

FROM MONOLOGUE TO DIALOGUE: KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR AN APPROACH TO MULTIPLE STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Amidst challenges of economic uncertainty, resource constraints, social movement and unrest, increased pressure is placed on organisations to address diverse stakeholder expectations. Stakeholders are central to the success of an organisation, and this fact compels the latter to engage, be more transparent and respond to stakeholder concerns. Stakeholder engagement is an integral part of ensuring organisational sustainability and success, as it utilises strategic direction and operational excellence to serve as tools for competitive advantage. Contemporary organisations have realised there are opportunities to be derived from changing the nature of organisation–stakeholder relationships, from control to collaboration, from exchange to engagement. With the emergence of strategic communication as an all-encompassing function to achieve the mission of the organisation, the task of the strategic communication professional is to facilitate stakeholder engagement strategies that will elicit evolutionary and mutually defined dialogue, consultation and reciprocal relationships. Although the concept of stakeholder engagement is not new, and there is consensus in the existing literature on its significance, there is no common understanding on what it actually entails. Furthermore, there is a dearth of literature on approaching stakeholder engagement from multiple vantage points, and on the role of the strategic communication professional in facilitating the stakeholder engagement process. To address the need for theory building in the field, this article aims to highlight key considerations (from the literature) for an approach to multiple stakeholder engagement from a strategic communication perspective. This, to provide a strategy for continuous engagement which will result in sustainable relationship building with strategic stakeholders, as well as short-term, secondary stakeholder engagement on the basis of working relationships.

1. INTRODUCTION

The interactive 21st century has empowered organisational stakeholders. A single-voice approach has been replaced by many diverse voices, resulting in greater experimentation, openness to different viewpoints and freedom of speech (Overton-de Klerk & Verwey, 2013, p.371). Freeman's (1984) call to replace a meagre shareholder outlook with a wider perspective in ensuring organisational viability and success, has gained renewed prominence. "As the expansion of the network society accelerates, organizations must review and adjust their policies, actions and communicative behaviour to improve their relationships with increasingly influential stakeholders" (*The Stockholm Accords*, 2010, p.6). Consequently, stakeholder engagement is progressively gaining acceptance and usage in the business environment (O'Higgins & Morgan, 2006, p.62). As a dialogic communication tool, stakeholder engagement offers interactive, mutual learning processes that could promote transformative action and social change (Manetti & Bellucci, 2016, p.985). Now, more than ever, organisations require the cooperation and input of their stakeholders to address the complex and diverse issues characterising contemporary society (Rensburg & De Beer, 2011, p.152). In that sense, the nature of organisation–stakeholder relationships has changed from control to collaboration and from exchange to engagement.

Strategic communication is fast emerging as an all-encompassing function focused on purposeful communication aimed at ensuring the inclusiveness of all voices (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015, p.3). The role of the strategic communication professional is to facilitate a stakeholder engagement strategy that elicits dialogue, consultation and reciprocal relationships that are evolutionary and mutually defined (Cornelissen, 2014, p.55). This could be enabled by the concept of stakeholder inclusivity, which implies that organisations afford stakeholders the right to be heard, and simultaneously accept the responsibility of having to account to them (AA1000SES, 2015). As a philosophical underpinning of the *King IV Report on Corporate Governance* (IoDSA, 2016), stakeholder inclusivity underlines the interdependent relationship between the organisation and its stakeholders. Cognisance of the needs, interests and expectations of strategic stakeholders allows the organisation to become attuned to the opportunities and challenges posed by the economy, society and surrounding environment (IoDSA, 2016).

Despite a recognition in the literature of the importance of stakeholder engagement, it is still regarded as an "under-theorised area" (Greenwood, 2007, p.318; Sloan, 2009, p.38). Rhodes, Bergstrom, Lok and Cheng (2014, p.84) concede that the best approach to managing diverse stakeholder interests and engaging with them, "is still inconclusive". Moreover, there is a dearth of literature on approaching stakeholder engagement from multiple stakeholder vantage points (Cote & Kamm Latham, 2010, p.176) and the role of the strategic communication professional in facilitating the stakeholder engagement process. To meet the need for theory building in the field, this paper aims to provide theoretical considerations for an approach to multiple stakeholder engagement from a strategic communication perspective. The aim is to offer a strategy for continuous engagement with strategic stakeholders, to ensure sustainable stakeholder relationship building as well as short-term, reactive engagement with secondary stakeholders through working relationships. These theoretical considerations serve as the starting point for the development of a multiple stakeholder engagement framework as well as a fully-fledged model.

The paper is structured as follows: first, organisational stakeholders are defined, and a distinction is made between strategic and secondary stakeholders, which serves as a basis for focusing on

multiple stakeholder engagement. This discussion is followed by an elaboration on stakeholder engagement, with reference to the AA1000 AccountAbility Standard (AA1000APS) and the AA1000 Stakeholder Engagement Standard (AA1000SES), which culminates in an overview of the stakeholder engagement process and possible complexities associated with such engagement. Based on this discussion, the role of the strategic communication professional in the stakeholder engagement process is outlined from a critical perspective, in conjunction with several foundational prerequisites for multiple stakeholder engagement. Lastly, a framework is created to encapsulate the key considerations for multiple stakeholder engagement. The paper concludes with a discussion on the limitations and contributions of this study, as well as opportunities for future research.

