



ADDIS ABABA UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM AND COMMUNICATION

*Perception and Practice of Strategic Public Relations:
Evidence from Ministry of Finance*

By: Kindu Gashaw

Advisor: Agaredech Jemaneh (PhD)

Thesis

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This is to certify that the thesis prepared by Kindu Gashaw, entitled *Perception and Practice of Strategic Public Relations: Evidence from Ministry of Finance*; and submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Public Relations and Strategic Communication complies with regulations of the university and meets the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

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ABSTRACT

This study entitled “Perception and Practice of Strategic Public Relations: Evidence from Ministry of Finance” is based on the research questions: To what extent the public relations department of the ministry of finance is involved in strategic public relations/communication approach? How does the Ministry of Finance give value to the contributions that strategic PR/communication approach can make to the organization? And what is the perceived strategic perspective of the public relations practitioners in the Ministry of Finance? Its principal objective was to investigate the perception and practice of strategic public relations in the Ministry of Finance. The information needed for the study was collected using purposive sampling technique through key information providers, supporting documents, and focus group discussion methods. The data collected are organized into categories and analyzed against present theoretical perspectives. Based on the findings of the analysis, it was determined that the public relations/communication activity practiced by the Ministry’s public relations department is lagging in terms of the contemporary standards of strategic PR/communication. The root causes of this problem are found to be poor perception of the management to the value of strategic public relations and the practitioners perceived limitations to strategic perspectives. The analysis shows that the public relations department’s role in the implementation process of the Ministry’s strategic objectives is inadequate. The study is finally concluded by suggesting that the Ministry’s public relations practice should be designed along with the modern approaches of strategic PR/communication.

Key words: *Strategic communication, Strategic public relations, Strategic thinking, Perception, Practice.*

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STATEMENT OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I, the undersigned, declare that this thesis, entitled *Perception and Practice of Strategic Public Relations: Evidence from Ministry of Finance*, is my own and original work and has not been presented for a degree in any other university, and that all sources of material used for the thesis have been duly acknowledged.

Name _____

Signature _____

Date _____

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CHAPTER ONE

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Under the modern world conditions, no government, private or non-governmental organization is expected to function successfully without public relations. However, to be regarded as a significant part of organizational success and achievement, PR needs to create meaningful relations, understandings, and values with the organization's target publics. Public relations can be defined as "the management function that identifies, establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and the various publics on whom its success or failure depends" (Cutlip *et al.*, 2000, p. 4). This definition suggests that without the active participation of PR department in the executive management committee, the PR program in any institution cannot be successfully developed and achieved. PR as a "management function" is viewed as a strategic role that would influence the decision-making process at the level of executive management. This perspective could also magnify that the contribution of PR is imperative both in the strategy formulation and execution process of a particular organization.

Nevertheless, many people do not expect PR to generate strategic value other than writing media releases and implementing public relations campaigns. The stereotypical "low and tactical" picture of PR was revealing from some research interviews. For example, a survey of members of the New York chapter of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) discovered that 67% believed that PR did not have a good credibility while 65% responded they were not as respected as other professions members (PR Pros, 1998). This indicates that simply securing a seat in the dominant coalition may not guarantee that public relations' perspectives would be strategic and truly valued by decision makers. Thus, public relations professionals, currently, seems to have sincerely struggling globally to secure their misunderstood role.

The researcher deeply worries that if such a stereotype remains to exist, PR will never attain its developmental objective and due professional respect from the society. With respect to this challenge, Austin & Pinkleton (2000) advice: "To improve their stature

within organizations and among a broad range of publics, public relations professionals must take a planned, strategic approach to their programs and problem solving” (p.6). The continuous demands that arise from today’s global and local pressures also increasingly force public relations practitioners to think and act strategically.

These days, everything seems to be confined to the condition of quality narrations that impacts the course of meaning creations. The capacity for thinking strategically regarding the organizational goals and initiatives in a more proactive and future oriented perspectives is therefore much more necessary. In this regard, Smith (2004) clearly confirms that the call now is for strategic communicators. Lindeborg (1994) also writes that excellent public relations is managed strategically, meets its objectives, and balances the needs of the organization and key publics with two-way symmetrical communication.

Accordingly, the practice of strategic public relations in the Ministry of Finance, one of the key public institutions in Ethiopia, was the researcher’s endeavour. This organization has a unique role across the public service via its financial and economic policy decisions. It is particularly responsible for overseeing the management and control of the country’s finances to ensure appropriate use of public funds. Moreover, the ministry mobilizes resource and loans from international financial institutions and development assistance. This broad mandate will undoubtedly require the ministry to engage and communicate strategically with its diverse stakeholders in a way that would tackle the country’s most concern of economic insecurity.

This research was, therefore, aimed to analysed and describe how strategic public relations is perceived and practiced in this organization. The study looked at in detail by paying special attention to the ministry’s communication planning, implementation, evaluation, and general view toward the concept of strategic public relations. Hence, the research finding is hoped both to enhance the ministry’s future strategic relations activities and contribute to the development of the Ethiopian PR industry.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Now more than ever with growing economic, political and social pressures both globally and locally, engaging with a traditional public relations or communication approach may not be enough. Today’s PR practitioners need to know what to do, why and how to

evaluate its effectiveness since the profession become demanding competency in conducting research, making decisions, and solving problems.

In other words, to be successful, organizations should challenge their conventional way of communication practice. However, critics often say that PR/communication is seen as a simple, separated, tool for transmitting information between people. Surr, et al. (2002), for example, stress that the most obvious problem in the field of communication lays on the failure to recognize communication as a systemic issue.

Grunig (2011) argues that rather than being seen as strategic management, “public relations has been institutionalized as a symbolic-interpretive activity that organizations use to exert their power over publics and to disguise the consequences of their behaviours from publics, governments, and the media” (p.1). Grunig, continuing his strong critic, writes that because most people believe public relations is a *tactical activity*, public relations practitioners keep typically supplying services what they believe people demand for. According to Grunig (2011)“PR has become institutionalized as a messaging activity whose purpose is to make organizations look good in the media or to sell products usually through devious means” (p.12). Steyn (2000b) a South African prominent scholar on the other side, emphasised that public relations practitioners often criticized by top management for focusing on implementation and tactics at micro level, rather than addressing key strategic issues of an organization.

Both the above authorities of the area confirm that the practice of public relations should be recognized as a ‘management function’ or strategic approach. This implies that both top managements and practitioners rarely appreciate the value of strategic public relations. As a strategic and management function strategic PR inevitably demands the skill of ‘strategic thinking’ which is far more than merely giving out information to the general public.

Oliver (2001, p. 3) defines strategy as ‘the means or process by which an organization aims to fulfil its mission’. From the strategic public relations perspective, strategy is ‘the determination of the basic long-term goals and objectives of an enterprise, and the adoption of courses of action and the allocation of resources necessary for carrying out these goals’ (Cutlip et al., 2000,p.371). Being goal driven, audience targeted, and action

focused PR, therefore, could be one of the major forces in achieving important social, political, and community change. Hence, to add a substantive value both to organizations and the society as whole, modern PR needs to be an integral part of the strategic management process in an organization.

Strategic PR practitioners will be able to accomplish a more concrete outcomes than simply 'reacting' to routines that has no impact on the mission and goals of the organization. Thus, it is a louder call particularly to organizational leaders to re-focus their attention on the role that public relations can play for organisational success. However, whether that is the case in Ethiopian organizations or not, the researcher strongly believes that the practices need to be analyzed scientifically.

As it has been highlighted in the introduction part, one of the important public organizations found to deserve a formal research on its strategic PR/communication perception and practice is the ministry of finance. Economic and development issues have always been an inherent concern of Ethiopia. In this regard, the responsibility of Ministry of Finance which has been providing diverse financial services, making important decisions, and developing drafts of economic policies is notably understood. It has, therefore, a significant role in improving the lives of Ethiopian people both at the rural and city level. As far as the knowledge of the researcher is concerned, no formal research was conducted on this organization's strategic communication practice.

Specifically, the ministry has also recently launched a huge national economic development plan called Home-Grown Economic Reform which strongly demands mobilization of all-inclusive efforts across sectors (Xinhuanet.com, p.2019). Consequently, the ministry needs to find ways to build the resources and capabilities necessary to attain its reform goals. The researcher firmly believes that the value of such national reform goals must be communicated strategically. This turn specially requires the strategic attention in relation to its PR/communication activity in which the ministry should focus on the capacity of its PR/communication department to help achieve its ambition.

Indeed, it would be difficult to achieve this huge reform without an effective and appropriate strategic PR/communication programs, campaigns, and projects. With this

understanding, therefore, the Ministry's perception and practice of PR/communication activity was critically explored. The practice was thoroughly examined considering up-to-date strategic PR/communication theories and models.

It seems that digitalization; the expansion of the Internet and challenges from activism has called a halt to the current Ethiopian PR industry in a situation with only two options. Should the PR practitioners continue to be engaged with the traditional "tactical" communication activities, often isolated from the strategic management, primarily focussing such as on publications, press releases, events; or modern "strategic" role that can significantly impact to the achievement of organizational goals and mission?

More than ever, Ethiopian organizations currently seem under public scrutiny. With this considerable development, the researcher sincerely believes that traditional PR/communication practices need to be replaced by the modern managerial and strategic approach. Indeed, public relations involved in strategic management does much more than publicity.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The principal objective of this research was to critically analyze and describe the perception and practice of strategic public relations in the Ministry of Finance.

1.3.1 Specific Objectives

1. To examine the Ministry of Finance's public relations department engagement with the strategic function of PR/communication.
2. To analyze to what extent the Ministry of Finance perceives the value of strategic PR/communication.
3. To scan the strategic competency of the Ministry of Finance's public relations/communication practitioners.

