OSR literature (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p. 3; Grunig & Huang, 2000, p. 42; Jonker & Foster, 2002, p. 191; Rensburg, de Beer & Coetzee, 2008, p. 388; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2009, p. 3) that should be achieved after an OSR has been built. *Stakeholder engagement* will be considered as a desirable OSR outcome that should be maintained in order to establish OSP. Girard and Sobczak (2011, p. 4) suggest two dimensions of stakeholder engagement: Firstly, it is characterised by communication and environmental scanning focused on managing possible risks associated with conflict of interests. Secondly, it initiates collaboration and partnership building. This two-dimensional approach to stakeholder engagement will form a basis for the purpose of this article: Once a foundational OSR has been built, stakeholder engagement could be experienced whereby the organisation is the key driver in building a mutually beneficial

OSR. It is hence proposed that stakeholder engagement can only be experienced *after* the development of an OSR, to fulfill the role of an OSR outcome, since stakeholder engagement moves beyond the management of common interests to a higher level of intensity of stakeholder participation in decision making, problem solving and organisational activities. This perspective is affirmed by Greenwood's (2007, p. 315) definition of stakeholder engagement as the endeavors that the organisation undertake to involve strategic stakeholders in decision making and to encourage participation in organisational activities; hence, the organisation is regarded as key initiator where two-way engagement will only be experienced on OSP level.

Phase 3: OSR maintenance

OSR maintenance is defined as the “growth and nurturing of mutually-beneficial OSR” (Jo, Hon & Brunner, 2004, p. 14). Various synonyms are also presented for the maintenance of OSR, of which the most predominant are *stakeholder management* or more accurately, *stakeholder relationship management*. Boesso and Kamar (2008, p. 65) define stakeholder management as the management of a diverse range of tasks, which include “identifying, assessing, prioritising, managing the relationship, communicating, negotiating and contracting” with various stakeholders that have an influence on the organisation's economic interests. Chinyio and Olomolaiye (2010, p. 7-8) are of opinion that stakeholder management is related to stakeholder relationship management and includes the principles of acknowledgement of stakeholder concerns, listening and communicating to stakeholders, adoption of stakeholder processes, recognition of the interdependence among stakeholders, collaborative work and the acknowledgement of possible conflicts. The preferred term that will be utilised for the purpose of this article is *OSR maintenance* which refers to the nurturing of sustainable OSR to allow the evolvement of these relationships into organisation-stakeholder partnerships. Strategies to maintain relationships and symmetrical OSR are derived from Stafford and Canary (1991, p. 233) and Hon and Grunig (1999, p. 14): access; openness; positivity; assurances of legitimacy; networks and sharing tasks: *access* refers to the communicators of organisations and members of strategic stakeholder groups and highlights a direct reporting relationship between the organisation and strategic stakeholders with the avoidance of third party interference; *openness or disclosure* across the whole process is a key indicator that relational parties are satisfied and committed to the OSR, and will according to Christensen and Langer (2008, p. 7), result in transparency, clarity and comprehension and within a foundational OSR, evolve in

intensity over time; *positivity* refers to all the measures the organisation undertakes to make strategic stakeholders more satisfied in the relationship where positive; *assurances of legitimacy* focuses on attempts made by relational parties to assure one another that actions taken and claims made are valid and that true commitment to maintain the OSR is evident; *networking* refers to the “structure of ties between actors in a social system” and implies that organisations must make an effort to build networks or coalitions with the same groups as their strategic stakeholders; and *sharing tasks* between organisations and strategic stakeholders could, for example be achieved through the provision of employment and would strengthen the sense of mutuality within the OSR and inspire relational parties to work towards the achievement of shared objectives. In addition to these symmetrical OSR maintenance strategies, *evaluation* and *conflict resolution strategies* are also considered as part of the OSR maintenance phase. *Evaluation* through environmental scanning and evaluation research can determine whether identified stakeholder needs and expectations are being met and *conflict resolution strategies* can be used to resolve possible issues that were detected through environmental scanning that could harm the OSR development process. Hon and Grunig’s (1999, p. 16-17) symmetrical *integrative* conflict resolution strategies are accepted for this article, which include cooperation, being unconditionally constructive, saying win-win or no deal, and cooperating.