2. DEFINING ORGANISATIONAL STAKEHOLDERS

The word “stakeholder” was first utilised in 1963, in management literature at the Stanford Research Institute to generalise the concept of “stockholder” as the only group to which the organisation should react (Freeman, Harrison, Wicks, Parmar & De Colle, 2010, p.31). This gave rise to the definition of stakeholders as groups that are essential for organisational survival. Based on this notion, Edward Freeman (1984, p.46) developed the stakeholder concept as a mutually influential approach to strategic management, in which he broadly defined a stakeholder as “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of an organisation’s objectives”. The stakeholder concept concentrates on the maximisation of value for all parties who are aligned with the organisation’s strategy, to ensure the fulfilment of mutually beneficial objectives (Freeman et al., 2010). It emphasises that business success is achieved through the creation of supportive communities, established through sustainable stakeholder relationship building.

Numerous categorisations of stakeholders exist in the literature, with secondary and primary/strategic stakeholders seemingly the most prominent. Secondary stakeholders are not deemed essential to the survival of the organisation (O’Higgins & Morgan, 2006, p.63), while strategic stakeholders are “those groups that may limit the autonomy of the organisation in pursuing and realising its strategic goals” (Freeman et al., 2010, p.31). Strategic stakeholders are not limited to internal organisational stakeholders and could include external parties. Slabbert (2012, p.11) asserts that strategic stakeholders ensure the achievement of organisational objectives, as well as the future existence and survival of the organisation, and will always be present and relevant over time. Gao and Zang (2006, p.724) aver that sustainable development in the organisation can only be achieved through a multi-stakeholder approach. From this perspective, multiple stakeholder engagement (for the purposes of this article) encapsulates short-term engagement with secondary, and continuous engagement with strategic, stakeholders, depending on the identified material issue and/or topic of engagement.

3. STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Stakeholder engagement, considered a “network-based, relational and process-orientated approach”, is a “trust-based collaboration between individuals and/or social institutions with different objectives that can be achieved together” (Kaur & Lodhia, 2014, p.58). More specifically, stakeholder engagement represents the organisation’s endeavours to involve organisational stakeholders in decision-making, to encourage participation in organisational activities and to recognise the potential influence the actions of one might have on the other (Magee, 2012; Noland

& Phillips, 2010, p.40). Stakeholder engagement encapsulates a perspective of mutual responsibility; information sharing; open and respectful dialogue; and a continuous commitment to resolving mutual issues (Lawrence, 2007, p.72). Manetti (2011, p.111) adds to this list by stating that the process of engaging stakeholders makes them partners in business management. Manetti and Bellucci (2016, p.985) regard stakeholder engagement as a dialogical communication tool that allows for “interactive mutual learning processes that are capable of promoting transformative action and social change”. From these definitions it could be inferred that stakeholder engagement is a collaborative undertaking that allows those stakeholders to take part in the decision-making processes and activities of the organisation, with a view to working towards a mutual objective. It should also be noted that the organisation has to have the capacity, motivation, dedication and resources for engagement. In this regard, Cornelissen (2014, p.57) argues that “the crux ... for managers is to conceptualize a sufficiently detailed logic on how the company engages stakeholders, and to ensure that the appropriate amount of time, resources and dedication goes into managing stakeholder relationships”.

According to the AA1000SES (2015), the levels of, and approaches to, stakeholder engagement have evolved over time, to where it could be practised on three levels: first-generation engagement is reactive in nature, in that it responds to issues in the environment (usually evident in secondary stakeholder engagement, as mentioned earlier); second-generation engagement is planned and systematic, aimed at mitigating risks and maximising returns; and third-generation engagement is a process of integrated strategic engagement for change and sustainable performance. It could be deduced that both second- and third-generation engagement are aimed at strategic stakeholders, being long-term in nature and aiming to strengthen organisation–stakeholder relationships.

Various perspectives on stakeholder engagement exist. Greenwood (2008, p.318), for example, states that stakeholder engagement is built on the theoretical traditions of business ethics, social accounting and human resources. It could be practised from two distinct perspectives, namely accountability and responsibility (using stakeholder engagement as a tool, the organisation is exempted from responsibility and accountability towards stakeholders, by involving the latter in decision making and governance), and managerial control and social construction (stakeholder engagement is perceived as undermining the very ideals it purports to support). A further distinction is made between three different perspectives (Mathur, Price & Austin, 2008, p.601–603): stakeholder engagement as a management technique, as an ethical perspective, and as dialogue. Stakeholder engagement as a management technique represents a practical approach aimed at identifying stakeholders who could assist the organisation in achieving its objectives. This is in line with Greenwood’s managerial control and social construction perspective and Sloan’s (2009, p.37) controlling approach, where stakeholder engagement is conducted in line with the organisation’s one-sided objectives (i.e., stakeholders need to be managed, evaluated and monitored). The second perspective, rooted in participatory governance, equity, transparency and ethics, regards stakeholders as citizens with the right to value the process of participation for democratic reasons. Lastly, stakeholder engagement as dialogue views engagement as a social process where polity, interests and citizenry co-evolve. A dialogical approach specifically allows participants engaging in this manner to voice their opinions in a democratic forum, in working towards mutual learning and action (Mathur et al., 2008, p.204). The relevance of a dialogical view of stakeholder engagement has gained new prominence with the emergence of interactive communication technologies, which allow organisations to provide real-time feedback and engagement in conversations with stakeholders (Manetti & Bellucci, 2016, p.989). The dialogical