1.3.2 Research Question

In order to achieve the above objectives, the following research questions will be answered:

1. To what extent the public relations department of the Ministry of Finance is involved in strategic PR/communication approach?
2. How does the Ministry of Finance give value to the contributions that strategic PR/communication approach can make to the organization?
3. To what extent the public relations practitioners of the Ministry of Finance are perceivably competent to deliver strategic PR/communication?

1.4 Significance of the Study

Public relations practitioners in the Ministry of Finance can make use of the findings of this study to think and act more strategically towards the priorities of the organization. The research can also offer a significant contribution to the management to establish a firm basis for decision making to adjust the PR/communication practice based on what works and what does not. The benefit of this research may not be limited to the study organization; it will also have a substantial offer for all actors working around strategic PR/communication in motivating to conduct additional studies. Moreover, since the profession of PR would lose its value unless it is focused and strategic, the findings of this study will also contribute to the growth of the Ethiopian PR industry.

1.5 Delimitation of the Study

The scope of this research is delimited in geography, time, and focus. As a single case study, geographically this study was carried out in the Ministry of Finance, Addis Ababa. Despite the practice of strategic PR/communication is a wide issue that covers various disciplines, this study was particularly focused on the ministry's public relations department.

1.6 Limitation of the Study

In this study, the population is limited to the staffs of the ministry of finance. Due to time constraints and the big challenge paused by the pandemic corona virus, the opinion and feelings of other stakeholders and the media were not incorporated. Though this study was based on a methodologically accepted qualitative approach, the researcher also does not deny that the specific opinions, feelings, and beliefs seized by the participants in this study may not be generic enough to replicate themselves countrywide. Thus, the findings

of this study will be indicative, not necessarily conclude or reflect the nationally shared consciousness. However, it is also hoped that the findings will have a significant worth in terms of providing contextual evidence on how strategic PR/communication is perceived and practiced in the Ministry of Finance.

CHAPTER TWO

2. L ITRATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the related literature to strategic public relations under the following headings: Strategic communication; Strategic public relations; Communication, management, and social theories; Roles and models of public relations; Excellent public relations department; Strategic thinking, and Strategic public relations plan.

2.2 Strategic Communication

The term strategic communication is a comprehensive category under which strategic public relations falls. According to Hallahan et al (2007) strategic communication is defined as: “The purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfil its mission” (p.4). Argenti et al, (2005) also conform to Hallahan et al. defining strategic communication as communication aligned with the overall strategy of the institution to facilitate strategic values. Furthermore, Bennett & Jessani, (2011) state that strategic communication is consistent, coordinated and structured with a clear agenda or goals. Based on the above scholars, strategic communication generally suggests to communication activities, from planning to implementation, are well coordinated (making parts to move together), consistent (maintaining a particular standard) and seeking to achieve specific goals or agendas.

Hallahan et al. discussed that strategic communication has been used in the academic literature for many years, but it is only in 2007 that scholars have coherently explored it in terms of a unified body of knowledge. Frandsen and Johanson (2016) also agree with Hallahan et al. that it is from the mid-2000s onwards that the concept of strategic communication has become increasingly popular among practitioners as well as academics.

As stated by Frandsen and Johanson, today, practitioners often use the term when they talk about their organizational function or practice. Similarly, academics use the term to identify a specific approach to the study of communicative practice and include this

phrase in the titles of institutions, publications, courses, and curricula. Moreover, the above scholars indicate that all types of organizations including private and public sectors, political parties, NGOs, and social movements can use strategic communication to reach their goals.

Strategic communication is clearly recognized as a sub-discipline of communication science; however, it practically integrates different theories and models from other neighbouring disciplines within the social science. Because of this interdisciplinary character, Dühning (2015, p. 6) calls strategic communication as “post disciplinary”, that to say it appears between disciplines rather than forming its own.

In the model below, Falkheimer & Heide (2014) conceptualised strategic communication as a field emerging at the intersection of communication and media theory, organizational and management theory, and social theory.



**Figure1. Strategic Communication and its Relationship to Nearby Fields
(FalkheimerHeide, 2014)**

2.2.1 Strategic Communication Pertaining to Communication, Management and Social Theories

Strategic communication, placed at the intersection of communication, management, and social theory, is relatively undeveloped in the academic literature. As stated above, scholarly dialogues about this topic have appeared recently in publications such as the *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, which was started in 2007. Consequently, researchers have detected some theoretical and practical gaps between the fields of management and communication that challenge the practice of strategic communication. For instance, Hallahan et al (2007) in Thompkins (1987) contends that current organizational and managerial concepts are rooted from communication theories. However, much of the academic research and training in the management and communication sectors are separated from strategic communication practice.

The discrepancy resulted in the absence of vital linkage between how communication is taught in academia and how it is practiced strategically challenges the practice (ibid). Thomas and Stephens (2015) also criticized this undesirable gap in the academic arena writing as, to date, the management literature has consistently highlighted the importance of communication, but it does not go beyond accepting the concept. In the same way, communication literature occasionally incorporates theory from strategy literature.

According to Littlejohn & Foss (2010), there are seven ‘schools’ of communication: Rhetoric (Aristotle), Semiotics, Critical school, Phenomenology, Socio cultural, Cybernetics, Social-psychological. Van Ruler (2012) on her part sees communication management under four schools: informational, persuasion, interaction and reflective. Whatever communication views and theories are available in the literature, Hallahan et al (2007, p.17) assert that when used in a context of achieving an organization’s mission, strategic communication is understood as “informational, persuasive, discursive, as well as relational communication.” In the above quote, “persuasive” relates to the rhetorical approach; “discursive” refers to the critical approach and “relational” approach bases on the system theory.

This means, working strategically together, different views and theories would complement one another since they have a common aim of supporting a single organization. Strategic communication which is a deliberate, planned, sustained and systematic series of communication supports the organization's strategic management efforts (Wilcox and Cameron, 2005).

Strategic communication scholars are trying to integrate insights from social theory to improve the practice of communication. They utilized many specific theories such as theories of Habermas, Luhmann, Weber, and others that are found under the comprehensive name of social theory. In connection to social theory, the most influential critic to strategic communication comes from J. Habermas (2007) with the claim that "strategic" action is directly opposing to "communication action" in the public sphere as cited in Hallahan et al (p.15).

According to Habermas strategic communication undermines the critical public sphere by cultivating a consensus that is not based on rationality or good arguments. However, Habermas did not disregard the use of strategy altogether if it is to be used with responsibility to create understanding between the organizations and its public. Based on the view of Vercic et al(2001, p.382), "strategic communication is first of all a strategic process of viewing an organization from an 'outside' perspective". Thus, strategic communication should not be only viewed from the side of organizational effectiveness.

2.2.2 Specialities under the Umbrella of Strategic Communication

Six specialities are commonly involved in the development, implementation, and assessment of strategic communications within an organization. These disciplines are management communication, marketing, public relations, technical communication, political communication, and information/social marketing campaigns (Hallahan et al., 2007). Each of these six practiced by different staff personnel to addresses organizational purposes. The above writers also noted that those disciplines were developed as specialty functions in the modernistic world of the 20th century. The six speciality areas, practitioners and their specific purpose can be summarized in the following table (no hierarchy of importance is implied in the table).

No	SPECIALITIES	PERSONNEL	PURPOSES
1	Management Communication	Managerial/administrative personnel throughout organization	To facilitate the orderly operations of the organization.
2	Public Relations	Public relations or publicity, human resources, finance, or government relations staffs	To establish and maintain mutually beneficial relationships with key constituencies. This includes consumers and customers, as well as investors and donors, employees and volunteers, community leaders, and government
3	Marketing Communication	Marketing and advertising staffs	To create awareness and promote sales of products and services.
4	Technical Communication	Technical, engineering support, and training staffs	To educate employees, customers, and others to improve their efficiency.
5	Political Communication	Government affairs staffs as well as politicians and advocacy groups.	To build political consensus or consent on important issues involving the exercise of political power and the allocation of resources in society. This includes efforts to influence voting in elections as well as public policy decisions by lawmakers or administrators. On the international level, this includes communications in support of public diplomacy and military
6	Information/Social Marketing Campaigns	Employees in nongovernmental, Not-for-profit, and governmental agencies, as well as corporate staffs involved in social, psychological, and physical well-being.	To reduce the incidence of risky behaviors or to promote social causes important to the betterment of the community.

Table 1. An overview of the six specialty areas practiced in strategic communication (Hallahan et al. 2007).

Strategic communication examines organizational communication from an integrated, multidisciplinary perspective by extending ideas and issues grounded in various traditional communications disciplines. This shows that many actors participate in the communication processes of an organization. Buhmann and Likely (2018) strengthen this point stating that strategic communication encompasses any purposeful use of communication to fulfil an organization's mission and strategy cutting across a variety of organizational subsidiaries, projects, and activities. However, it is important to note also that not all communication fields are assumed to be strategic communication; for instance, “journalism” is a case in point.

2.3 Public Relations: One of the Main Actors of Strategic Communication

2.3.1 Definition of Public Relations

As discussed above, several different professions fall under the umbrella of strategic communication. All those career paths involve in strategic communication to achieve certain business-driven goals. Among those disciplines public relations (PR) is one of the main actors of strategic communication.

