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Communication Planning: Agility is a Game Changer in Strategy Development

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this conceptual article is to explore what agility means for communication planning. Agility is focused on adaptation to change. A review of current communication planning models shows that most models are focused on long-term detailed planning with little room to fully adapt to change. In contrast, agility encourages to focus on choices to be tested, not only at the output or tactic levels but for every choice in the strategy. This implies that we should alter our idea of evaluation as the final step in our planning models and focus much more on goal-based and goal-free formative evaluation, in order to test choices over and over again and show that strategy is not a product but a process of adaptation. The design of an agile communication strategy must be short and simple and show the coherence of the choices made. Based on the literature in business and marketing strategy modeling, a framework for an agile communication strategy with eight building blocks is presented. The intention of this model is to introduce a framework that helps to see strategy building as a narrative that ensures coherence in the choices made and offers room for fully adapting to change.

Introduction

There is nothing surprising about the fact that organizations are transforming from rather static, bureaucratic, and hierarchical institutions into more open and responsive ones. As Salo (2017), from the world-leading strategy consultancy McKinsey, concludes: "Rapid changes in competition, demand, technology, and regulations have made it more important than ever for organizations to be able to respond and adapt quickly" (p. 1). Many strategic communication scholars have echoed Grunig et al. (2002), emphasizing the new role of communication professionals in aligning organizations and stakeholders by influencing organizational strategic decision-making. Tench et al. (2016, p. 119), for example, showed that two-thirds of the respondents to the European Communication Monitor 2016 were using their strategic role, bringing in reflective capacities to align organizations and stakeholders. Some years earlier, the Arthur W. Page Society (2013) emphasized another aspect of the changing role of the Chief Communication Officers:

> Speed, transparency, and globalization continue to be major factors in staying on top and ahead of communications trends and issues. Today's CCO more than ever needs to have the right long- and short-term plans, the right people and the right processes in place to effectively anticipate and respond to issues in real time. (p. 17)

Thus, communication professionals play a role in the adaptation of organizations to their environments and should themselves use planning models that are also open to adaptation.

The worldwide COVID-19 pandemic revealed that circumstances can change overnight and in a rather disruptive way. However, more frequently, change and even disruption develop in more

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hidden ways, delivering only "weak signals," as Weick and Sutcliffe (2007, pp. 8–9) called the phenomena. We therefore need "a system to concentrate on what is going on here and how" (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007, p. 35) and "a style of mental functioning that enables continuous learning as well as ongoing refinement of expectations" (p. 39). This is what Ries (2011) and many other business authors call "adapting to change" and the need for "the learning organization" (Senge, 2006).

One methodology for adapting to change is known as "agile working," meaning that organizations should become significantly more flexible, faster, and more responsive by establishing new ways of planning, organizing, and stakeholder interaction, as Zerfass, Dühring, Berger, and Brockhaus (2018, p. 6) define it (see also van Ruler, 2014). In a research project on the use of agility in organizations, Comella-Dorda et al. (2018) undertook a survey of clients from McKinsey and found that three-quarters of their respondents considered organizational agility as a top or top-three priority on their units' agendas and reported that more transformations appeared to be on the way. Of those who had not begun agile transformations, more than half said that plans for either unit-level or company-wide transformations were in the works.

There is quite a deal of evidence suggesting that organizations are indeed transforming to become more agile in their working (De Meuse et al., 2010). This has its consequences for the role of the communication professional, moving from only focusing on the implementation of business strategy to also facilitating strategy adaptation, as well as the way communication activities are planned. The purpose of this article is to explore what agility means for communication planning models and to introduce a framework for agile communication strategy development.

The essence of strategic communication

The concept of strategic communication has its origins in the military, but in the last two decades, it has been adopted by non-military organizations. Today, there are numerous books available with "strategic communication" in the title. As Botan (2018, p. 3) claims, "[s]trategic communication is big and getting bigger."