Building block 3: Theoretical foundation

The theoretical foundation constitutes the third building block of the proposed OSR building framework and comprises of the following: the stakeholder concept (Freeman, 1984) and Ferguson’s (1984) proposition of a relational paradigm to public relations; the excellence theory (Grunig, 1983); and the relationship management theory (Ledingham, 2003).

The stakeholder concept

The stakeholder concept is predominantly referred to as the ‘stakeholder theory’ (Donalson & Preston, 1995; Friedman & Miles, 2002; Antonacopoulou & Méric, 2005; Rensburg et al, 2008; Agle, Donalson, Freeman, Jensen, Mitchell & Wood, 2008; Luoma-aho & Paloviita, 2010; Johansen & Nielsen, 2011). However, Freeman (1994, p. 413) specifically states that “there is no such thing as the stakeholder theory”, it is a “...framework, a set of ideas from which a number of theories can be derived” (Freeman, Harrison, Wicks, Parmar & De Colle, 2010, p. 63). Fassin (2009, p. 116) also

emphasises that the stakeholder concept has potential for theory development and that it requires a proper theoretical body of work. In support of these arguments, the stakeholder concept will be utilised as the preferred term and will be considered as a collection of ideas that places focus on the maximisation of value for stakeholders (Freeman et al, 2010, p. 28) that is aligned with the organisation's strategy to ensure mutual goal fulfillment. The stakeholder concept proposes a *stakeholder mindset* within the organisation to ensure organisational survival, which implies that "...business is fully situated in the realm of humanity" (Freeman et al, 2010, p. 24;29). For the purpose of this study, Donaldson and Preston's (1995) normative paradigm and studies that focused on the relational perspective of the stakeholder concept are applicable:

- ***Normative paradigm:*** Based on a study conducted by Donaldson and Preston (1995, p. 65-6) in which various issues and implications associated with the stakeholder concept were explored in terms of descriptive precision, instrumental power and normative validity of the stakeholder concept evident in management literature, three paradigms, namely: the normative, instrumental and descriptive were proposed. The normative paradigm is the most applicable to this study and implies that organisations with high moral standards will simultaneously place value on true stakeholder engagement, characterised by qualities such as trust, fairness and dialogue (Amaeshi, 2010, p. 16). According to Mainardes, Alves and Raposo (2011, p. 233), the normative paradigm forms the foundation of the stakeholder concept and is orientated towards establishing a relationship between the organisation and stakeholders within an ethical and morally acceptable framework, thereby moving away from economic interests. The normative paradigm places high regard on human qualities in economic activity and integrate the notion that a collective working relationship developed within a framework of fairness, honesty and trust, will create more value for the organisation over time as oppose to pursuing profit driven objectives.
- ***The relational perspective:*** The relational perspective of strategic management "...brings to the forefront of our attention the relational nature of organizational life" (Antonacopoulou & Méric, 2005, p. 30) and is regarded as the original intention of the stakeholder concept: 'envisioning the organisation and its stakeholders in two-way relationships' (Freeman et al, 2010, p. 109). It also emphasises that a mutually-beneficial OSR to achieve mutually desired end goals is more beneficial than pursuing goals driven by self-interest.

The stakeholder concept from a normative, relational perspective contributes the following to the theoretical framework of this study:

- It places emphasis on having a stakeholder mindset, thereby not only to include numerous stakeholder groups and the ability to balance diverse stakeholder needs, but also to implement a proactive approach towards OSR building, and not to focus on reactive approaches associated with publics;
- The success of the organisation is based on collaboration between the organisation and strategic stakeholders;
- It underlines that relationships should be based on ethical principles and that mutual benefits for both the organisation and stakeholders should be considered, thereby making two-way symmetrical communication principles relevant; and
- It places emphasis on management decision making which will contribute to raising the corporate communication function to the desired strategic level, since stakeholder relationship building is a key function of corporate communicators.