As a field of academic study and professional practice, therefore, a good way to begin would be to define first what public relation really means. However, regarding to definition, PR seems to find itself in an awkward situation for it is hard to find a universally agreed definition in the literature. The Foundation of Public Relations Research and Education commissioned a study in 1975 to articulate a universally accepted definition in which sixty PR leaders were participated. Surprisingly, they collected and analysed 472 definitions of the term public relations starting from 1900 (Harlow, 1976). This is because PR is a new phenomenon as an academic discipline that emerged during the last half of the twentieth century. The research team then proposed the following extended definition:

Public relations is a distinctive management function which helps to establish and maintain mutual lines of communications, understanding, acceptance and cooperation between the organization and its publics; involves the management of problems or issues;

helps management to keep informed on and responsive to public opinion; defines and emphasizes the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; helps management keep abreast of and effectively utilize change, serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends; and uses research and sound ethical communication techniques as its principal tools (Harlow,1976). That is why an American historian, Heilbroner in Cutlip & Center(1978)described PR as a brotherhood of some hundred thousand whose common bond is its profession and whose common enemy is that no two of them can ever quite agree on what the profession is.

Though, the term is still an area of debate, the following definition is commonly found in the literature: Public relations is “the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends” (Cutlip et al., 2000, p.6).In the above definition “the management function” importantly signifies that PR is not a communication function but it is one of a management discipline equally parallel such as to human resource management, finance, marketing, etc.

PR serves a wide variety of organizations such as businesses, government agencies, medical facilities, educational organizations, trade associations, foundations, religious bodies, etc. In such organizations, according to Tench &Yeomans (2009), PR operates under different names as public relations, corporate communication, corporate affairs, public affairs, communication management, and reputation management. Except the names, however, there is no significant difference in practice among these terms. Steyn (2002, p.1), for example, concluded that there is no theoretical difference between corporate communication and public relations. Van Ruler and Vercic (2004, p.3) also confirm that communication management and corporate communication are accepted as alternative terms for public relations. In order to have a better understanding of public relations, it is important first to have a closer look of ‘roles’ of public relations and the excellence theory (models of PR and characteristics of excellent PR department).

2.3.2 The Roles of Public Relations

The roles of PR were originally introduced by Broom and Smith (1979). These scholars proposed five PR role models: problem-solving process facilitators; expert prescribers; communication process facilitators; technical services providers; and acceptant legitimizers. After revising these roles, Dozier and Broom (1995) later identified two basic PR roles that practitioners dominantly tend to play: Communication manager and Communication technician.

In their work, Dozier and Broom assigned communication manager for a practitioner who plans and manages PR activities, advises management, makes communication policy decisions, and oversees their implementation. Conversely, the primary concern of communication technicians is simply producing public relations materials such as writing press releases and web content, organizing events, editing, and working with the media. Technicians are not involved in organizational decision making; they are simply given the task of communicating about the decisions taken by the dominant coalition. Their focus is on implementing programs and producing communication materials. However, the boundary between managers and technicians' roles is not always clear-cut in practice. Most practitioners are involved in both manager and technician roles, but it is generally accepted that one role may dominate (Tench&Yeomans, 2009).

Verčič et al (2001), after surveying 43 countries, also described the practice of European PR under four major roles: managerial, operational, reflective, and educational. The first two, more or less, relate with the traditional managerial/technician roles. Reflective PR is explained as the role of considering changing social values to adjust organizational standards and values and is intended to influence the strategic management team. This role, seen as the core role of PR, emphasises the value of social responsibility in the practice of PR to earn legitimacy and public trust. And the educational role of PR seeks to increase the communication abilities of employees. In their recent study, Verčič, D. et al (2014) also revealed that European communication practitioners dominantly perceive five issues: Integrate business strategy and communication, withstand the impact of digital and social web change, build, and maintain trust, be more transparent and accommodate stakeholder needs, and manage data flow rate and volume appropriately.

2.3.3 Models of Public Relations

The 1980s J. Grunig and his colleagues' study, excellence theory, is perhaps the most influential paradigm that dominates the public relations discussion and practice for the past 30 years. After 15-year study, these researchers theorized the traditional four PR models: press agency, public information, two-way asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical communication (Grunig, 1992a). Based on Grunig(1992b), these four PR models are briefly summarized below.

- **Press agency model:**One-way disproportionate communication approach aiming at publicity using any available means commonly especially through the media, commonly seen as propaganda. Practitioners in favor of this model often do not worry about truth.
- **Public information model:** Communication professionals adopting this model are working as in-house journalists; to disseminate truthful information about their organization yet focusing on one-way disproportionate communication approach.
- **Two-way asymmetric model:** The intention of this model is to scientifically persuade stakeholders to adopt a desired behavior. This is done through combining the interests of their organization with the attitudes and values of the stakeholders. Practitioners use research and interactions, but this serves for developing messages to persuade key stakeholders to meet the needs of the organization. The communication process focuses primarily on changing the behavior of relevant stakeholders. Hence, excellent theorists are suspicious of unethical circumstances where organizations may achieve their goals using socially undesirable tactics.
- **Two-way symmetric model:** This two-way balanced model, considered to be the best communication approach by excellence research teams, aims to build consensus between organizations and its strategic stakeholders. It is the most favored communication model by the excellence theorists; a research-based public relations model used to manage conflict and improve communication with stakeholders (Grunig, 1992).

2.4 Strategic Public Relations Management

In today's increasingly competitive economic, political and social environment PR may not survive if it keeps undertaking tactical roles. Perhaps in those past days, practitioners of the field may have required to master only journalistic skills. But today where they are expected to handle complex organizational issues, mastering only knowledge of pure communication is not enough for competent PR practitioners.

Nickols (2000) defines strategy as the bridge between policy (high-order goals) on the one hand and tactics (concrete actions) on the other hand. Tactical decisions usually focus on the day-to-day actions and more likely to be response oriented or reactive in nature. This suggests that, in an organizational context, any PR activity should be part of the overall organization's strategy.

As a management function, PR should be strategically guided to contribute a solid impact. According to Plowman (2005, p.132), "public relations is strategic when it aids in formulating the organization's approach to accomplishing overall goals and then supports that effort in a coordinated and consistent manner." Steyn in Toth (2007, p.3) also writes that "strategic public relations management (strategic communication management) assumes public relations to be a strategic management function with a mandate to function at the strategic (macro or societal level). Grunig, Grunig & Dozier (2002) describe this approach "full participation" of the strategic PR where it is empowered to involve in the dominant coalition before any strategic decisions are made.

According to Austin & Pinkleton (2006), non-strategic PR practitioners carry out numerous communication activities such as producing newsletters, brochures, news releases, and an occasional special event, but without giving much thought to how each communication products and activities works for a specific and an overall purpose. Austin & Pinkleton go on to say that scientific practitioners organize all their activities in terms of effectiveness. Each brochure, newsletter, and special event is part of a larger strategic framework to achieve a clear goal.

Strategic public relations takes on the duty to perform environmental scanning, stakeholder identification, issue management, strategic planning, relationship building, and evaluation (Dozier & Broom, 1995; Grunig, 2011). Based on Austin & Pinkerton

(2006), “When practitioners respond to problems and challenges strategically instead of tactically, they have a much greater likelihood of helping organizations meet their challenges, solve or avoid protracted problems, and adjust to the expectations of key stakeholders in mutually beneficial ways” (p.4).

Nevertheless, Steyn (ibid) criticize the practice of PR that its role is often portrayed as merely facilitating the strategy process and the implementation of those strategic decisions. By itself, the function of PR is not considered as a strategic element in the organization’s management decision making process. Public relations profession encounters such kind of challenges on a regular basis; consequently, this resulted in PR to be suffered from low credibility. A credibility study carried out by the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) found that public relations ranked almost at the bottom of a list of approximately 50 professions (Public Relations Society of America, 1999). And to come out of such credibility crisis, Austin & Pinkerton (2006) suggest as follow: “To improve their stature within organizations and among a broad range of publics, public relations professionals must take a planned, strategic approach to their programs and problem solving” (p.6).

Generally, strategic public relations is about to develop and manage purposeful communication, working to achieve an organizational goal rather than just distributing information. According to Austin & Pinkerton (2006) “strategic public relations planning and research techniques have evolved into the most powerful tools available to public relations practitioners” (p.6). Austin & Pinkerton also emphasise that PR practitioners well prepared to utilize these tools can enjoy more autonomy in decision making and greater support from management.

2.5 Strategic PR in Relation to Excellent Public Relations Theory

Grunig and his colleagues, in their Excellent Public Relations theory, proposed seventeen characteristics of excellent public relations department. As cited in Tench &Yeomans (2009:548), such characteristics of excellent PR department are:

1. Managed strategically,
2. A single (integrated) public relations department,

3. Separate function from marketing,
4. Direct reporting relationship to senior management,
5. Two-way symmetrical model,
6. Senior public relations person in the managerial role,
7. Potential for excellent public relations, as indicated by knowledge of symmetric model, managerial role, academic training in public relations, and professionalism,
8. Equal opportunity for men and women in public relations,
9. Worldview for public relations in the organization reflects the two-way symmetric model,
10. Public relations director has power in or with the dominant coalition,
11. Participative rather than authoritarian organizational culture,
12. Symmetric system of internal communication,
13. Organic rather than mechanical organizational structure,
14. Turbulent, complex environment with pressure from activist groups,
15. Programmes meet communication objectives,
16. Reduces costs of regulation, pressure, and litigation,
17. Job satisfaction is high among employees.

As indicated above, Excellence theory provides a useful framework for strategic public relations in many ways. A significant contribution of Excellence theory to the development of strategic public relations is particularly its conclusion that public relations should be managed strategically, and report directly to the senior management.

According to the Excellence theory, participation of public relations practitioners in a strategic management of organizations is the critical characteristic of the most effective public relations departments. According to Grunig (1992), public relations is most likely to contribute to the organization's effectiveness when the senior manager of the

department is a member of the dominant coalition, where it helps to shape the organization's goals and determine which stakeholders are strategically important.