Sweden was one of the first countries to transform some of its academic public relations and marketing communication programs into strategic communication programs. Falkheimer and Heide (2014, p. 128) see strategic communication as a phenomenon of an organization's targeted communication processes in contemporary society, including the domains of organizational communication, public relations, and marketing communications. For them, strategic communication is closely related to the concept of corporate communication (cf. e.g., Cornelissen, 2017): "Corporate communication also has a holistic approach to organization communication, but it has a predominantly instrumental and functionalist view based in management and marketing research" (Falkheimer & Heide, 2014, p. 131). They prefer to call the field "strategic communication" because of the preoccupation of corporate communication with its origins in the fields of management and marketing, while strategic communication originates from media and communication studies and public relations (Falkheimer & Heide, 2014, p. 134). Moreover, they criticize the dominance of a transmission view of communication in corporate communication theory. Falkheimer and Heide heavily lean on an interpretive and social constructionist view of communication: "In a contemporary, social, constructionist understanding of organizations, communication is not only a process for information dissemination, but also the very process of constructing and maintaining an organization" (Falkheimer & Heide, 2014, p. 130).

A decade after the establishment of the *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, Zerfass et al. (2018, p. 487) concluded that the strategic communication research domain was still not clearly delineated. In a special issue of this journal on the future directions of strategic communication, all of the authors attempted to define the boundaries of the field. Although they differed in the details (see Zerfass et al., 2018, pp. 487–488), it is obvious that all of the authors in this special issue defined the domain as concerned with all communication activities in the context of strategy development and implementation of an organization or other entity, and that "strategic communication is most of all

seen as a means to engage in conversions of strategic significance to its goals" (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 491). Thus, we may conclude that there are two pillars on which strategic communication rests – organizational strategy and communication – as well as a link between these two phenomena (van Ruler, 2018). In other words, strategic communication is about communication, in the context of organizational strategy development and implementation. Botan (2018, pp. 8–9) adds that what defines strategic communication as such is the use of strategic information as input in communication planning itself.

We may conclude that strategic communication is closely related to strategy development by the organization as a whole and should also be strategic in itself. The kind of strategy development methodology in use in an organization will, of course, lead the kind of communication strategy used.

The debate on strategy development methodology

In most communication planning methodology, objectives need to be smart and based on a well-built diagnosis, with tactics described in detail, as Nothhaft and Schölzel (2015) state. With regard to this perspective, they warn that "[t]here is a tendency in management to adopt a clinical, scientific discourse which seems perfectly rational, until it is confronted with the 'irrationality' of reality" (p. 23). Although they do not use the term "agile" itself, they argue for adaptation to changes in the environment, which can be seen as a form of agile working.

The term "agile" comes from Greek (from the mythological figure Achilles) and the Latin word *agilitas*, which refer to the ability of an individual to move their body efficiently and rapidly (Muller, 1920). Sheppard and Young (2006) defined agility in sports accordingly, as "a rapid whole-body movement with change of velocity or direction in response to a stimulus." In today's world of management, agility is more a mindset or philosophy, or even a buzz-word used for describing continuous adaptation and greater speed of adjustment aiming to be as effective as possible. The ultimate claim of organizational agility is that by better adaptation and rapid action or response, an agile organization can deliver higher returns faster to shareholders (Hoogveld, 2020). This requires strategy planning methodology that is suitable for adapting to change.

There is indeed a long-lasting debate in strategy theory concerning whether strategy is an a priori analytic and deliberate planning process or an emergent process originating in a specific environment (for an overview, see Mintzberg et al., 1995). *Deliberate strategy* entails a top-down approach in which management specifies the strategy and the actions based on an analysis of the situation. Deliberate strategy assumes that the manager has almost complete control over how to allocate the internal and external resources and manipulate these to suit the objectives. The focus is on prediction of the future and control. The most well-known school in this respect is the planning school (for a discussion of schools in strategy theory, see Whittington, 2001).

In contrast, *emergent strategy* focuses on learning what works in practice. Emergent strategy evolves in response to changes in the environment. In its pure form, there is no a priori intention determining how and what to achieve. Mintzberg and Waters (1985) argued that the application of the pure concepts of deliberate and emergent strategy are very rare in practice. In an attempt to find a solution to the sharp dichotomy in the debate on strategy as an a priori analytic and deliberate planning process or an emergent process originating from the environment, they proposed that strategy development be seen as both deliberate and emergent. They combined both perspectives into a model in which there is an intention upfront, of which some parts are realized but others are not, and where there is room to incorporate what is emerging and to eliminate what is no longer relevant. This implies that the strategy realized is partly deliberate and partly emergent. It also implies that strategy is an ongoing deliberative process that needs to be frequently reflected upon in order to adapt to internal and external emergent changes and to check whether one is still doing the right things in the right way.