approach is congruent with Sloan's (2009, p.37) collaborative approach to stakeholder engagement, which encapsulates a partnership between the organisation and stakeholders, with the purpose of mutual learning. In interrogating the dialogic process, Manetti and Bellucci (2016, p.987) explored the use of social media for engaging stakeholders in sustainability reporting, and discovered that organisations mainly use an agonistic approach, as opposed to one that is deliberative and democratic. In taking a deliberative, democratic perspective, stakeholder engagement aims to define general consensus among diverse stakeholders, to achieve Habermas' (1984) "ideal speech situation". In contrast, stakeholder engagement from an antagonistic perspective aims to synthesise different viewpoints among diverse stakeholders. Despite this, it should be noted that "the main feature of stakeholder engagement ... is not the mere involvement of stakeholders to mitigate or manage their expectations, but to create a network of mutual responsibility" (Manetti, 2011, p.111).

According to Sloan (2009, p.27), stakeholder engagement has the purpose of increasing accountability and strengthening trust and corporate credibility, in addition to contributing towards safeguarding existing and future corporate growth. Similarly, Rhodes et al. (2014, p.86) state that stakeholder engagement could generate a competitive advantage for the organisation. Stakeholder engagement assists the organisation in understanding certain issues; in strengthening goodwill and its reputation; and building long-term relationships with stakeholders (Cornelissen, 2014, p.55). Sloan (2009, p.26) and Gould (2012, p.6) maintain that the purpose of stakeholder engagement is to maintain relationships with strategic stakeholders. Slabbert (2012, p.314), however, warns that organisations should never focus on building sustainable relationships with secondary stakeholders, instead advocating only short-term working relationships with them.

3.1 Stakeholder engagement frameworks

Despite the ambiguity in the literature as to what stakeholder engagement entails, and a lack of multiple stakeholder engagement approaches, various frameworks exist that provide stakeholder engagement criteria or standards. These include, among others, Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation; The Environment Council's (TEC's) stakeholder evaluation and benchmark criterion; the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI, 2015) and the AA1000SES (Gao & Zhang, 2006; Kaur & Lodhia, 2014; Manetti, 2011). Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation provides different engagement techniques, including manipulation; therapy; informing; consulting; placation; partnerships; delegated power and citizen power. The TEC, a UK-based non-profit organisation, has developed stakeholder engagement evaluation and benchmark criteria in practice and reporting, specifically to create more collaborative approaches aimed at ensuring co-decision-making in the sustainability arena. This framework consists of stakeholder identification; evidence and engagement; target and metrics; the integration of engagement programmes; the use of engagement results in report development and feedback opportunities (Kaur & Lodhia, 2014, p.62). The GRI framework, which highlights the significance of engaging stakeholders in the sustainability reporting process, provides four key arenas (G4) for disclosing stakeholder engagement initiatives: a list of organisational stakeholders; a basis for the identification and selection of stakeholders with whom to engage; an approach, frequency and type of stakeholder engagement; and the identification of key topics and concerns identified during engagement and how the organisation responded (GRI, 2015, p.43). The AA1000SES (2015), developed by AccountAbility (a leading global research, consulting and standards organisation) is an in-depth approach providing guidelines on the purpose, scope and process of stakeholder engagement. It is

applied worldwide by leading organisations, non-profit organisations and public bodies to integrate stakeholder engagement in daily organisational activities (Crane, Matten & Spence, 2014, p.426). For the purpose of this study, the AA1000SES is used as benchmark to build towards a multiple stakeholder engagement approach (see the section which follows).

3.1.1 AA1000 Stakeholder Engagement Standard (AA1000SES)

The AA1000SES – an “open-source framework for assessing, designing, implementing and communicating an integrated approach to stakeholder engagement” (AA1000SES, 2015) – is divided into three sections: a foundational section of commitment and integration; a preparatory section detailing the purpose, scope and stakeholders; and the implementation section, which encapsulates the stakeholder engagement process.

3.1.1.1 Commitment and integration

This section of the report emphasises that stakeholder engagement must form an integral part of the culture and functions of the organisation. This is achieved by integrating 1) the AA1000 Accountability Principles Standard (AA1000APS) of inclusivity, materiality and responsiveness, as well as 2) stakeholder engagement, in organisational governance, strategy and operations (see Table 1) (AA1000APS, 2008; AA1000SES, 2015; IoDSA, 2016; Kaur & Lodhia, 2014).