Excellent public relations department contributes to an organization by bringing external perspectives to the decision-making process (Grunig 2006). By participating in organizational decision-making process, excellent public relations department will be able to identify the stakeholders who would be affected by organizational decisions or who would affect those decisions. Once they had identified stakeholders, PR departments can, therefore, strategically develop programs to communicate with them (Grunig and Grunig 2001).

Emphasising on the public interest, Grunig (1992b) says: “public relations should be practiced serving the public interest, to develop mutual understanding between organizations and their publics, and to contribute to informed debate about issues in society” (p.9). Grunig (1992) also argues that symmetrical communication takes place through dialogue, listening, negotiation, and conflict resolution, not through command and manipulation.

Other writers who advocate excellence theory such as Dozier and Ehling (1992) as well express that “communication managers are more successful moving two parties closer together than converting one party over wholly to the other party’s perspective”. Excellence study concluded that organizations are effective when they choose and implement goals that are important to their self-interest as well as to the strategic publics (L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Ehling 1992; Grunig and Grunig 2001).

However, since the focus of of Excellent theory is relationships and relational outcomes, organizational effectiveness seems less important than relations to this theory. Hence, Excellence theory, in its original sense, does not fit more accurately into the strategic frame of public relations. This is because the emphasis of strategic PR is to achieve an organization’s mission. This emphasis may actually be considered as unethical by excellence theorists. Excellence theory emphasizes the notion of “two-way symmetric model of communication” as a guaranty for ethical public relations practice (Grunig, 1992; Grunig&Grunig, 1992; Grunig& Hunt, 1984; Grunig, 2001). According to them,

the final goal of excellent public relations department seems building and maintaining relationships with key publics.

Many writers, however, didn't agree with such *ideal* view of communication that dominates the PR literature. For example, Murphy (1991) criticized Excellent public relations theory on the ground that two-way symmetrical communication would not be realistically practiced in every situation of public relations unless it is combined with other asymmetrical strategies. Pieczka (2011) also argues that relationship management outcomes such as openness, trust, involvement and commitment is the soft social responsibility that can only be achieved within a tolerant, peaceful, and deliberative democracy.

Consequently, Grunig (1992b), the prominent figure of the excellent theory, moderately accepted a mixed-motive approach expressing: "Excellent departments generally practice a mixture of the two-way symmetrical and two-way asymmetrical models – a *mixed-motive* model – although their practice is more symmetrical than asymmetrical" (p.19). This indicates that strategic PR practitioners can use both two-way symmetrical and two-way asymmetrical models according to the context, instead of one exclusively.

The aim of strategic public relations is, therefore, to achieve strategic objectives of the organization and advance its mission through communication. Strategic PR tries to add value to the organization by influencing the public's awareness, attitudes, and/or behavior using a two-way communication (Tymson & Lazar, 2006). The perspective of Cutlip et al (1995) is also useful in this sense. To alter the behavior of others, organizations may have four instruments: physical force, patronage, purchase, or persuasion. Here, "persuasion" implies the application of communication to bring about the desirable changes in awareness, attitudes, and behaviors of publics. Skinner, et al., (2013, p.28) also state that public relations manage an organization's communication with "a view to inform, persuade, and influence attitudes and to bring about action". Truly, persuading others is influencing others "to accept one's ideas, policies or courses of action" (Halloran 2007, p.6). Public relations practitioners are employed for these purposes therefore persuasion is 'necessary and inevitable' (Porter's 2010, p.128).

In this regard, several scholars greatly concerned with the question of ethics. They fear practitioners may behave unethically against the public interests. For instance, Halloran (2007) states that “strategic communication has its roots in the true and classic meaning of ‘propaganda’” (p.6). However, the aim of strategic public relations is not meant simply to transform organizations to effectiveness but also to maintain public trust and confidence through accountability, ethical and moral principles. In 2012, the global alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management, The Melbourne Mandate endorsed that public relations and communication professionals have a mandate to define an organization character and value. This suggests that PR is essentially responsible for establishing moral values and social responsibility into the organizational decision-making process that serves the public interest, too.

While there is still a lack of comprehensive theoretical framework to practice strategic public relations, writers like Baker and Martinson, as cited in Tench &Yeomans (2009, p.268), also tried to develop a guiding principle as an “ethical persuasive PR” criterion which they termed as the five TARES test: **T**ruthfulness, **A**uthenticity, **R**espect, **E**quity, and **S**ocial responsibility.

2.6 Perception of Strategic Public Relations

The term perception has been defined as a “complex process by which people select, organize, and interpret sensory stimulation into a meaningful and coherent picture of the world” (Berelson& Steiner, 1964, p.88). Perception has a powerful impact on the way strategic public relations is practiced and portrayed in an organization. Public relations that strives to build others good perceptions, ironically, does not enjoy a favourable perception itself (Coombs & Holladay, 2007).

According to the Public Relations Society of America (2012), “Public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics”. This clearly indicates, departed from its historical roots in publicity and journalism, PR is already understood as a strategic dialogue. Unfortunately, this ideal is not practiced often enough because PR is misperceived by traditional practitioners, the media and organizational leaders. According to Smith (2004), PR professionals used to be called upon mainly for tasks such as writing news

releases, making speeches, producing videos, publishing newsletters, organizing displays and so on. This simplistic view overlooks the key role of strategic PR in promoting public understanding of, and support for, public policies.

Historically, public relations has been thought as a technical profession practiced mainly for publicity needs. Thus, many organizational leaders did not expect PR to generate greater value other than disseminating messages created by senior management. Some researchers call such technical function of PR, restricted to policy implementation, a “symbolic paradigm” (Grunig & Kim, 2011), or an “interpretive” function.

Different writers mentioned particular reasons why PR practitioners tend to be perceived tactical rather than strategic approach. These include the practitioner’s lack of knowledge or experience to play the role of strategic communicator (Grunig, Grunig and Dozier 2002); unavailability of formal strategic communication education (Grunig 1992; Carrington 1992); the culture and attitude towards communication within the organization, particularly by senior decision-makers (Dozier, Grunig and Grunig 1995); and the relative ease and comfort of routinely pursuing a ‘historicist’, or ‘the way we have always done things here’, approach (Steyn, Green and Grobler 2001).

Since many traditional organizational leaders tend to maintain the status quo or reluctant to change their behaviours regarding to PR, disagreements may arise between strategic oriented public relations practitioners and such traditional organizational leaders (Grunig, Grunig, and Dozier, 2002). Likewise, there are many PR practitioners who are not equipped with business knowledge that support organizational strategy development. Both challenges, misconception of CEOs and PR practitioners themselves towards PR, seem a bottleneck that holds back the industry’s development.

Instead of traditional views, new PR theories, models and labor market should lead the industry. Enabling conditions such as organizational systems, management support, and necessary resources (e.g., skill, equipment, or finances) must also be in place to realistically deliver effective strategic public relations programs. Not to suffer from hostility and suspicion from the management, strategic PR practitioners need also gradually change leader’s biased perception by continuously presenting constructive suggestions (White & Dozier, 1992).

2.7 The Essence of Strategic Thinking in Strategic Public Relations

Concepts such as strategic thinking, strategy and strategic planning may be confusing for some practitioners who have no management background. Nevertheless, to organize all the PR process and achieve a relevant outcome, the habit of thinking strategically is a prerequisite. In this respect, Buhmann and Likely (2018) emphasize that in recent decades, both academics and practitioners have argued that strategic communicators should support organizational thinking and focus on strategic actions.

While there is no consensus in the definition of strategic thinking in the literature, Mintzberg (1994), nevertheless, writes that “strategic thinking” is a synthesizing process involving intuition and creativity whose outcome is an integrated perspective of organizational strategy. On the other hand, “strategic planning” is the systematic programming (analytical) process of such a predetermined strategy from which an “action plan” is developed later. “Synthesis” here refers the process of taking many related parts and combining them into something bigger, whereas analysis is breaking something big down into smaller parts, (Hughes and Beatty, 2005).

Strategic public relations practitioners, therefore, inevitably require strategic competencies much more than content creation and information dissemination. Herrmanne, author of the creative brain, describes the concept of strategic thinking from a different perspective as in the future new leaders will not be masters, but maestros. The authors continue that leadership is about anticipating change, inspiring creativity, and choosing the best idea from everyone.

The skill of strategic thinking and strategic planning expertise may separate managers from technicians. Practitioners who lack strategic thinking skills and strategic planning expertise will find hard in fulfilling the demands of modern PR/communication management role. Researching, prioritization, strategic decision-making, programming and evaluating communication functions all necessitates the skill of strategic thinking and planning and evaluation expertise.

The following Herrmanne’s brain model may be helpful to think out of the mental default:

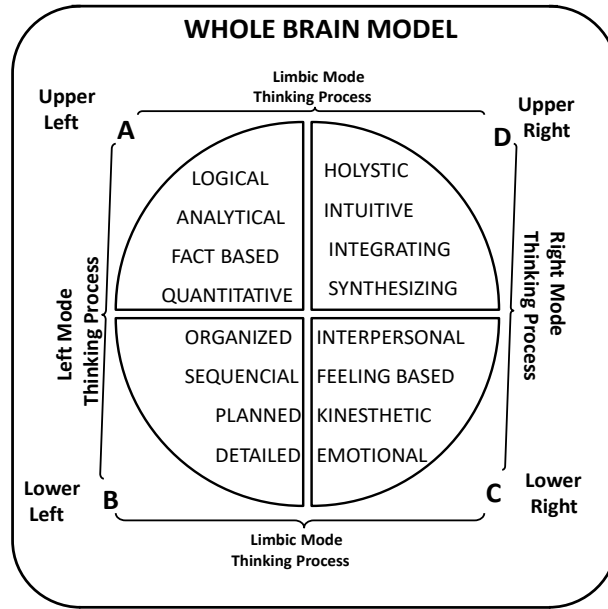


Fig 2. The Whole Brain Model (Herrmanne, 1996)

Thinking strategically is not the same as preparing a strategic plan or operational plan. In distinguishing the more general and important strategic thinking from the traditional strategic planning, Herzberg (1984) well described that strategic thinking works on organizational soul and strategic planning works on the skin and bones. Thus, strategic planners keep work hard to link the soul of the organizational to its body.