As Whittington (1993) and Mintzberg et al. (1995), and more recently Koch (2011) and others, describe, theoretical approaches to the question of how to develop strategy have changed over time. Classical strategy theory is about rational long-term planning, while more recent strategy theory is

much more about continuous change, which is conceived as much more emergent and incremental. Strategy implies movement from the present position to a desirable but uncertain future position. The choices made are conceived as based on a series of linked hypotheses, no less but also no more, as Martin (2014, p. 7) concludes. Koch (2011), Viki (2015) and many others have echoed this statement. As Viki (2015) claims, the more turbulent the environment, the more adaptive the strategy should be in order to be able to respond to the evolving reality. We might conclude that strategy development today is seen above all as being based on assumptions to be repeatedly tested and adjusted accordingly. Today's strategy development theories are much more oriented toward emergence and the adjustment of ideas based on the regular monitoring of what is emerging – testing what works and what does not – than toward rational long-term planning (Hoogveld, 2020; King, 2010; Koch, 2011; Martin, 2014). This also means that we must alter our idea of evaluation as the final step in our planning models. Or, as Verĉiĉ (2019) states: "Strategy is always work in progress, and what is of the utmost importance is planning as the process, not plans as products" (p. 57).
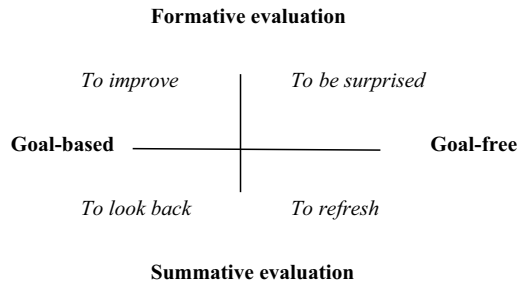
The role of evaluation in communication planning models

In the social sciences, a distinction is made between summative and formative evaluation, where summative concerns evaluation of the outcome and formative evaluation is meant to provide feedback about a program as it appears in action and to describe how it works (Maruyama & Ryan, 2014, p. 414). If it is true that strategy is primarily seen as based on assumptions to be repeatedly tested, formative evaluation must be at the heart of the communication planning model in use.

It is striking that in many communication planning models, evaluation is narrowed down to summative evaluation (e.g., Potter, 1997; Weintraub & Pinkleton, 2001; Vos et al., 2004; Watson & Noble, 2005; Szyska & Dürig, 2008; *PR News*, 2013; Smith, 2013, 2021; see also the comments of Gregory & Macnamara, 2019). One consequence of this view on the role of evaluation is that accommodating change is not part of the planning model. However, some do identify other forms of evaluation. Smith (2013, 2021), for example, differentiates between formative and summative evaluation, insofar as formative evaluation should be undertaken in order to define the situation and develop the objectives. In other words, formative evaluation is the first phase in this model, while summative evaluation occurs in the fourth and final phase and is used to check whether the objectives have been met. There is no room or attention paid to any change that might occur during the implementation of the plan. Consequently, formative evaluation is not meant to cope with change but to form the strategy itself.

Most communication planning models can be equated with models from the planning school (Whittington, 1993). As explained in previous work (van Ruler, 2015), these planning models provide an illusion of stability and control. Many researchers in public relations argue that we should alter our perspective. Grunig (2009) claims, for example, that "[m]ost important is that we abandon the illusion of control" (p. 4). It is, as Grunig continues, disputable whether such control has ever been realistic. Moreover, we may readily conclude that it is not at all realistic in a period in which every (self-proclaimed) stakeholder can and does provide knowledge and opinions in the public sphere about whatever they believe is important, as Phillips and Young (2009, p. 6) draw attention to in their book. This is also why McNamara (2014) challenged the Barcelona Principles at the AMEC 2014 conference in Amsterdam, stating that we should not only see evaluation as focused on the assessment of outcomes but also as providing input to gain insights relevant to decision-making; and not only to define our objectives but to define our actions as well.