Table 1: AA1000SES commitment and integration principles

AA1000APS	<p><i>Inclusivity</i> Inclusivity enables stakeholder engagement. It is compulsory for the achievement of materiality and responsiveness. Inclusivity is a commitment to be accountable to those stakeholders on whom the organisation has an influence and to facilitate their participation in identifying issues and collaboratively working towards solutions. Stakeholder inclusivity as one of the four philosophical underpinnings of the <i>King IV report on Corporate Governance</i>. It represents a relationship of interdependence between the organisation and stakeholders, and encapsulates the organisation’s ability to create reciprocal value. By being cognisant of the needs, interests and expectations of strategic stakeholders, the organisation becomes more accustomed to the opportunities and challenges posed by the economy, society and environment.</p>	<p><i>Materiality</i> Materiality represents the process of identifying the significance of an issue to the organisation and stakeholders, by means of a materiality determination process. Not all issues are material. A material issue will affect both the organisation and stakeholders’ decisions, actions and performance. Ultimately, the organisation is responsible for identifying its material issues. In this capacity, the organisation has to develop an in-depth understanding of its sustainability context, to identify its own material issues and be aware of other issues and to whom they are material. The materiality determination process could change over time and should be applied across the organisation, and integrated in a continuous fashion, with the availability of the necessary resources. More than one material issue could be identified simultaneously. In such instances, prioritisation techniques need to be employed to address these issues.</p>
	<p><i>Responsiveness</i> Responsiveness is an organisation’s ongoing response or demonstration of how it responds to material issues that could influence its sustainability performance. This could be done through its decisions, actions, performance and communication with stakeholders. The response is dependent on the urgency of the material issue and the available resources.</p>	
Organisational governance	Organisational strategy	Organisational operations
<p>Established processes should be in place to allow the integration of stakeholder engagement information into governance. Effective governance defines the decision-making process, as well as clear roles and responsibilities. Once this has been established, the organisation could start to unpack material sustainability issues that could influence both the organisation and stakeholders, and start to work collectively towards solutions.</p>	<p>The outcomes of stakeholder engagement should inform organisational strategy. Stakeholder engagement should form part of all policies and processes aimed at developing strategy.</p>	<p>Insights from stakeholder relationships and engagements should inform operational management plans.</p>

3.1.1.2 Purpose, scope and stakeholders

In alignment with the organisation's objectives, the why (purpose), who (stakeholders involved) and what (scope) of stakeholder engagement should be established (see Figure 1) (AA1000SES, 2015).

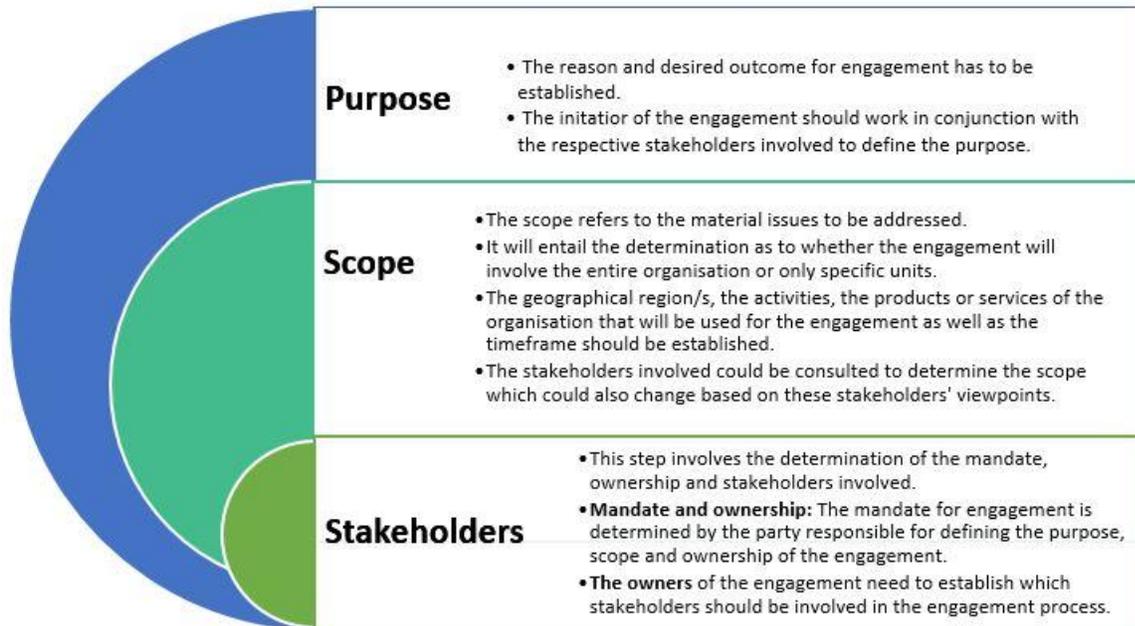


Figure 1: The purpose, scope and stakeholders of engagement

In line with the generations of engagement (mentioned earlier), it could be argued that stakeholder engagement will not always be about the collaborative resolution of material issues. Engagement with strategic stakeholders should be continuous and long-term in nature, while secondary stakeholder engagement is likely to be reactive and short-term. Furthermore, lower levels of engagement imply that the ownership of the engagement lies with the organisation, while high levels of engagement suggest that such ownership is shared between the organisation and its stakeholders (AA1000SES, 2015). Ownership of the engagement also touches on the resources available, although Ross (2012, p.116) states that one could have engagement with or without resources. Stakeholder engagement without the exchange of resources is normally associated with lower levels of engagement that are short-term in nature, whereas an exchange of resources between the parties is representative of high levels of engagement, where both the organisation and stakeholders share the risks and rewards of such engagement.