According to Samantha Howland, a senior managing partner at Decision Strategies International consulting firm, six key elements of strategic thinking a identified after in-depth research with more than 20,000 executives in more than 175 countries(<http://www.wobi.com/blog/strategic-thinking/six-key-elements-strategic-thinking>).The summary of these Six Key Elements of Strategic Thinking include the ability to:

Anticipate: Proactively monitoring the environment to prepare for threats and opportunities.

Challenge: To have questioning information instead of accepting at face value; reframing problems to understand root causes; challenging current beliefs and mindsets.

Interpret: Thoughtfully analyzing valuable facts and figures.

Decide: Applying process and discipline to arrive at a good enough decision; balancing speed, rigor, quality, and agility to take courageous stands, even with incomplete information.

Align: Acknowledging the diversity of differing viewpoints and opinions, but also to know how and when to align divergent agendas to work toward a common goal. Actively engaging stakeholders to encourage open dialogue and address misalignments.

Learn: encouraging feedback, viewing success and failure as sources of critical insight, celebrating the right kind of failures in addition to success.

Howland gives emphasis that each of the above six elements become significant when examined in the context of one comprehensive framework instead of isolated focus.

2.8 Developing Strategic Public Relations Plan

If we need to effectively deal with organizational communication problems, then it is essential to plan systematically. Likewise, successful public relations programs require proactive strategic communication planning. Van Riel (1995) states corporate communication strategy as “providing the focus and direction for an organization’s communication with its stakeholders, i.e., it determines what should be communicated to assist in achieving organizational goals” (p.24). Strategic public relations plan provides the link between the organizational mission and communication function.

Steyn and Puth (2000) also describe the concept of PR/communication strategy as “it is a process of identifying the organization’s key strategic issues, determining their impact on the organization’s stakeholders, and deciding what should be communicated to solve the problem or capitalize on the opportunity” (p.52). That means it will help to determine what should be communicated to avoid conflicts and adapt the organization to trends and events of its surrounding environment.

In the work of styen (2007), PR strategy is conceptualized as both deliberate and emergent. As a deliberate strategy it communicates organizational strategic positions and goals to internal and external publics to initiate changes (communication as a change initiative). Whereas emergent PR strategy address constantly emerging stakeholder and

societal issues which is in accordance with Grunig (1992) view of stakeholder and issues management.

A strategic public relations plan also guides the direction of public relations program and helps to harmonize the different communication activities, channels, and products to achieve the desired outcomes. PR strategy makes the PR function relevant in the organization's strategic management process and implies a strategic contribution to decision making (Styen 2007). Here what is more important is creating "value links" to the overall strategy of the organization. However, many PR practitioners fail to consider this strategic framework; habitually, they often want to get directly to tactics and activities. As cited in Steyn (2002), Van Riel also reveals that academic knowledge about the strategic management of an organization's communication is relatively limited.

According to Austin & Pinkleton (2006), the organization's mission forms the basis for any strategic planning; and the key ingredients of the recipe the manager must develop include a mission statement, a problem statement, situation analysis, goals, objectives, strategies, and tactics. Austin & Pinkleton presented the strategic planning pyramid as follows emphasizing that decisions at each level of the pyramid depend on the decisions made on the underlying levels (p.1).



Fig.3. The strategic planning pyramid (Austin & Pinkleton, 2006)

In the literature, we can find several frameworks and models to approach communication strategy. Such frameworks and models could serve a clear and practical approach in formulating, implementing, and evaluating strategies. For example, Cutlip et al. (2006) presented strategic public relations process in four-steps as:

- Step1. Defining the public relations problem
- Step2. Planning and programming
- Step3. Taking action and communicating, or implementing the program
- Step4. Evaluating the program

Buhmann and Likely (2018, p.3) also crafted the following cycle of communication strategy process:

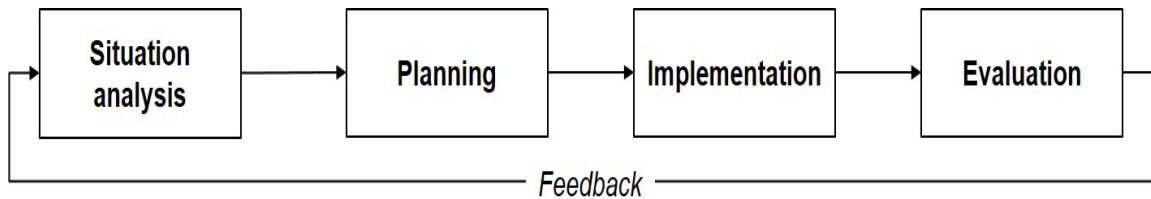


Fig.4. Basic planning/evaluation cycle

In the above strategy process, the first cycle, *situation analysis* refers to formative research, needs assessment and analysis while *planning* is about strategizing, goal setting, and tactical planning. The third cycle, *implementation* refers also to strategy in process, and *evaluation* denotes value assessment based on research that shows impact and provides feedback future stages of situation analysis and planning.

The situational analysis cycle gives a framework to strategize the appropriate communication goals and objectives and this in turn enables to smoothly implement communication planning. In developing communication strategy, the specific tasks include researching, strategic formulation, operational planning, and evaluating. Such tasks and elements of communication strategy are interrelated to form overall integrated process.

Based on Buhmann and Likely evaluation can be also distinguished in three types in the above basic planning/evaluation cycle: *Formative evaluation*, *process evaluation* and

summative evaluation. Formative evaluation through organizational listening, environmental scanning, and public opinion research provides a baseline for strategic decision-making. Communication objectives and specific activities/products, campaigns and programs in the strategic planning stage are set based on and later evaluations are conducted against these objectives based on the insight gained through formative evaluation research. Process evaluation phase centers on an evaluation of operations and on determining whether processes are on track (focusing on immediate outputs and outtakes). Summative evaluation, first assess the effect or outcome of communication activities, campaigns, or programs, specifically in how far they have met their objectives formulated communication strategy. Second, the effect of communication at the organization level is evaluated i.e., if business unit/functional objectives, corporate goals or even enterprise goals are being met. In addition, this final evaluation phase also provides feedback, insights, and learning for future situational analyses and broader organizational strategizing.

A well-crafted PR/communication strategy generally covers the communication objectives, the target audience, the key messages, the communication channels, the resources needed, and the feedback/ evaluation methods to measure the progress/results of the communication program. Therefore, along with enabling conditions such as systems, support, and resources, “strategic public relations management demands a set of abilities that require competence in planning principles, research methods, communication theories, and effective communication presentation skills” (Austin & Pinkleton 2006, p.9).

Referring to the prominent scholars in PR/communication strategy (Steyn2002; Cutlip, Center, and Broom 2006;Austin and Pinkleton2006; and others), key elements of **public relations/communication strategy** including the *implementation planning* can be summarized in the following way.

A) PR/communication Strategy:

Step 1: **Situation analysis** (internal and external context of the organization’s problem),

Step 2: **Communication goals and objectives,**

- Step 3: **Target groups** (specific publics with which a relationship is developed),
- Step 4: **Key messages** (the general communication content),
- Step 5: **Strategy** (general approaches to realize objectives using the key messages),
- Step 6: **Tactics** (what we say based on key messages or specific actions we may take),
- Step 7: **Monitoring and evaluation** (in terms of the communication goals and objectives).

B) Implementation Planning (should be linked to the above strategic framework):

- Step 8: *Objectives* (in terms of knowledge, attitude, and behaviour),
- Step 9: *Target audience* (determining specific publics),
- Step 10: *Messages/ communication actions* to be taken based on the key messages,
- Step 11: *Channels/ instruments* (to disseminate and promote our products and actions),
- Step 12: *Resources* (budgeting and sharing responsibilities with the appropriate skills),
- Step 13: *Timing* (timeline),
- Step 14: *Evaluation/feedback* (assessing the appropriateness of communication tools, budget, time and the influence on the knowledge, attitude, and behaviour of target audience against the specified objectives).