Ferguson's relational paradigm for public relations

The principle of Ferguson's (1984) paradigm is that the *relationship* between the organisation and publics should be the unit of analysis as oppose to focusing on the organisation and its publics as distinct entities (Toth, 2002, p. 205). Within an OSR context it is underlined by Hung's (2007, p. 445-448) evolutionary review of studies on OSR, which include, among others, relational dimensions of OSR (Ballinger, 1991); antecedents and consequences of OSR (Broom et al, 1997); indicators for evaluating relationships (Huang, 1997); the dimensions of OSR (Bruning & Ledingham, 1999); OSR measurement strategies (Hon & Grunig, 1999); methods for evaluating relationships in the antecedent, cultivation and outcome stages of a relationship (Grunig & Huang, 2000); the conceptualisation of OSR in terms of interpersonal communication (Toth, 2002); a cross-cultural, multi-item scale for measuring OSR (Huang, 2001); the influence of relationship on organisational reputation (Grunig & Hung, 2002); and the role of structural and personal commitment in OSR (Bruning & Galloway, 2003). Although Ferguson's paradigm is only a collection of ideas and propositions for further theory development, it is considered as the starting point and a foundational element, together with the stakeholder concept, for the development of an OSR building framework.

The excellence theory

The excellence theory (Grunig, 1983) explains the value of corporate communication to an organisation in identifying specific characteristics of corporate communication that contribute towards organisational effectiveness, which is accomplished when *mutually-beneficial objectives*, identified for both the organisation and stakeholders, are achieved (Grunig & Grunig, 2008, p. 327-8). The excellence theory provides both a *strategic* and *pragmatic, thereby a platform to implement the proposed framework*, contribution to this study:

- **Strategic contribution:** Grunig and Grunig (2008, p. 329-331) explain that corporate communication could be practiced from two different approaches, namely, the *interpretative or symbolic approach*, which emphasises how corporate communication influences stakeholders' perception of the organisation through media relations; and the *strategic management approach* that focuses on the participation of corporate communication executives in strategic decision making which is specifically designed to *build OSR* (Van den Bosch & Van Riel, 1998, p. 25). The strategic management paradigm provides a “normative framework for an ethical, effective, and both organizationally and socially valued approach” that can be applied to the communication practice (Grunig & Grunig, 2008, p. 331). Grunig and Repper (1992, p. 120) offer two important proponents on the strategic management of corporate communication: Firstly, communication practitioners have to be part of the strategic management of the overall organisation through environmental scanning and providing inputs to define the organisational mission and objectives, which provides direction from the organisational level. Secondly, communication practitioners should also manage communication programmes strategically; thereby corporate communication itself should be practiced strategically, which is achieved through strategic stakeholder identification and the proactive resolution of issues by means of symmetrical communication programmes. Based on this discussion it is evident that *building OSR is both central to practicing corporate communication strategically and for corporate communication to contribute to the strategic level of the organisation, since sustainable OSR are required to achieve the organisational mission which requires continuous research to identify stakeholder needs and to detect issues of concern.*
- **Pragmatic contribution:** The pragmatic contribution as indicated implies that it could aid the implementation of the proposed SISOSR framework, and is based on the key characteristics of

the excellence theory, which, inter alia, include the importance to involve senior communication executives in the strategic management process, the integration of communication functions and two-way symmetrical communication. Furthermore, communication excellence can be illustrated against three levels, namely programme, departmental and organisational. Since OSR building is central to the excellence theory, the proposition is thus that *the excellence communication function should be integrated in the communication department to ensure the successful implementation and facilitation of the proposed OSR building framework.*

The excellence theory therefore provides the required context for the implementation of the proposed OSR building framework and has the means to raise corporate communication to the desired strategic level.