Stakeholders that need to be identified for stakeholder engagement should not be confused with the formal process of identifying strategic and secondary stakeholders, which is usually done by means of a specific stakeholder categorisation or mapping technique for the organisation as a whole (Bourne, 2011; De Bussy & Kelly, 2010; Frow & Payne, 2011; Mitchell, Agle & Wood 1997). Instead, it refers to the identification of those stakeholders who will be involved in the engagement itself, to successfully address the purpose of that particular engagement. This could include the organisation's relevant strategic stakeholders and, where necessary, secondary stakeholders.

Although the AA1000SES (2015) suggests that mediums of engagement should be identified in the stakeholder engagement process, the author of this paper argues that the available mediums (the ‘*how*’) already need to be established in conjunction with the purpose, scope and stakeholders – specifically with the proposition of continuous engagement with strategic stakeholders. Thomson and Bebbington (2005, p.523) regard mediums of stakeholder engagement as any platforms or mechanisms that bring together the organisation and stakeholder, be it through meetings, surveys, focus groups or communiques. Furthermore, stakeholder engagement could take place through individual or collective consultation (AA1000SES, 2015). Social media applications specifically have made it possible for stakeholders to be recognised as partners and co-creators (Manetti & Bellucci, 2016, p.989; Rensburg & De Beer, 2011, p.160). It is, however, essential to ensure that social media are employed to elicit continuous interactions, debate and conversations, rather than to act as a one-way communication medium for the organisation.

3.1.1.3 Stakeholder engagement process

The stakeholder engagement process outlined by the AA1000SES is a four-stage approach of planning, preparation, implementation and reviewing (AA1000SES, 2015; Kaur & Lodhia, 2014, p.61): during the planning stage, the owners of the stakeholder engagement should profile and map stakeholders; obtain an understanding of the nature of the stakeholders involved; determine the engagement level and relevant methods; and draft a stakeholder engagement plan. The preparation stage entails the approval of available resources to ensure a successful engagement plan and a determination of where capacity for engagement needs to be built, before identifying and preparing for possible engagement risks. The implementation stage requires the owners of the engagement to invite stakeholders to engage; brief the participants; establish procedural and behavioural ground rules for engagement; develop an action plan and communicate the engagement outputs. The final stage entails reviewing the engagement, to monitor and evaluate its quality and identify possible improvements. This stage concludes with the organisation publicly reporting on such engagement.

Remember that stakeholder engagement is not always a planned, in-depth and structured process. Interactive communication technologies allow for real-time engagement with stakeholders. Furthermore, it is proposed that continuous engagement with strategic stakeholders should almost become part of the daily lives of organisational members.

When identifying key considerations for stakeholder engagement, it is essential to review possible complexities that might emerge.

3.1.2 Complexities associated with stakeholder engagement

According to Crane et al. (2014, p.432), issues and complexities associated with stakeholder engagement include the impossibility of having direct dialogue and engagement with certain stakeholders; the fact that the needs and expectations of different stakeholders are often mutually exclusive; and the difficulty of negotiating consensus among mutually exclusive stakeholder views. Manetti and Bellucci (2016, p.989) add to this by stating that the discourse in engagement is often both quantitatively and qualitatively dominated by certain stakeholder groups; there is a lack of respectful listening to others and limited commitment to collaborate; some stakeholder groups still do not have access to online forums; and the technology employed by stakeholders encourages certain forms of online interaction over others. The AA1000SES (2015) also makes a distinction

between stakeholder and organisational risks associated with stakeholder engagement. Risks could include participation fatigue; disruptive stakeholders; uninformed and disempowered stakeholders; and conflict between participating stakeholders. Organisational risks could include, among others, a waste of time and financial resources; strong criticism; an inability to meet the organisation's expectations and a conflict of interest.

The role of the strategic communication professional in the engagement process is, among others, to mitigate these complexities through facilitating continuous dialogue, debate and conversation.

4. STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

This section first provides an overview of the changing landscape of strategic communication to contextualise a discussion on the role of the strategic communication professional in the stakeholder engagement process.

4.1 The changing landscape of strategic communication

The collaborative turn brought about by, among others, Web 2.0 communication technologies, has caused communication professionals to increasingly find themselves at points of inflection that have stimulated a shift towards critical ideology. In this context, the role of strategic communication as a process that sprouts from an organisation's strategic plan, focused on enabling the organisation's strategic objectives, is being questioned. Such a perspective was promoted by Grunig's (1984) excellence study, which is accepted as the meta-theory in public relations and communication management literature (Botan & Hazleton, 2006). The excellence theory is an umbrella term for an integrated collection of middle-range theories which explain the value of communication to an organisation, and identify the specific characteristics of communication that contribute towards organisational effectiveness (Grunig & Grunig, 2008, p.327). This mainstream definition served as platform for two-way communication models – for instance, Shannon and Weaver's (1949) transmission model eventually evolved in discussions around two-way symmetrical and asymmetrical communication in public relations literature (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015, p.4).

A critical perspective on strategic communication questions the concept of “managerialism”, where managers assign workers to authoritarian workplace activities predominantly with a view to benefiting themselves (Holtzhausen, 2002, p.256). Such a perspective departs significantly from mainstream approaches, as it raises questions about power, persuasion and activism, which the “orthodoxy of public relations [and communication management] chooses to ignore” (Coombs & Holladay, 2012, p.882). Conversely, power, persuasion and activism in mainstream strategic communication are regarded as “unethical”, “socially irresponsible behaviour” that should “be avoided” to sustain a balanced, two-way symmetrical communication perspective of mutual understanding between the organisation and its stakeholders (Coombs & Holladay, 2012, p.881–882).