2.9 Conceptual Framework

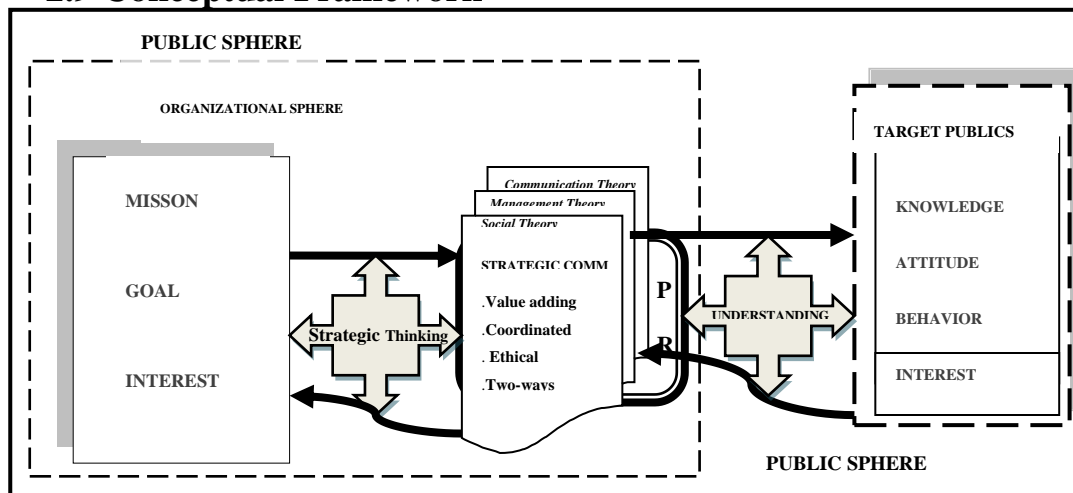


Fig 4. Conceptual framework (own source)

CHAPTER THREE

3 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

3.1 Qualitative Research Approach

The primary aim of this study was to access insights into participant's perceptions which may help give basis of understandings across reasoning and words. For this purpose, the study adopted a qualitative research approach. According to Patton (2001, p.39) qualitative research is an approach that "seeks to understand phenomena in context-specific settings" which produce findings that is not through statistical procedures or other means of quantification, "but instead the kind of research that produces findings derived at from real-world settings where the phenomena of interest unfold naturally."

Worthen and Sanders (1987, p.50) describe that qualitative study is "using the researcher as the chief 'instrument' in both data gathering and analysis". The researcher's perceptions and interpretations became part of the research and as a result, a subjective and interpretive orientation flows throughout the inquiry (Creswell, 2014). This indicates that researchers' use their diverse perspectives and experiences in collecting data and interpreting events instead of employing objective tools or equipment, which is not an easy task since the process may be labour intensive and time consuming.

Eid (2011) confirms this perspective writing as; doing research using qualitative data is much more difficult than quantitative data. Qualitative analysis requires more effort for a researcher to read and review data notes, reflect on what has been read, and make comparisons based on logic and judgment. Such acknowledgements also imply that multiple realities and meanings may exist.

While flexibility is methodologically allowed in qualitative study in solving problems and creating new knowledge, the researcher is aware that a deliberate attempt of bias in either concealing or highlighting issues would also significantly reduce the acceptance of the research. Thus, in this research, a maximum professional effort was taken in each step to answer questions in an unbiased manner to the best of the researcher's ability.

Qualitative study approach is broad and can generally include exploratory, explanatory, interpretive, or descriptive designs. To answer the research questions and achieve its objective, this study had particularly been designed as an explanatory qualitative single case study. According to Creswell (2013) the fundamental goal of qualitative case study is to understand and present the participants' perspectives and get close to them in their natural setting.

3.2 Data Collection Methods and Tools

Creswell et al. (2007) explains that in a case study qualitative approach the investigator explores detailed, in-depth data involving multiple sources of information such as observations, interviews, audio-visual material, and documents; and reports a case description and case-based themes. Many other scholars also suggest that the data gathering methods most often used in case study include observations, interviews, focus groups, document, and artefact analysis (Merriam, 2009). To develop details of insights about the issue under study, researchers also want to become intimate with the details of a natural setting or a particular cultural-historical context (Neuman, 2011).

The data gathering method may be classified under two categories as primary and secondary data (Babbie & Mouton, 2012). Data that are collected by the researchers or someone who assist them are primary data. Whereas data constitutes documents and texts that were produced by someone other than the researcher are secondary data. For this study, to triangulate the primary data (focus group discussion, in-depth interview, and document review), secondary data was also gathered by means of analysing the existing literature regarding strategic communication and public relations to properly answer the research questions.

In line with its objective and questions, the study, therefore, undertook focus group discussion, in-depth interview, and reviewing planning and reporting documents as instruments at the site of the study organization.

3.2.1 Focus Group Discussion

According to Rabiee (2004), in a focus group technique, participants focus on the use of in-depth group interviews in which they were selected. Morgan (1997, p.2) also

comments as “The hallmark of focus groups is their explicit use of group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group”. Purposive sampling is a commonly used procedure for focus group interviews (Roberts 1997). Therefore, in this study to assess the attitude, understanding and reaction of practitioners towards the concept and practice of strategic communication, a focus group discussion was conducted that engage six homogeneous members from the public relations and information department. The discussion participants were chosen assuming that they had better information about the topic at hand; and the number is limited due to the constraint of physical distance caused by the COVID-19 virus.

Though succeeded after repeated schedules, due to the threat posed by the pandemic corona virus, the researcher was seriously encountered with great inconveniencies in getting access to the selected discussion participants. It was conducted in the month of August 2020. The discussions were recorded for later analysis; and the list of questions used at the discussion guide is annexed.

3.2.2 In-depth Interviews

Finding out the management member’s perception and understanding in relation to the practice of the PR department is one of the research questions to be answered in this study. Hence, posing questions to the management members regarding to the involvement and contributions of PR in the strategic management process of the Ministry of Finance was crucial. In this respect those selected management members were assumed to be most appropriate key informants in providing relevant insights that help to understand the perception and practice of strategic public relations in the Ministry.

To this end, including the PR director 12 key informants who were known to be rich sources of data were deliberately selected to collect empirical data i.e., purposive sampling was employed. According to Dictionary of public relations measurement and research, purposive sample is: “A non-probability sample in which individuals are deliberately selected for inclusion based on their special knowledge, position, characteristics, or relevant dimensions of the population” (Stacks and Bowen 2013, p. 24). In addition to their knowledge, position and experience, the availability and willingness to participate in the study was also considered. During the in-depth

interviews conducted with the 12th sample informants, in August and September 2020, it was noticed that nothing new information were heard i.e.,” saturation was reached”. Given the information were repeated, it was believed that enough information was gathered.

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured way i.e., with a flexible list of questions that allow for focused and conversational communication. To guide the interview, the annexed interview schedule with a list of open-ended questions was developed. When necessary, probing questions such as “why do you believe this?” or “would you please be more specific?” were used as a supplement in requesting participants to further explain their response. During the interviewing process the researcher carefully took notes and responses were recorded with the consent of participants. The following table shows the detailed background of the interviewees:

No	Directorate	Status of the interviewee	Gender	Educational background	Years in the Ministry
1	Public relations and information Directorate	Director	M	MA	More than 12 years
2	Strategic Planning Directorate	Director	M	MA	More than 15 years
3	Treasury Directorate	Director	F	MA	More than 15
4	Information system Administration Directorate	Director	M	MA	More than 15 years
5	Corporate Service General Directorate	General Director	M	MA	Less than 5 years
6	Rights and Benefits of Dismissed Heads of Government Officials General Directorate	General Director	F	MA	More than 5 years

7	Gender Directorate	Director	F	MA	Less than 10
8	Economic Reform office	Head	M	MA	More than 20 years
9	Economic Reform office	Advisor	F	MA	More than 5 years
10	Programs and Project	Senior	M	MA	More than 20
11	General service Directorate	Director	M	BA	More than 10 years
12	Human Resource development and Administration Directorate	Director	F	MA	Less than 10 years

Table 2. Background of the interviewees in MOF

3.2.3 Document review

The study was developed through inputs from an in-depth review of the organization's available communication related documents. To acquire supplementary information and triangulate the interview and focus groups data, the following have been reviewed:

- Home grown economic reform agenda, Ministry of Finance.
- Strategic planning document, Ministry of Finance.
- Planning and reporting documents, public relations, and information department.
- Structure, duties and responsibilities, public relations, and information department.

3.3 Data Analysis Procedures

After the completion of both the focus group discussion and the in-depth interviews, the audio-recorded voices were transcribed and checked for accuracy. At this stage, the anonymity of informants was also looked after in the transcript so that the participant cannot be identified from anything that is said. Using textual analysis method researchers analyse and interpret the features of written, recorded, or visual messages (Frey,

Botan&Kreps, 2000).Once all the interviews had been transcribed and after necessary document are properly reviewed the information then was coded themes. According to David& Sutton (2011,p.339), coding is “a process of applying codes to chunks of text so that those chunks can be interlinked to highlight similarities and differences within and between texts”. In the coding process, the similarities or differences of topics that was analysed from the informant’s voices was highlighted on the transcript for viable interpretation. Next, based the research questions, the coded items were categorized based on themes, in a way that makes sense. Thus, when the findings were organized for reporting, such themes, were sensibly serving as the heading of a section.

3.4 Reliability and Validity (Trust Worthiness of the Study)

Research refers the application of scientific methods to systematically investigate a problem under consideration (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2001). This clearly signifies that study result without the merit of rigor is worthless. Thus, ensuring reliability and validity remain to be the most important issue in the research world. A research is reliable if the result can be reproduced under a similar methodology i.e., testing its consistency over time. As to validity, the focus is ensuring whether certain measurement methods are accurately measure as intended (Salkind, 1997).

Nevertheless, writers such asGolafashani(2003) claims that the concepts of reliability and validity may not sufficiently apply to the qualitative research paradigm. According toDenzin and Lincoln (1994) since qualitative study as a field of inquiry is incorporated under specific assumptions; it should be seen in its own right. That is why instead of validity and reliability often time terms like trustworthiness, credibility and dependability are used in the qualitative research paradigm.

In qualitative research it is impossible to escape entirely from the trap of subjectivity. However, this does not mean that qualitative researchers have no responsibility of ensuring the credibility of their findings. According to some writers, triangulation is considered as one important strategy that helps to improve the trustworthiness of qualitative research (McMillan &Schumacher 2006; and Stenbacka, 2001).In this regard, this study employed diverse data gathering methods such as in-depth interview, focus group discussion and document analysis to ensure triangulation in data collection. To

ease the data collection process, interview guide and leading questions were sent to the selected sample key informants and discussion participants before the scheduled appointment. Important ideas, perceptions and views of informants and participants are then collected through tape recorders and note taking.