The relationship management theory

Based on Littlejohn's (1983, p. 13-14) criteria of a theory, Ledingham (2003, p. 190) proposed the following theory of relationship management: The effective management of OSR "around common interests and shared goals, over time, results in mutual understanding and benefit" for interacting organisations and stakeholders. The applicability of this theory to this study is encapsulated by Ledingham's (2003, p. 192) statement that "relationship management specifies how to build toward *symmetry (managing OSR around common interests and shared goals)* and when to apply the approach (*over time*). Moreover, the relationship management theory not only *predicts outcomes and the conditions* under which those occur..." [own emphasis], but also accommodates theories that only explain part of the relationship building process. The relationship management theory offers an *affirmative contribution* to this study, since it confirms and reiterates the rationale and argument behind the OSR building framework.

A SEQUENTIAL INTEGRATED SUSTAINABLE ORGANISATION-STAKEHOLDER RELATIONSHIP (SISOSR) FRAMEWORK

The proposed SISOSR framework is based on three key characteristics, which also constitute the acronym for the framework. Firstly, it is *sequential*. Saz-Carranza and Vernis (2006, p. 417) argue that a sequential process is characterised by linearity that is usually composed of emergence, evolution and possible dissolution steps which is promoted by this framework through a three

phased process approach whereby one phase is dependent on the successful completion of the previous phase. Secondly, it is *integrated* which implies the integration of stakeholder identification, OSR development and OSR maintenance, which are normally studied independently, into one OSR building framework. This is based on the rationale that OSR cannot be built if strategic stakeholders have not been identified; OSR that have been built need to be maintained to ensure optimal organisational effectiveness; and that stakeholder identification, OSR development and OSR maintenance are interrelated and should be studied as a collective whole to more sufficiently explain the process and elements of OSR building. Thirdly, it is *sustainable* which is often associated with progress and OSP, which Smith and Sharicz (2011, p. 74) define as “the result of the activities of the organization...that demonstrate the ability of the organization to maintain viable its business operations...” and can be achieved through the practice of two-way symmetrical communication to establish mutually-beneficial relationships whereby a concern for others’ interests are evident.

Furthermore, the proposed framework is also *generic*, which implies that the same principles could be applied to different situations, thereby not being specific or customised (Arif, 2007, p. 21). Although the SISOSR framework promotes OSR building with *strategic* stakeholders specifically, it is generic in the sense that it does not focus on a specific strategic stakeholder group and that the framework could be applied to both internal and external strategic stakeholder groups. The rationale behind this approach is that some strategic stakeholder groups will be applicable to all organisations, for example employees, but it will also differ depending on the industry of the organisation. A need for a generic approach to address a variety of strategic stakeholders is therefore addressed. Furthermore, it is also generic in that it could assist the organisation in any communication situation, not only to aid a specific communication activity.

A graphic illustration of the proposed SISOSR framework will be provided, followed by a brief explanation of the key concepts and process of the framework.