If we are to take this seriously, we must develop a planning model in which choices are seen as hypotheses and evaluation is a legitimate element that tests the choices made. That is, we need a model that emphasizes both forms of evaluation. While Buhmann and Likely (2018, pp. 626–627) emphasize more aspects of evaluation than most communication planning models, they use different labels for it. They use the concept of "formative evaluation" for the input needed for a situation analysis as the first phase of the planning process (cf. Smith, 2013, 2021). For what is normally called formative evaluation,

Formative evaluation

To improve   *To be surprised*

Goal-based ——————————|—————————— **Goal-free**

To look back   *To refresh*

Summative evaluation

Figure 1. Aspects of evaluation (van Ruler, 2015).

they use the concept of "process evaluation," meaning the evaluation of the outputs during implementation. In their model, "summative evaluation" is used to assess the outcome of the activities in relation to the objectives that were set earlier. Consequently, their model is more oriented to change than most planning models, but only on the output level, not on the goal levels. Although they conceptualize planning as a cycle, it is not completely dynamic in the sense meant in current strategy theory.

There is yet another aspect of evaluation that needs attention and may be helpful in developing a more agile communication strategy model. Scriven suggested that we differentiate between goal-based and goal-free evaluation (Scriven, 1974, 1991). Goal-based evaluation entails making sure that you are working toward reaching your goals (which is called formative evaluation in the social sciences and what Buhmann & Likely, 2018, call process evaluation) or that you have achieved your goals (which we normally call summative). Goal-free evaluation, however, is intended to gain all kinds of insights relevant to decision-making (which we have called formative above) or to review the planning process itself (which we might call summative). Goal-free evaluation avoids tunnel vision (Scriven, 1974) and is a good means to manage the unexpected, as Weick and Sutcliffe (2007, p. 8) stated. Thus, goal-free evaluation, on the one hand, is intended to monitor what is going on and identify unanticipated effects and, on the other, concerns a post-hoc review of the whole planning process (see Figure 1).

Scriven was the first to use the terms "goal-based" and "goal-free," but the idea of reflection in planning in this way is not new at all; it was a basic concept in Kurt Lewin's (1946) action research approach for professionals (see also Burnes, 2004). Lewin argued that professionals should continuously reflect on their planning and actions. In his model of professional work, he claims that every action must lead to observation of the reactions and to reflection on these, to the benefit of the planning of the subsequent action. Planning, Lewin (1946, p. 38) says, normally starts with a general idea. Fact-finding about the situation is then required to turn the idea into a plan and to start acting. Highly developed manufacturers, he says, will subsequently undertake more fact-finding, first to determine whether the action was successful, and second to incorporate what is learned into the planning of the following actions or even to alter the overall plan if necessary: "Rational social management, therefore, proceeds in a spiral of planning, executing, reconnaissance or fact-finding about the result of the action." (p. 38).

This model of professional work formed the basis of the Plan, Do, Check, Act(ualize) cycle is known as the Deming cycle for continuous improvement (Edwards Deming, 1982), and is equivalent to the idea of iterative testing and refinement of actions and goals (Schwaber, 2014; Sutherland, 2015). Agility, therefore, supports the dominance of formative evaluation, with both goal-based and goal-free evaluation. Thus, not only actions but also goals should be seen as assumptions to be tested.

Agility versus linearity in planning model methodology

Like many management scholars and management consultancies, (Bailey 2012; PWC, 2015) claimed that businesses and other organizations need to re-think the way they operate, with many now favoring the "agile organization." Such an organization strives to make change a routine part of organizational life in order to reduce or eliminate the organizational trauma that paralyzes many businesses attempting to adapt to new markets and environments. Because change is perpetual, they claim, the agile enterprise is able to nimbly adjust to and take advantage of emerging opportunities.

Agility may be positioned in the debate on strategy development, for example, in relation to the difference between strategy as a plan and strategy as a pattern, or the difference between deliberate and emergent strategy, as mentioned above (Mintzberg et al., 1995). However, it can also be positioned in terms of fundamental differences in approaches to organization itself. In this respect, Putnam and Pacanowsky (1983) were the first to introduce interpretivism into organizational communication studies, arguing that communication is the means to construct organization. Weick (1987) subsequently coined the notion of "enactment" and noted that organizational life is to be seen as a product of ongoing enactment (see also Heath, 2000; Taylor & van Every, 2000), which also appears to reflect the idea of agility. Weick and Sutcliffe (2007) sketched the outlines of an agile organization in their premise that "expectations can get you into trouble, unless you create a mindful infrastructure that continually does all of the following: track small failures; resist oversimplification; remain sensitive to operations; maintain capabilities for resilience; and take advantage of shifting locations of expertise" (p. 2). "Good management is mindful management," they claim, meaning "that they organize themselves in such a way that they are better able to notice the unexpected in the making and halt its development" (p. 18). When this counts for an organization and its manner of coping with change, it also encourages us to make our communication planning models more agile.