Based on McMillan& Schumacher (2006), in a qualitative study, the concern of validity is to maintain conformity between the interpretations of the phenomena and the realities of the world. This requires a continuous refinement and improvement throughout the study. Thus, since this study was not involving statistical quantification, the researcher tried to look the views, perceptions and experiences of the interviewees and participants in detail. To this end, the researchers spent considerably enough time during transcription, reading over the written transcripts, analysis and finally making the conclusion. Generally, it is believed that all these conscious administrations helped to minimize unnecessary bias and increased the quality of the research findings.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Researchers must responsibly assure participants they are guaranteed from potentially risky research practices. They have the right to be informed ahead about the nature and objective of the study (Abbott and Grady, 2011). Accordingly, the researcher gained a formal letter from the AAU school of journalism and communication faculty and gave the copy to the study participants before the scheduled date of data collection.

The actual data collection was started after the participants were clear and comfortable about the study. Their sound was also recorded as per their consent. To keeping the anonymity of interviewees and focus group discussants, the research data was analyzed using code numbers with Key informants and Focus Group Discussion (FGD).

CHAPTER FOUR

4. DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

The main objective of this study was to critically analyze and describe the perception and practice of strategic public relations in the Ministry of Finance. To understand the different dimensions of the practice and arrive at a sound conclusion, the study was guided by the following three research questions:

- I. To examine the Ministry of Finance's public relations department engagement with the strategic function of PR/communication.
- II. To analyze to what extent the Ministry of Finance perceives the value of strategic PR/communication.
- III. To scan the strategic competency of the Ministry of Finance's public relations/communication practitioners.

This chapter presents the analysis and findings of the study obtained from the in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and document reviews. It is organized under the headings of the three research questions followed by the thematic categories emerged from the data. The chapter also presents some general insights into the findings obtained from those sources in relation to the three research questions. The Interpretation part is organized corresponding to the research questions of the study for the sake of information consistency.

4.2 Findings of the Study

- I. Involvement of the public relations department of the ministry of finance in strategic PR approach.**

- A. The practice of research and analysis*

In relation to this research question, one of the distinct thematic areas emerged out from the data collected via in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis is the practice of research and analysis. The researcher did not find any official document that ensures the PR department manages its communication function based on researched

information and knowledge. The following two quotes from the focus group discussion and interview also strengthens this reality:

I have never encountered this department when conducting any formal research to obtain strategic input for its planning purpose except brainstorming on staff meetings and little media monitoring practice. What I mean is that there is a customarily annual operational plan which is usually compiled from different sections, but it is not based on actual research. Rather I observe many times endless proposals related with re-structuring. (FGD, August 2020)

With its current capacity conducting a useful research is not much expected from the PR department. I think the department personnel lack some necessary skills to involve in research. Of course, this problem is not only limited to PR but also it is widely reflected in other departments of the ministry.(Interviewee B22, August 2020)

Before starting to implement strategic communication in an organization, researching and analysis is obviously the indispensable step that should be carried out primarily. Formative research and analysis phase helps to obtain basic information on the internal and external situations of the organization, its target audiences, and related issues to be addressed by communication.

B. Communication strategy

As stated by many PR scholars in the literature, to communicate strategically is to develop and manage purposeful communication which basically helps to achieve organizational goals. This kind of communication approach primarily requires a clear communication strategy that details the range of communication aligned to the organization's overarching strategy. This will effectively guide the PR/communication efforts in the right direction across the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of an organization. Thus, developing a proper communication strategy is one of the responsibilities of the ministry's PR department. However, it was hard to find a clearly articulated strategic communication plan that steers the general direction of communication activities. In-line with this argument, one interview participant reflected his view as:

Nowadays communication is metaphorically viewed as a sharp sword. However, in my opinion, the public relations and information directorate in this ministry lacks a thoughtful strategy that helps to enhance its performance. The directorate is simply engaging with some routine communication activities much lower than the expectation. You know, this ministry has a big responsibility and mandate that stretched out from the federal ministries to the regional levels of administration internally. It has also regular contacts and relations with various international and regional development partners externally. This means, communication strategy is crucial to the Ministry. I remember at one time the draft work was started by a certain consultant, nevertheless not finalized and validated for implementation. (Interviewee J 30, August 2020)

Acknowledging the importance of a communication strategy, one interviewee explained that drafting a strategic communication document was initiated to be implemented for the period of the Ethiopian fiscal year 2011-2013, though it had never been operational just yet. And this interviewee argued the reason why the strategy was not carried out as:

In Ethiopia, the past few years have generally exhibited a wide-ranging political and administrative unease. This national context obviously can hinder strategic motivations in the public relations practice. You know, this instability kept all of us rather in confusion mood simply to remain reactive than to act based on a long-term strategy. Let alone in a single ministry, one cannot find a coherent national communication strategy in Ethiopia today. Currently, it seems that public relations as a profession is at a great risk. The leadership even can totally shut down this directorate's operation if they want. So, we can adapt and implement that drafted strategic document when situations get improve. (Interviewee A 21, August 2020)

According to other interview participant, however, the major cause for lacking a coherent communication framework in the PR unit is attached with the limited professional expertise of practitioners:

Generally, public relations department is a crucial channel through which information flows to link the ministry with its wide-ranging stakeholders. It is like

an artery does in a blood system; but in the case of the ministry, the PR department is not performing its duty based on sound planning as expected. In my opinion, this is basically linked to the capacity constraint of the practitioners. (Interviewee G 27, August 2020)

C. Implementation practice

Implementation is significantly required to interpret the communication strategy into action. This is to say, obviously, there must be a PR/communication strategy to implement. However, as it is reported above, the guiding PR/communication strategy of the public relations function is already missed. The public relations department seemed operating its function without clearly identifying communication outcomes, measurable objectives, target audiences, strategy or approaches, tactics, and monitoring & evaluation frame. The researcher did not also find any relevant communication policies, rules or guidelines that help to smooth the implementation process of the PR function.

Implementation of PR functions usually requires the establishment of communication programs with a series of deliverable activities, allocation of skills and budgets to these activities, and development of procedures to handle the day-to-day detailed activities. However, the only active document available in the PR department was the annual operational planning, not founded on a strategic plan. This plan simply contains a series of communication tactics that further turns out to action plans with no stated clear goals and specific objectives to be achieved. Action plans were not also clearly detailing timelines, responsibilities, and the required resources. It was, therefore, difficult to assess how well the implementation plan of the PR department is fit with the organization's strategic plan. Generally, the following repetitive communication activities often seemed rolling up in the department's operational plans year after year:

- Facilitating meetings and other staff events.
- Informing and updating publics about the plans and outcomes of the organization.
- Publishing periodic newsletters.
- Managing media related activities such as interviews and press conferences.
- Serving different information seekers as per the Freedom of the Mass media and access to information proclamation.

- Producing communication materials that enhance image building.

The above communication practice often focused on disseminating information to the public, which is not supposed to targeting specific audiences, nor guided by key messages. According to the reporting documents of the PR department, different mainstreaming Media outlets, the organization's website, and online social media platforms such as Face book and twitter pages serving as the most important means of information dissemination.

Research participants were asked to reflect their perceptions regarding to the communication activities that the PR department was most often engaged. Including to the PR practitioners, participants of the study were exclusively remarking that instead of focusing on strategic issues, the PR department has always been involving on routine tactical activities. The following selected quotes could justify the fact:

The PR and information directorate generally informs internal and external publics about the policies, plans, initiatives, outcomes and other concerns of the ministry. The directorate will also react to some news media when they hurt the image of the organization. (Interviewee K 31, August 2020)

The public relation and information directorate usually performs communication activities like holding press conferences, sending out press releases, arranging meetings and refreshments, dispatching information on the ministry's Face book and Twitter accounts, and sometimes publishing periodic magazines. (Interviewee E 25, August 2020)

Just by looking at the content and format of the magazine prepared by PR department, you can guess how the department is poorly performing. This indicates that it is significantly lacking depth and strategic insights; generally, the practice does not fit to this big ministry. (Interviewee F 26, August 2020)

During the focus group discussion, it was also revealed that the PR unit was assigned to manage with other administrative assignments which are far from the proper communication:

The PR department spends most of its time involving with non-communication activities. It is too busy with protocol services like dealing with travelling documents, arranging meeting room and refreshments. Recently, it is also assigned to manage printing and photocopy services plus the library. Even, covid-19 related supplies such as face masks and sanitizers are also distributed to the staff of the organization through this directorate. (FGD, August 2020)

The researcher also learned from the focus group discussion that other functional areas found in the ministry used to handle some communication activities like crafting press releases. These departments keep sending their drafted press releases to the public relations directorate just for dissemination to different media outlets with minor editing. When asked the reason why the public relations experts do not directly perform such communication activities, one interview participant explained as:

We know those communication activities are the responsibility of public relations directorate; however, it would be difficult to handle such kind of communication activities with the current capacity of the directorate. Some of the activities require competencies of referring and understanding of bulky documents prepared in English language. Besides, some of directorate staffs are not willing participate PR in the fund mobilizing process, for example when they are dealing a negotiation with different embassies and international financial organizations. (Interviewee A 21, August 2020)

Until recently, according to the reviewed document, there was also a separate communication apparatus other than the PR department located under other department of the ministry called Public Private Partnerships (PPP) that deals with its own communication activities. By now these two separated PR activities have been restructured with one department. However, as it is witnessed above, still the PR function of the ministry does not seem integrated and coordinated in a single department.