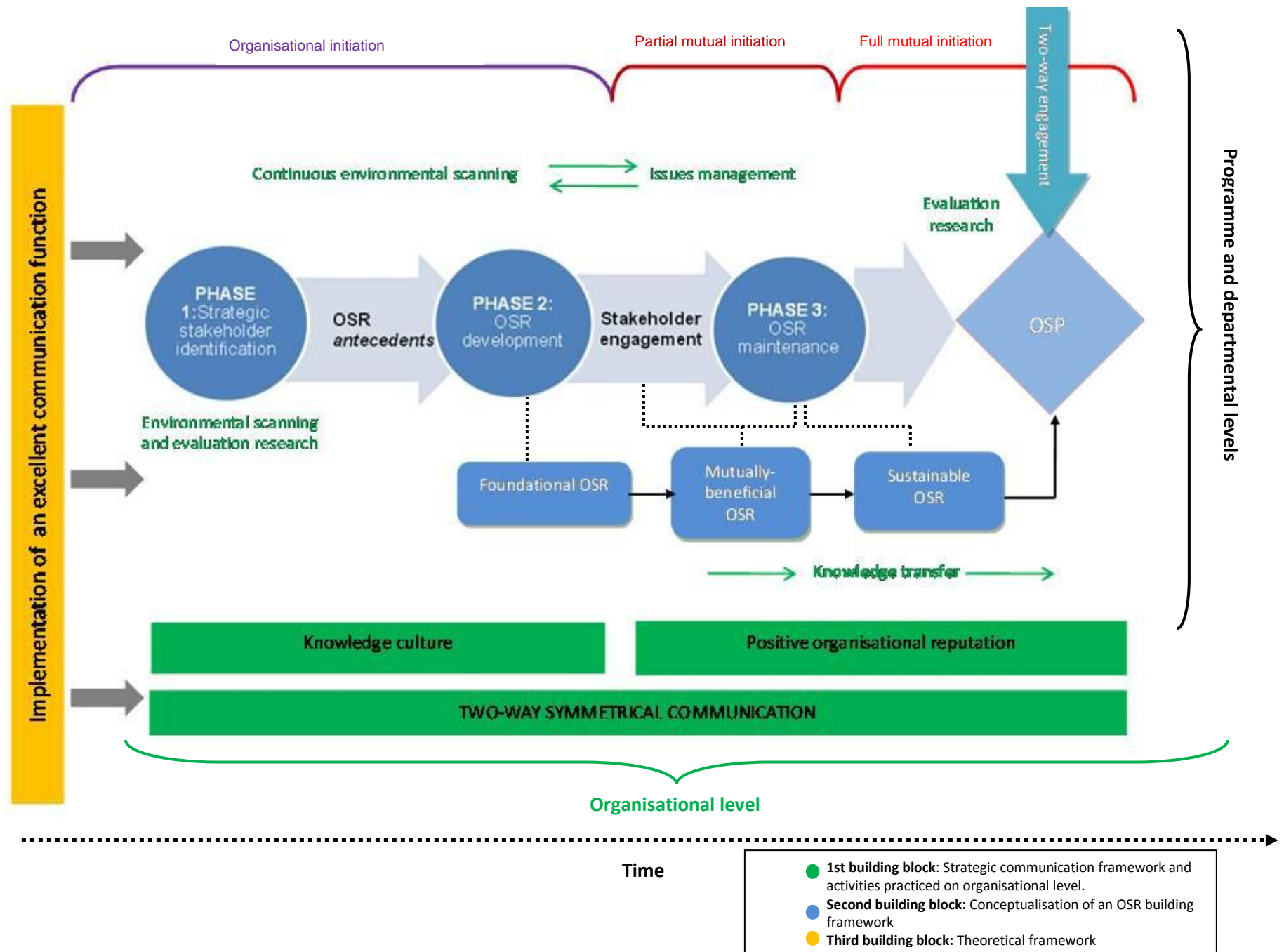


Figure 1: A conceptual Sequential Integrated Sustainable Organisation-Stakeholder Relationship (SISOSR) framework

Prior to explaining the process behind the SISOSR framework, it is important to understand how the framework should be interpreted. Firstly, the green elements and text of the framework represent the first building block of the framework, namely the strategic communication foundation. It also represents all the corporate communication actions that should be executed on *organisational level*. The strategic communication foundation therefore not only serves as an important basis of the SISOSR framework, but also emphasises how corporate communication contributes towards the overall strategic management of the organisation to contribute towards organisational effectiveness. Secondly, the blue elements of the framework present the second building block of the framework, namely the conceptualisation of OSR building. As illustrated, the actual relationship building process occurs on *departmental* and *programme levels* of the organisation. Lastly, the third building block of the framework, namely, the theoretical foundation is represented by the yellow area, which embodies integration of the excellence function within the communication department which will allow the implementation of the proposed actions, and in essence, is a prerequisite for the successful implementation of the SISOSR framework. Furthermore, the establishment of an excellent communication department and OSR building in itself occurs *over time*, which represents a continuous process.