Overton-de Klerk and Verwey (2013:370–376), echoed by Verwey (2015), identify various paradigmatic shifts in strategic communication, brought about by disintermediation; a blurring of communication genres; media convergence and organisation as communication. These shifts

particularly outline the differences between mainstream and contemporary approaches to strategic communication (see Table 2).

Table 2: Paradigmatic shifts in strategic communication

Paradigmatic shift	Description
From divergence to convergence	Strategic communication now represents an all-encompassing function of purposeful communication to achieve the mission of the organisation.
From top down to bottom up	Interaction as opposed to mere information transfer is valued. Organisational leaders should listen to their stakeholders by means of stakeholder engagement and co-creation strategies. Bottom-up communication, in which shared meaning is formed by the communication process itself, is favoured.
From monologue to dialogue	Different voices should be appreciated to stimulate creativity and innovation, and identify unique solutions to problems.
From consensus to conflict/dissent	Strategic communication is no longer aimed at achieving consensus, but at ensuring that multiple voices are heard, even if it causes conflict.
From communication management to communication influence	The strategic communication professional no longer acts as a representative for organisational management controlling communication. Instead, the strategic communication professional should serve as a facilitator for discourse within a climate of continuous change.
From control to self-organisation	Change and consensus within an organisation cannot be achieved through controlling stakeholders. Instead, the process of identifying creative solutions for business problems should start with stakeholders by means of high stakeholder engagement.
From corporate social responsibility to accountability	Accountability is earned by means of transparency and consistency between organisational statements and actions, which underline the power shift from the organisation to its stakeholders.
From integration to collaboration	Instead of communication integration, where the organisation was in control of the message, the real-time environment now necessitates organisations to work in partnership with society (which includes hostile stakeholders) to build its brand identity.

Overton-de Klerk and Verwey (2013, p.370) argue that, nowadays, strategic communication should be viewed as an all-encompassing communication function characterised by purposeful communication. There is a call for a broader acceptance of strategic communication as “the practice of deliberate and purposive communication that a communication agent enacts in the public sphere on behalf of a communicative entity to reach set goals” (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2013, p.74). Purposive communication or conversation places the emphasis on action, as opposed to talk (Dervitsiotis, 2002, p.1087). It allows the sharing of meaning and ideas, deepens mutual understanding, and creates meaningful action (Hodges & Gill, 2015, p.291). Hallahan, Holtzhausen, Van Ruler, Vercic and Sriramesh (2007) argue that strategic communication acknowledges that purposeful influence is the core objective of communication in the organisation. Strategic communication moves beyond merely providing information or building and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships, to the manner in which communication could contribute to an organisation’s purpose for being (Hallahan et al., 2007, p.11). In this regard, strategic communication insentiently shapes the organisation itself (Overton-de Klerk & Verwey, 2013, p.370).

4.2 The role of the strategic communication professional in stakeholder engagement

To illustrate the role of strategic communication in stakeholder engagement, this paper draws on the ‘aligning’ dimension of strategic communication, proposed by Invernizzi and Romenti (2015) in the context of entrepreneurial organisation theory. The aligning dimension of strategic communication involves the integration of environmental scanning, boundary-spanning and bridging activities towards stakeholder engagement. See Table 3 for a description of each activity and its relevance to stakeholder engagement (Cornelissen, 2014, p.56; Invernizzi & Romenti, 2015, p.218).

Table 3: The aligning dimension of strategic communication in the context of stakeholder engagement

Aligning dimension of strategic communication	Description	Relevance to stakeholder engagement
Boundary spanning	To ensure organisational survival, the strategic communication professional should act as a boundary spanner by observing and interpreting the context in which the organisation operates.	In line with the objectives of the organisation towards achieving its mission, the strategic communication professional plays a critical role in identifying material issues and topics for engagement through boundary spanning and environmental scanning activities. Through bridging, the strategic communication professional acts as facilitator in creating a network of mutual responsibility by eliciting conversation and debate, and stimulating dissent with strategic stakeholders. To establish accountability, it is essential that the strategic communication professional facilitate transparent and consistent organisational statements and actions. Thus, the emphasis should be on bridging stakeholder claims and actions by ensuring that the organisation adapts its activities to conform to the external expectations of strategic stakeholders.
Environmental scanning	The strategic communication professional should conduct environmental scanning on both an issue and public level, and an organisation stakeholder level. This could assist the organisation in developing strategies that are in line with the ongoing dynamics in its social context and the relevant expectations of stakeholders, as opposed to only focusing on its self-interest.	
Bridging	The strategic communication professional is responsible for building bridges between the organisation and strategic stakeholders, and activating and facilitating the participation and involvement of organisational members on the basis of allowing a balanced voice to organisational management and stakeholders.	

The strategic communication professional is no longer responsible for controlling the communication of the organisation so as to reach consensus among stakeholders. S/he should facilitate dialogue and interaction among stakeholders – even if it causes dissent. The focus is on paving the way towards collaborative problem solving.