The vast majority of models in public relations and communication management planning are still rather linear, representing the functional relationship between the elements as a line or flow from one element to the other. One has to make choices regarding the first element before one can make any choice regarding the next, and choices are not seen as hypotheses but as established. Christensen et al. (2008) scrutinized the notion of corporate communication planning models as fixed input-throughput-output models that expect members of the organization to operate in the service of the communication plan, while it should be the other way around. In the field of public relations, Gilpin and Murphy (2006, p. 375) stated that it is very peculiar that, while a non-linear approach is normal for crisis communication, most non-crisis public relations planning is very mechanistic and detailed, and oversimplifies the complexity of normal organizational life (Gilpin & Murphy, 2006, p. 376). They suggest the use of the concept of the "enacting organization" (from Daft & Weick, 2001), actively engaging in the world rather than passively reacting to events.

Enacting organizations are heavily invested in learning by doing, playing an active part in the entire interpretation cycle, from awareness to sense-making to learning and back again, as Gilpin and Murphy (2006) cite Daft and Weick (2001). This helps organizations to construct mechanisms to interpret ambiguous events and to provide meaning and direction for participants. These processes are flexible rather than rigid, situated rather than sweeping, and gently indicative rather than strictly prescriptive. Moreover, Gilpin and Murphy (2006) also proposed improvised teamwork, which deals with the unforeseen but should not be mistaken for unskilled decision-making, they say: "Rather than attempting to identify every potential threat and response, (crisis) managers and researchers are free to actively explore new areas of interrelating. This approach therefore embraces the emergent properties of complex systems, instead of striving to contain, control, and predict them" (p. 389). Strategy development should even be seen as a matter of juggling many balls, Jonker (2014) suggested.

All this implies that strategy should only be formulated in relation to the main features and that there should not be any linearity in the elements of the strategy planning method. This is why Ostenwalder and Pigneur (2010) avoid arrows in their strategy model and use the concept of "building

blocks" in their very successful business model canvas (Ostenwalder & Pigneur, 2010). In a recent book, Bland and Osterwalder (2020, pp. 32–29) stipulate that "business modeling" (as they call organizational strategy building) is an iterative process of discovery and validation through continuous testing of ideas on every level on the basis of three questions: Is it feasible? desirable? and viable? Consequently, agile planning models need to focus on choices instead of detailed objectives and tactics.

The difference between plan and strategy

As Tibbie (1997) has shown, the term "strategy" is widely used in public relations, but in a rather ill-defined manner. The term stems from the Greek verb "strategein," which literally means "to build roads" ("stratos agein"), and even in ancient times it was used to mean "building the roads to reach certain goals," "being the leader," as well as "using a ploy to win" (Muller, 1920). Thus, even in ancient Greek, the concept of strategy was interpretable in multiple senses and this is still the case in the field of communication.

Torp (2015) argues that strategy in public relations is often defined as a plan (or action) intended to accomplish specific goals. In this case, strategy is just another word for plan. However, there is also another interpretation of strategy in public relations literature, where strategy is merely one step in the planning method. In one of the most used books on public relations planning, Smith (2013, 2021) claims that the planning process in public relations consists of four phases, with nine steps in total. The first phase involves the analysis of the situation, the organization, and the public. The second phase concerns strategy, consisting of establishing goals and objectives, formulating action and response strategies, and developing the message strategy. The third phase introduces tactics, which means first selecting communication tactics and then implementing the strategic plan. Finally, the fourth phase entails evaluation of the plan. Thus, strategy is merely a phase of the whole planning process and defined as the outcome of the first phase.

Steyn and Puth (2000) take another position and see strategy in communication management as the first phase of the entire planning process. For them, the strategic part of the planning process is decision-making about the objectives. Once decisions have been made, the tactical part, which is about how to attain the objectives, needs to be described (see also Steyn, 2003). King (2010) understands strategy in yet another way, as concerned with how to act, which Steyn and Puth called the tactics. Thus, indeed, strategy has many interpretations in the field of communication planning.