The framework will be discussed as a *process* in which the various elements of the framework will be discussed *in order of development*. It should be noted, that although an order of development is proposed, these building blocks, and hence the three organisational levels, are interlinked, in that the elements proposed by one building block and organisational level becomes applicable and necessary for the achievement of elements proposed by another building block and organisational level.

Establishment of an excellent communication function within the communication department

The implementation of the excellent function within the communication department supports the principles of the theories presented in building block 3: It allows the development of strategic communication programmes for various strategic stakeholders (stakeholder concept); it focuses on the relationship between the organisation and stakeholders (relationship management paradigm); it proposes a symmetrical two-way communication process to allow the establishment of mutually-beneficial OSR (relationship management theory and stakeholder concept); and it emphasises the importance of practicing corporate communication strategically and how corporate communication could contribute towards the overall strategic management of the organisation (stakeholder concept).

Hence, the implementation of an excellent communication function could not only be considered as a prerequisite for the SISOSR framework, but it could also make the principles of these theories a realisation.

On programme level, it is proposed that senior communication executives could be involved in the strategic management process of the organisation since communication programmes for strategic stakeholders (identified through the utilisation of the strategic stakeholder methodology proposed by the second building block of the framework) could become part of this overall strategic management process. The strategic communication foundation also becomes applicable at this stage, since strategic stakeholders are identified, in addition to the actions of the strategic stakeholder methodology, by means of research. It is proposed that the communication programmes for these strategic stakeholders should be managed strategically through continuous research, the implementation of measurable objectives and evaluation strategies to determine the effectiveness of these programmes to meet mutually-desired end goals. This also resembles the environmental scanning, evaluation research and issues management to resolve issues of concern proposed by the strategic communication framework.

It is suggested that the communication department should be headed by a senior corporate communication manager with formal communication training and experience who has the required corporate communication knowledge to practice two-way symmetrical communication and to ensure that corporate communication is regarded as a strategic function within the organisation. The department should also ideally be staffed with corporate communication professionals that have solid academic and practical knowledge of the field. The corporate communication functions should also be integrated into one single communication department to ensure message consistency and not be placed under the management of another department with a purpose other than communication. It is argued that the two-way symmetrical communication framework should prevail in the department to allow sustainable OSR building. Two-way symmetrical communication could also stimulate participation, mutuality and trust between management and employees. It is advisable that the corporate communication executive should be part of the decision makers, thereby the *dominant coalition*, of the organisation. It is vital that the dominant coalition share the same two-way communication worldview of the communication executive to ensure sustainable OSR building. It is

also important to instill symmetrical internal communication since a collective working relationship is required to successfully instill mutually-beneficial relationships externally.

The integration of the excellence communication function within the communication department provides the foundation and ideal conditions necessary to ensure the successful implementation of the SISOSR framework. This department can only be established if the top management and the organisation as a whole support the two-way symmetrical communication perspective, thereby moving away from serving organisational self-interests to the achievement of mutually-beneficial objectives shared by the organisation and strategic stakeholders.