This paper proposes three foundational prerequisites or antecedents for a successful approach to multiple stakeholder engagement, where the strategic communication professional also plays a critical role.

5. FOUNDATIONAL PREREQUISITES

Prior to elaborating on the three prerequisites, it is argued that organisational agility is required: the ability of an organisation “to develop and quickly apply flexible, nimble and dynamic capabilities” (Holbeche, 2015, p.11). In essence, it encapsulates the organisation’s ability to swiftly adjust, respond to and flourish in a continuously changing environment. The organisation should be receptive to continuous stakeholder input, and be able to adjust to the demands made by the organisational environment.

On the basis of organisational agility, this paper proposes the following foundational prerequisites for an approach to multiple stakeholder engagement: shared leadership, a collaborative organisational culture, and strategic stakeholder relationships.

5.1 Shared leadership

In terms of multiple stakeholder engagement, strategic decisions can no longer be made in an independent fashion; decision making should involve a more participatory approach (Invernizzi & Romenti, 2015, p.219). Holbech (2015, p.252) concurs, arguing that the volatile and ever-changing business environment necessitates a collaborative or shared leadership approach. This implies that organisations need to deviate from a leader–follower logic towards the “collective efficacy of formal and informal networks, where expertise is the driver of change and leadership is broadly distributed such that people within a team and organisation lead each other” (Holbeche, 2015, p.252). It is essential that organisational members be empowered to contribute towards shared decision making that delivers the desired results. The strategic communication professional should act as facilitator (not as communication manager), thereby helping to establish processes that have meaning and add urgency to the strategic choices of the organisation (Holtzhausen, 2002, p.252).

5.2 Collaborative organisational culture

A shared leadership approach necessitates a collaborative organisational culture. The strategic communication professional should provide effective internal communication to elicit an innovative spirit, provide input and create room for individual expression against set responsibilities (Invernizzi & Romenti, 2015, p.220). Furthermore, s/he should orientate communication to define objectives, facilitate their sharing and establish cooperation (Invernizzi & Romenti, 2015, p.220).

5.3 Strategic stakeholder relationships

Building and managing stakeholder relationships is the mantra of strategic communication (Luoma-aho & Paloviita, 2010, p.49; Thiessen & Ingenhof, 2011, p.11). Relationships with strategic stakeholders act as a prerequisite for strategic stakeholder engagement. A dialogical approach to stakeholder engagement places the emphasis on relationships across the organisation, with the aim of building sustainable relationships with strategic stakeholders (Cornelissen, 2014, p.56). “The way in which an organisation engages with [strategic] stakeholders will depend on the capacities of both and the maturity of the existing relationship” (AA1000APS, 2008, p.10). When organisations have trusting relationships with strategic stakeholders, they are more likely to share nuanced information that can stimulate innovation, assist the organisation to address material issues

and make them more willing to interact on a continuous basis (Cornelissen, 2014, p.57). It should be noted that this paper specifically makes reference to the prerequisite of stakeholder relationships with strategic stakeholders, as it should arguably never aspire to cultivate sustainable relationships with secondary stakeholders – rather, the aim should be to foster working relationships.

The following section provides a culmination of key considerations from the literature for an approach to multiple stakeholder engagement.

6. KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR MULTIPLE STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Figure 2 depicts the key considerations for multiple stakeholder engagement from a strategic communication perspective.