Emphasizing the difference between a plan and a strategy, Martin (2014) argues that strategy is completely different from a plan, if not the opposite. "True strategy is about placing bets and making hard choices," he claims. Moreover, he adds: "Planning typically isn't explicit about what the organization chooses not to do and why. It does not question assumptions. And its dominant logic is affordability; the plan consists of whichever initiatives fit the company's resources. Mistaking planning for strategy is a common trap." He continues, arguing that "[s]trategy making is uncomfortable; it's about taking risks and facing the unknown. Unsurprisingly, managers try to turn it into a comfortable set of activities. But reassurance won't deliver performance."

Strategy thus implies movement from one's present position to a desirable but uncertain future position. The choices made are conceived of as a series of linked hypotheses, no less but also no more. The focus on planning leads seamlessly to cost-based thinking, Martin (2014) argues. Last but not least, many companies use a standard framework and a fill-in-the-blanks exercise that can lead the user to design a strategy entirely around what the company can control. To avoid these traps, Martin (2014) advises that the strategy statement be kept short and simple (far from a detailed plan) and that strategy is not about perfection but concerns choices about the unknown (no more than ambitions, a dot on the horizon) and how to make your logic explicit. Furthermore, he advises professionals to develop strategies not only to eliminate risk but to increase the odds of success. In this respect, as Porter (2011) stated in *What is strategy?*, the most important threat to strategy development is the failure to make a choice. One could even say that – since choices have to be made about the unknown – we should talk about choosing between certain hypotheses. This implies that strategy is not only a specific phase of

the planning process but entails another approach. Since agility is about flexibility and adapting to change, I thus prefer to talk about communication strategy rather than of communication plan.

Building blocks of agile communication strategy development

Looking at modern approaches to strategy development and the requirements of agility, I have constructed a list of requirements for agile communication strategy development. Regarding the design of a strategy, we must emphasize that strategy description – although not a fill-in-the-blanks exercise – should be short and simple (Martin, 2014). Moreover, a good strategy is designed to be coherent – all choices should reinforce and support each other (Zych, 2018). This implies that the development of a strategy is not a matter of phases and steps to be taken but a narrative in itself. For this reason, I prefer the idea of building blocks (cf. Ostenwalder & Pigneur, 2010) rather than arrows. Moreover, it is easier to check coherence if a strategy is designed on one page or one slide (cf. Kuiper, 2019; van Eck & van Zanten, 2014). The idea of building blocks also helps to show the iterative nature of strategy development itself – one can start wherever one wants, as long as choices made in one building block are consistent with choices made in other blocks. Changing an element or notion in one block usually affects another block, which calls for balancing, that is, its adjustment, to adapt to the new situation. The essential concern is balance in the final picture which, as a result, must portray the cohesion of viable choices made. The Final question of this conceptual article is, therefore, what the building blocks of agile communication strategy development should be.

In agility, the idea of quantitative SMART objectives is only valid for the short cycles of delivery of outputs, while agile working methods, such as the scrum, work with a "definition of done" (Sutherland, 2015), that is, a checklist that specifies the criteria that your end project has to meet for you to be satisfied. A definition of done is a narrative and can be described in a quantitative as well as qualitative manner. Another aspect of agile ways of working is the need to specify your dependencies to be successful (Schwaber, 2014; Sutherland, 2015). All these aspects should be part of a building block, called Ambition.

Having an ambition without regularly showing that you are doing the right things in the right way to achieve it is no more than a dream, as Bettag (2014, p. 15) claims. Thus, accountability is inextricably linked to ambition. Since modern strategy-building methodology is seen as a never-ending process, and all parts of a strategy need to be repeatedly tested through formative evaluation, it makes no sense to put the question of accountability at the end of the planning methodology, as is done in most communication planning models. Thus, one of the building blocks needs to be reserved for accountability. The building blocks accountability and ambition are intrinsicably linkedto each other.

No strategy is complete without a game plan in which choices are made about the tactics – the most important choices that will guide the operational activities (Steyn & Puth, 2000). These must be specified in order to determine how the ambition will be met (van Ruler & Korver, 2019, p. 118). In agile ways of working, this might be seen as a scrum-like backlog. A game plan may be seen as the realization of (parts of) the ideal as described in the vision (Sinek, 2011). Therefore, a third building block should be reserved for this game plan with tactical choices.