The strategic communication foundation

The OSR building activities proposed are practiced on *organisational level* and display corporate communication's contribution towards the overall strategic management of the organisation. The successful implementation elements are dependent on the practice of the *two-way symmetrical framework of communication* which will be enabled by the integration of the excellence function within the communication department. To ensure the development of OSR, a positive organisational reputation is required to stimulate the initial attraction of the stakeholder to the organisation. The practice of symmetrical communication could promote openness, honesty, trust, negotiation and collaboration to build and maintain a positive organisational reputation. The establishment of a knowledge culture in the organisation to ensure knowledge transfer is also facilitated by the excellent communication department. Symmetrical internal communication allows employee participation and a collective working relationship to promote knowledge sharing. The integrated spheres of communication excellence encapsulate the requirements for a knowledge culture: The head of the corporate communication department must firstly have the *required knowledge* to practice the two-way symmetrical communication framework; and secondly, the dominant coalition must support the practice of two-way symmetrical communication to enable a *participative organisational culture*. Once a culture of knowledge has been established, *knowledge sharing* could only occur once mutually-beneficial OSR have been built, since knowledge sharing will only occur once a high level of trust has been established between the organisation and strategic stakeholders. Corporate communication executives should conduct continuous environmental scanning, in conjunction with other stakeholder identification methodology, to identify strategic stakeholders, to

obtain more information on these stakeholder groups and detect issues of concern in order to employ issues management proactively to resolve problems prior to developing into crises. Environmental scanning, evaluation research should be conducted during the stakeholder identification phase of the framework to further determine what the identified strategic stakeholders' needs and wants are and during the OSR maintenance phase to ensure that stakeholder needs are being met. Although evaluation research is predominantly relevant to the organisational level, it could also become relevant on programme level as it could contribute towards developing measurable objectives for the communication programmes for each stakeholder.

The conceptualisation of OSR building

The process of OSR building will be explained against the three proposed phases of OSR building, namely; strategic stakeholder identification; OSR development; and OSR maintenance as well as the two sub-phases of OSR antecedents and stakeholder engagement. This discussion will also highlight the development of a foundational OSR, to a mutually-beneficial OSR, to a sustainable OSR and eventual organisation-stakeholder partnerships against the three phases of the SISOSR framework. Phase 1 and 2 of the framework is also predominantly driven by *organisational initiation* which implies that the organisation is the initiator of the OSR. Phase 3 is characterised by *partial mutual initiation* whereby both organisation and the strategic stakeholder, although to a lesser extent, is starting to initiate engagement to *full mutual engagement* through two-way engagement on OSP level. Furthermore, the second building block of the framework occurs on *programme and departmental levels* and encapsulates the *strategic* practice of corporate communication.

- **Phase 1: Strategic stakeholder identification**

Since the organisation is the initiator at this stage of OSR building, corporate communication executives should identify all strategic stakeholder groups and select those groups that display a high degree of stakeholder salience. Furthermore, these groups should display a high level of involvement and the costs of engaging in these stakeholders should not exceed the benefits. As stipulated in Figure 1, continuous environmental scanning and evaluation research need to be conducted to obtain more information on the needs of these stakeholder groups.

- **Phase 2: OSR development**

The actual OSR development phase is preceded by certain OSR antecedents and has the proposed outcome of stakeholder engagement. Within this phase, the *foundational OSR*, as presented by the OSR development continuum, is developed which will evolve into mutually-beneficial OSR, sustainable OSR and eventual OSP over time. As mentioned earlier, this phase is characterised by predominant organisational initiation and only at stakeholder engagement phase partial mutual initiation becomes evident.

In conjunction with the establishment of an excellent communication department and strategic communication framework, four OSR antecedents, which is considered as the sub-phase prior to phase 2 of the framework, should be evident which will stimulate the OSR development process: Once strategic stakeholders have been identified, the organisation should reflect its *worthiness to be trusted*. This is closely linked to the establishment of a positive organisational reputation and would become evident through open and honest communication through the practice of two-way symmetrical communication that is supported by the dominant coalition of the organisation. To stimulate OSR building, the organisation and stakeholder should experience a sense of *association* with one another. Furthermore, it is argued that the need for a communication programme becomes evident once both the organisation and stakeholders' actions have *consequences* on one another because the need to collectively work towards reaching mutual desired end-goals is higher. Lastly, both the organisation and strategic stakeholders will have certain *expectations* prior to the relationship, and if not met throughout the OSR, the relationship will not endure. Continuous two-way symmetrical communication *practiced over time* ensures the development of trust, control mutuality, relationship satisfaction, relational commitment and mutual understanding between the identified strategic stakeholders and the organisation, which constitute the desired elements of a foundational OSR.