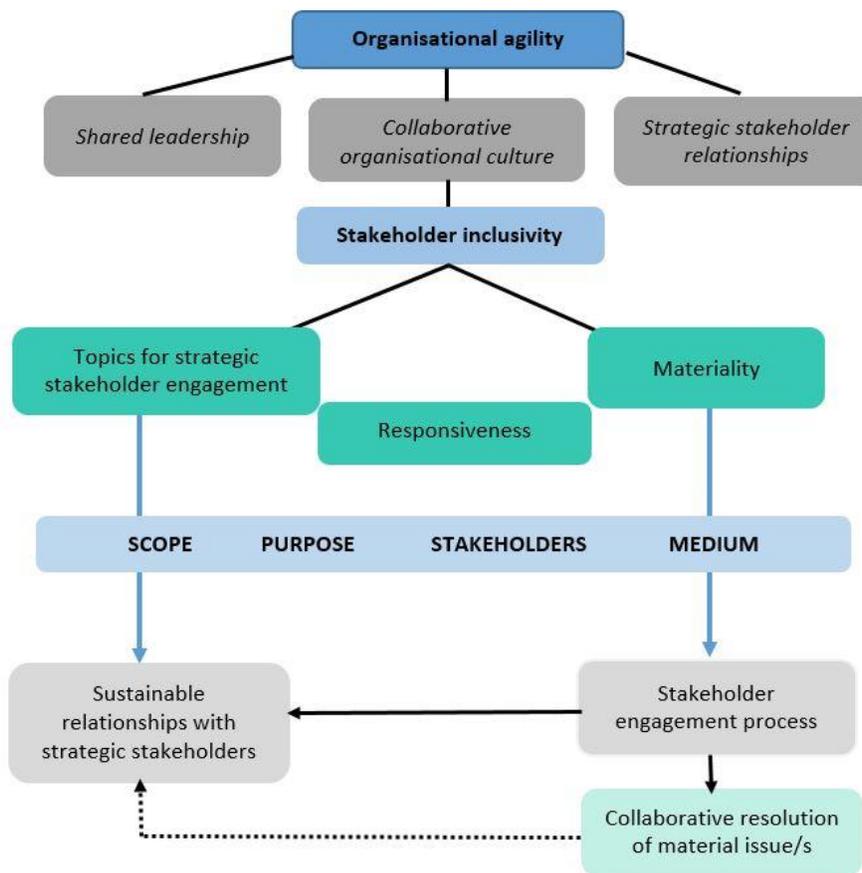


Figure 2: Framework of key considerations in multiple stakeholder engagement

Figure 2 shows that an approach to multiple stakeholder engagement necessitates a receptive internal organisational context as basis. This arguably starts with the establishment of organisational agility for an open organisational structure, to allow the organisation to adapt to the demands of the business environment and absorb continuous stakeholder inputs. Also, external stakeholder engagement is enabled by employee engagement. A shared leadership approach could empower employees toward shared decision making and collaboration. By means of environmental scanning and boundary-spanning activities, the strategic communication professional could assist

the organisation to become cognisant of the needs, interests and expectations of strategic stakeholders; to be more accustomed to the opportunities and challenges posed by the economy, society and environment, and thus to effect stakeholder inclusivity. To establish accountability, it is essential that the strategic communication professional facilitate transparent and consistent organisational statements and actions. In this regard, the emphasis should be on bridging stakeholder claims and actions by ensuring that the organisation adapts its activities to conform to the expectations of strategic stakeholders.

This study further proposes that stakeholder engagement be stimulated by the occurrence of material issues and that the strategic communication professional continuously identify topics of engagement through environmental scanning and boundary-spanning activities. More than one such topic/issue could be identified simultaneously, calling for prioritisation techniques to determine the urgency of each. It should be noted that, apart from strategic stakeholder engagement on the basis of a material issue, continuous strategic stakeholder engagement is elicited by identifying contemporary topics. Through bridging, the strategic communication professional acts as facilitator in creating a network of mutual responsibility by eliciting conversation and debate, and stimulating dissent with strategic stakeholders. Engagement with secondary stakeholders is more reactive in nature, and only occurs if a material issue requires it. Furthermore, engagement with strategic stakeholders occurs on the basis of existing organisation–stakeholder relationships, where the engagement process assists, among others, in building sustainable relationships. Should the material issue demand engagement with secondary stakeholders, it will involve short-term working relationships. Once a material issue or topic of engagement has been identified, the scope, purpose, stakeholders and medium of the engagement should be established. Addressing a material issue would necessitate a more formal, planned stakeholder engagement process involving planning, preparation, implementation and evaluation. The purpose of addressing a material issue could not only entail the co-resolution of the particular issue to reach a shared objective, but could also contribute towards sustainable relationship building with strategic stakeholders. Continuous stakeholder engagement with strategic stakeholders around contemporary topics is more lucid in nature, with the purpose of contributing towards sustainable stakeholder relationship building.

7. CONTRIBUTIONS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper has provided an overview of possible considerations that have to be made in building an approach to multiple stakeholder engagement, while simultaneously underlining the role of the strategic communication professional in this process. The main limitation here, is that these considerations are based on interpretations from existing literature, and the fact that the actual steps to take in multiple stakeholder engagement, to address the exact requirements of stakeholder engagement, have not been explored. Despite these limitations, these considerations have served as a fundamental step towards building a conceptual framework and eventual multiple stakeholder engagement model. Future research should focus on empirically exploring these considerations in practice; on identifying the exact steps needed for an approach to multiple stakeholder engagement in alignment with these considerations, and quantitatively testing the proposed approach to create a fully-fledged model. Such a pragmatic exploration would need to be done at Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE)-listed organisations, with strategic communication professionals and individuals responsible for governing stakeholder relations and engagement. In addition, a content analysis of these organisations' annual and sustainability reports would be required. Although the King IV report no longer only requires listed organisations to comply (or aspire to comply) with its

principles, these organisations will serve as benchmarks for stakeholder engagement in the context of this study.

8. CONCLUSION

With the proposition of key considerations for an approach to multiple stakeholder engagement, this paper has provided a starting point for addressing the need to build theory in stakeholder engagement, specifically from the multiple stakeholder vantage points of a strategic communication perspective. The proposed considerations specifically centred on the foundational prerequisites of an approach to multiple stakeholder engagement; the integration of the AA1000APS of stakeholder inclusivity, materiality and responsiveness; elements of the AA1000SES and the proposition of continuous engagement with strategic stakeholders (either on the basis of identifying contemporary topics towards sustainable stakeholder relationship building or reactive, short-term engagement with secondary stakeholders through working relationships). These considerations have been viewed from a strategic communication perspective, to emphasise the central role of the function in stakeholder engagement. “[C]hanging consumer and stakeholder expectations require engagement with both internal and external stakeholders, including civil society. This engagement is required within emergent business and societal contexts that transcend boundaries, as technology and digital platforms drive rapid and continuous change” (Overton-de Klerk & Verwey, 2013, p.377). The task of the strategic communication professional, to move from management to collaboration and from exchange to engagement, is indispensable. In this capacity, s/he should facilitate stakeholder engagement through activating co-decision-making processes, building partnerships and stimulating supporting behaviour on the part of stakeholders.

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