The key to strategy is the ambition to attain a new communication situation; in other words, to realize (at least partly) one's vision (Bekkers & Mandour, 2017, p. 25). The list of issues arising from an analysis of the internal and external situation is helpful but needs prioritizing in order to determine the objectives. Good strategy identifies the key challenges that must be overcome but also needs a norm to identify what the challenges are. Collins and Porras (1997, p. 78) stress the importance of vision as a norm: "The rare ability to manage continuity and change is closely linked to the ability to develop a vision. Vision provides guidance and gives meaning to what to do and how to do it. A good vision paints a picture that is inspiring and compelling for others and guides what to aim for." Vision is to be seen as the strategic starting point (Bekkers & Mandour, 2017) and works as a touchstone (van Leeuwen, 2018). This vision guides the analysis of the internal and external situation. Thus, one of the

building blocks should be concerned with vision on the ideal role of communication in and for the organization and the added value of the communication department or team.

Botan (2018, p. 13) rightly makes a distinction between what he calls "grand strategy," which is the organizational level of strategy building, and subordinate strategies such as communication strategies, which are used to implement grand strategies. Thus, the first question to be posed concerns what the grand strategy is and how the communication situation is supportive of or a hindrance to the grand strategy. While most planning methods are oriented at analysis of the external situation, the internal situation is equally important. Consequently, two building blocks should be reserved for an analysis of the internal situation as well as the external situation. A confrontation matrix allows to analyze the internal and external communication issues and construct the key objectives in the building block of the ambition.
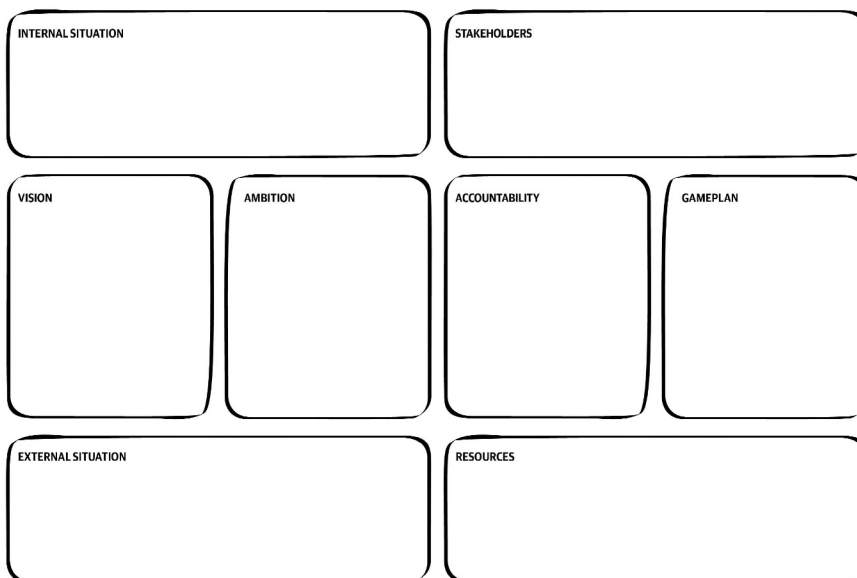
Freeman (1984) was the first to suggest that all kinds of groups and people may have a stake in the organization's success. He proposed that stakeholders should somehow be engaged in the creation of organizational policy. The seventh building block should therefore be reserved to identify the stakeholders and whether they have a role as a public, a target group, a participant, a strategic partner, an enabler or any other distinct group or person who may play an influential role in the success of the communication strategy.

Finally, a strategy is not complete without a specification of the resources needed to make the strategy successful. Resources concern having the necessary finances, time, and competencies to do the job (van Ruler & Korver, 2019; see also Tench et al., 2013). This should also be a building block.