- **Phase 3: OSR maintenance**

A foundational OSR will evolve into a mutually-beneficial OSR when stakeholder engagement has been achieved and the OSR has been maintained for a period of time. Further maintenance of the mutually-beneficial OSR will lead to sustainable OSR. For the purpose of this study, stakeholder engagement has been proposed as a two-dimensional approach. The first dimension of stakeholder engagement occurs upon the implementation of a foundational OSR. It thereby it serves as an

outcome of OSR. To move towards a mutually-beneficial OSR, the organisation has to engage stakeholders to partake in organisational decision making and problem solving. Continuous environmental scanning will also assist the organisation to detect possible risks associated with conflicts of interests, which is essential when engaging stakeholders in organisational activities and decision making. This dimension of stakeholder engagement is therefore characterised by *organisational initiation*. Although stakeholder engagement paves the way towards a mutually-beneficial OSR, a degree of OSR maintenance is also required to establish a fully-fledged mutually-beneficial OSR through the use of maintenance strategies. The mutual dependence and reciprocity experienced at foundational OSR level, is maximised within a mutually-beneficial OSR, whereby the organisation and strategic stakeholders are fully aware of the mutual dependence to achieve relational objectives. A sustainable OSR is specifically characterised by shared meaning and decision making as well as cooperative working relationship brought about through these maintenance strategies. At this level, both the organisation and strategic stakeholders act in the best interest of one another and full mutual initiation becomes evident.

Since environmental scanning and issues management were promoted as corporate communications strategies that should be conducted throughout the OSR building process to detect issues of concern, it is assumed that OSR building is not a smooth running process and various elements could hinder the OSR building process. Evaluation research becomes evident at programme and departmental levels within the OSR maintenance phase. Since OSR are multi-dimensional, which implies that strategic stakeholders require organisations to fulfill personal, professional and community relationship needs, the organisation should determine whether these needs have been met to further strengthen the OSR. As part of evaluation research the organisation must both evaluate whether the communication and relational needs of the stakeholders have been met by means of feedback; advisory or consultant groups; interviews, focus groups or surveys; social media, online chat rooms and/or blogs. Symmetrical conflict resolution strategies should be employed to seek solutions to problems through open and mutual decision making.

OSP

Through continuous two-way symmetrical communication practiced over time, the sustainable OSR will evolve into an OSP which is characterised by a cooperative working relationship to achieve mutually-desired end goals and shared responsibility between the organisation and stakeholders. At

this level, stakeholder engagement has evolved into *two-way engagement* whereby engagement is initiated from both the organisation and strategic stakeholders which is characterised by a *mutual process, collaborative problem solving* and *stewardship*. The organisation and stakeholder now work collectively to achieve mutually-desired end goals. Through knowledge transfer evident at this stage of the framework, collaborative problem solving becomes evident. The capabilities of the organisation and strategic stakeholders are now combined to reach mutually-beneficial solutions to problems to achieve a shared goal. Stewardship is experienced at this level, whereby both the stakeholder and organisation act as a steward of one another; both act in the best interest of the partnership, and hence, one another.

CONCLUSION

This article contextualised the current emphasis and need for OSR to ensure organisational survival and explored the need for OSR building frameworks that explain the process of OSR in which the need for accepting corporate communication as a strategic function has subsequently also been highlighted, since OSR is at the heart of corporate communication.

The limitation of the SISOSR framework is that it is presented as a normative ideal and future studies should focus on testing this framework in practice with the aim of developing a model. Furthermore, since this framework focuses on strategic stakeholders, future studies could focus on specific strategic stakeholder groups, and customised phases pertaining to a specific stakeholder group could be added to this generic framework.

ENDNOTE

This article is based on a summary of Mrs Slabbert's literature review conducted towards her doctorate degree with Prof Barker as supervisor.

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