The communication strategy framework

Arranging these building blocks on a one-pager produces a model called the Communication Strategy Framework (see Figure 2). The intention of this model is not to introduce completely different elements to other planning models. The building block idea itself is not new, although vision is normally overlooked in classic communication planning models. What is new, however, is to see the elements as pieces of a puzzle that must be put together to determine what the important choices should be and

Building blocks of the Communication Strategy Framework

INTERNAL SITUATION	STAKEHOLDERS

VISION	AMBITION	ACCOUNTABILITY	GAMEPLAN

EXTERNAL SITUATION	RESOURCES

Figure 2. The eight Building blocks of the Communication Strategy Framework (van Ruler, 2020).

avoid a detailed explanation of how to execute the plan. As a Dutch scholar, teacher, and consultant, I have worked with this model for six years. Communication professionals favor it as an alternative for the classical communication plan model. It facilitates them in making forceful and efficient choices, and it provides a clear picture of the communication strategy in one page. The model does not describe what one should do or which strategy is best. It just sets up and enables the selection of the best choices for the best strategy. If, in the process, possibly less favorable conclusions or choices in one block will by their nature affect the meaning or value of one or more other blocks, revision of the latter must occur until the point where changing elements in the blocks no longer has an effect on others. Only then are all the building blocks in sync and do they reveal the strategic orientation of the creator of the strategy (Brønn, 2014). In my practice, I have observed that this clearly helps communication professionals to bring their strategic insights to the table and also enhances their ability to adapt to change.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to explore what agility means for communication planning modeling. The literature on business strategy development showed that there is a long-lasting debate in strategy theory concerning whether strategy is an a priori analytic and deliberate planning process or an emergent process originating in the environment. The various theoretical positions on how to develop strategy have changed over time. Classical strategy theory is concerned with rational long-term planning, while recent strategy theory is much more about continuous change and is much more emergent and incremental. The more turbulent the environment, the more adaptive a strategy should be in order to be able to respond to the evolving reality. This is why the choices made should be seen as a series of linked hypotheses – as Martin (2014), Koch (2011), and Viki (2015), and many others have stated – rather than as a final product (Verĉiĉ, 2019).

This accords with the methodology of agility and shows that, in strategy theory, agility may also be seen as an important way of working. Agility encourages us to look to contemporary strategy theory, in which strategy development is seen as based on assumptions that must be repeatedly tested and adjusted accordingly. It is much more oriented toward the emergence and the adjustment of ideas based on regular monitoring of what is emerging – testing what works and what does not, as work in progress – than toward rational long-term planning. This implies that we should, above all, alter our idea of evaluation as the final step in our planning models.

In the social sciences, a distinction is made between summative and formative evaluation, where summative means evaluation of the outcome and formative evaluation is intended to provide feedback about a program as it appears in action and to describe how it works (Maruyama & Ryan, 2014, p. 414). A review of current communication planning models showed that in these models there is little room to adapt to change. There are some models, such as that of Buhmann and Likely (2018), which did include what is called formative evaluation in the social sciences, but only on the output or tactics levels and not at the planning level itself. Evaluation is always goal-based, which entails checking whether objectives are being met. It never involves goal-free discovery of other choices that might be made in the strategy. We may conclude that communication planning models do not reflect recent strategy theory but can best be equated with linear models from the classical strategy theory schools, in which planning is focused on detailed objectives and tactics. In contrast, agility encourages us to focus on choices to be tested, not only at the output or tactics levels but for every choice in the strategy.

Yet another question was addressed here, concerning the rather different uses of the term "strategy" in our field. For some, strategy is synonymous with a plan, while for others it is considered one step in the planning process, or merely the phase in which the objectives are planned before the phase in which tactics are planned. However, Martin (2014) showed that strategy is completely different from planning, or even the opposite, claiming that: "True strategy is about placing bets and making hard choices." He adds that: "Planning typically isn't explicit about what the organization chooses not to do and why. It does not question assumptions. And its dominant logic is affordability; the plan consists of

whichever initiatives fit the company's resources. Mistaking planning for strategy is a common trap." In agile ways of working, long-term detailed planning should be replaced by short-term cycles based on a solid strategy. This is why I preferred to use the term strategy for what is normally called a plan in the field of communication.

In order to demonstrate the coherence of the choices made, the design of an agile communication strategy must be short and simple. That is why I preferred the idea of building blocks (Ostenwalder & Pigneur, 2010) that can be presented on one page or one slide. Based on the literature on business and marketing strategy modeling, I constructed a framework for an agile communication strategy with the eight building blocks of vision, internal situation, external situation, ambition, accountability, stakeholders, resources, and game plan. The intention of this model is not to introduce completely different elements to those found in other planning models, but to create a model that helps to see strategy building as a narrative that ensures coherence in the choices made.

Disclosure statement

There is no potential conflict of interest; the model is mine and is published in van Ruler, 2020. The publisher agreed to publish it.

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