D. Monitoring and evaluation practice

Literature usually insists strategic PR practitioners to evaluate their communication objectives by choosing the right method that best fits their demands and budget. Management as well may demand the PR practitioners to verify the impact of the

communication activities in their reports. Specific monitoring and evaluation plan is, therefore, necessary to measure the impact of communication on target audiences and to make right adjustments. In this regard, the significance of research is not restricted to the planning purpose; monitoring and evaluation process also needs research-based information.

However, in the public relations department, the researcher did not find clearly specified PR evaluation procedures. The planning document does not say anything about the required information for evaluation, its sources and gathering methods. Practitioners said that is just what they always do. Not surprisingly, standard evaluation practice is not expected where there is no measurable objectives and baseline data. In preparing routine reports, this department seems to simply have the habit of reviewing outputs of communication activities by and large employing vague percentage and numerical measurements.

II. The value given by the organization to the contributions of the strategic PR approach.

A. Integration

As the 2020 fiscal year planning document indicates, the Ministry of Finance has not yet fully integrated the communication function with its strategic activities. Therefore, it can be said that in the eyes of the leadership, the communication function is not seen as a strategic resource that supports the core activities across the entire organization.

A holistic spirit of strategic thinking often begins at the senior management level. Likewise, senior management's opinions and actions may powerfully influence the perception and practice of strategic communication in an organization. When senior managers of an organization properly believe on the value it adds to the mission of their organization, they can progressively support the strategic communication function of the PR department in many ways. Without such foundation in place, a PR department may continue engaging with tactical communication emphasising on routine activities.

B. Structure

Perception of insignificance may also be possibly noticed from the designed structure that many of the study participants had emphasised their concern. The following quotes particularly stick at the department's structural issue:

I do not think PR is valued as an important part of the organization's strategic management. You can judge this by looking how it is structured. It has been designed in such a way by that reform committee usually who have no communication orientations. (FGD, August 2020)

I think one of the challenges encountered to the PR unit is its poor organizational structure; it is really a critical problem that needs to be resolved. To undertake its function in the right way, the design should be studied again by the proper specialists. (Interviewee C 23, August 2020)

According to the organizational chart of the ministry, the public relations unit was identified with a title of *Public Relations and Information Directorate*. As restructured recently, this directorate comprises three teams: Communication team, Electronics and social media team, and Event and protocol team. The structure was designed to embrace a total of 44 staffs; out of these only 12 positions are related with the communication proper, the rest focusing on protocol, library, and printing machine service. Currently altogether 34 positions are occupied, out of these 12 positions are directly linked with public relations.

From the interviewee conducted, the researcher is informed that the director (appointed) is the member of the ministry's strategic management committee, without voice. However, it was explained that two years ago, he was prevented from participation by the former minister who has left the organization. Though the current ministry's leadership decision to include the head of public relations in the strategic management committee is significantly aligned with the notion of strategic communication, it was surprising to hear comments from the research participants stating that the mere inclusion of the director in the management committee does not give a significant strength to the department of PR. The following two quotes catch their perspectives:

The inclusion of the PR director in the strategic management committee is actually good. But I do not think this could help the department to influence the decisions of the management, because the director may not have research based strategic information. Clearly the structure of the directorate is not able to do that. So, in my opinion, PR in the management may be simply limited to informing the decisions made by the management to the public. (Interviewee B 22, August 2020)

Whether the director of PR department is a member of the management committee or not, I don't think that brings any change to the department. Previously the director was prevented but now he is allowed whatsoever the case the department is found on the same track. Surprisingly, we sometimes also get confused when other communication advisors of the minister directly order us while we are reporting to the director of PR. Sometimes things kept messing up; generally, there is no clear coordination mechanism. Furthermore, disagreements and conflicting issues are still common among staffs in this department; I don't know the cause for sure may be resulted from mismanagement or other incompatibilities.(FGD, August 2020)

It was clear from the analysis of the interview and focus group discussion that although the PR unit is led by an appointed director who reports directly to the most senior official, this department practically had very little appeal to the leadership that does not fit with the broad mandate and capacity of the ministry.

The researcher, wondering about the circumstance uttered by the participants, went on sending other probing question as why the management does not give serious attention to improve the condition of the PR department. The following interviewee generally may represent the responses obtained:

Practically, the management is not involving in the professional process of each department. Many times, professional aspects are left to be handled by the respective functional areas. Usually, the leadership of the Ministry of Finance is too busy in other urgent national agendas. Communication is required simply to

disseminate new information that has already been decided. (Interviewee D 24, August 2020)

C. Career development opportunities

PR practitioners participating in the focus group discussion of this study, altogether, raised another big challenge; the ministry had never organizing training programs for the PR practitioners. They have seriously complained on the organization for not building their strategic competency as it does for other departments. Such lack of career development opportunities and professional support may also indicate senior manager's belief that public relation adds little to the ministry's strategic performance.

III. The perceived strategic competency of the public relations practitioners in the Ministry of Finance.

As it is stated thoroughly in the review literature section, strategic public relations essentially centres on unified planning and implementation of relevant communication activities that best support the organization's goals. But this process of strategic PR/communication process requires fundamental know-how as a strategic PR/communication professional. According to Austin & Pinkleton (2006, p.9), "Strategic public relations management demands a set of abilities that require competence in planning principles, research methods, communication theories, and effective communication presentation skills."

To make a meaningful contribution toward the achievement of organizational goals; thereby earn respect from the leadership, public relations practitioners first need to have a better conceptual understanding of strategic PR/communication and should demonstrate its value in practice. PR practitioners who participated in this study generally seemed to have a good understanding of strategic PR/communication and its relevance. The researcher noticed, both from the focus group discussion and the interview session that multiple participants had recognized the strategic importance of PR/communication. Unfortunately, instead of demonstrating the strategic features of the communication function practically, they still found considering themselves as communication technicians. For example, two participants reflected their thoughts in the following manner:

Strategic PR is really an innovative idea. This approach is, commonly employed in more developed countries. We also would like to engage with this practice because we can be respected and have a better place in this organization. However, in the case of Ethiopia, what is expected from public relations practitioners are good writing skill, preparing different communication materials to promote the image of the organization, liaising with different Medias, managing the organization's website and social Medias, organizing events effectively and so on. If we successfully carried out such communication activities, I believe that we are in a position to better supporting the organization. (Interviewee A 21, August 2020)

This department is assigned to involve in so many duties; communication materials production, media relations, facilitating repetitive event, protocol services including arranging foreign travelling, printing services, and managing so many current issues. All these duties are important. That is why this department is currently structured with 44 staffs. So, I think in the future we will try to be more strategic when we better build our capacity in many ways; for the time being, our focus is to give those primary technical services to the ministry. (FGD, August 2020)

Furthermore, as it has been manifested in the department's planning and reporting documents, elements of strategic communication are obviously missing. These practitioners, currently, seemed find themselves to think that strategic PR issues are out of the immediate concern of the public relations department. This implies that many of them, having different arguable reasons, do not give significant value to the essence of strategic PR more than mere verbal expressions. Probably lack of desirable attitude towards strategic and sustainable PR/communication might be the main reasons as the following two quotes are alerting:

The current staffs of the PR directorate lack the appropriate motivation towards developing a coordinated and long ranged strategic communication plan. Simply they are bounded on dissemination of information to the public; or I think there must some barriers that hinder them to do so. Perhaps managers in the department

may not provide adequate leadership in strategic direction. (Interviewee A 21, August 2020)

Today's communication environment is quite different especially the youth seem moving fast. They should be better addressed strategically. The current trend requires far beyond traditional methods of communication. However, in my observation, the PR staffs do not seem adequately possessing those required strategic skills. (Interviewee G 27, August 2020)

4.3 Data Interpretation

The role of strategic public relations is not restricted to handling the process of information exchange between organizations and their publics. When managed strategically, PR has a great potential in changing attitudes and behaviours toward the intended economic, social, and political goals in order to advance the quality of life. Strategic PR can significantly contribute a measurable support to the realization of planned organizational goals. With this perspective in mind, through in-depth interviews, focus group discussion and document review, a detailed investigation was carried out in this study to understand the practice of strategic PR in the Ministry of Finance. And so many findings appeared from the analysis presented above in chapter four.

- **Involvement of the public relations department of the ministry of finance in strategic PR approach.**

In the literature reviewed, the importance of strategic pr/communication is well recognized by many writers. Without planned strategic pr/communication, it becomes very difficult for organizations to effectively realize their mission and priorities. Although the importance of communication strategy is well emphasised by ample authors in the literature reviewed, the analysis in chapter four revealed that the PR unit in the Ministry of Finance was not found to be guided by strategic framework. The only active document found in the PR department was the customary annual plan that directly lists out a series of some communication activities which further turns out to a kind of action plan having no reference to any clear goals to be achieved.

As it is stated from the reviewed literature, strategic public relations, rather than focusing on isolated activities, is primarily concerned to the goals to be achieved and the strategic decisions to be taken to that end. However, the communication activities listed out in the action plan of the PR unit under study were not originated from the broader communication strategy that links the function of PR to the organization's goals and priorities. The researcher is of the opinion that before stating any tactical communication activities or operational planning, there should be a clear communication framework that gives basic directions to be accomplished. Starting directly with tactical moves is not sufficient to deal with the communication needs of the ministry. In this regard, the finding shows that the PR unit of the ministry seriously lacks the fundamental feature of strategic public relations.

In connection to the absence of communication strategy, the analysis indicates that there are numerous strategic elements missing in the practice of the Ministry's public relations. Firstly, unlike suggested steps of strategic PR plan, the department does not give due attention to the importance of formative research i.e., internal and external situation analysis in relation to the organization's strategic problems to be addressed by PR. The researcher strongly advocates that to achieve meaningful strategic PR outcomes, communication interventions should result from a valid "research and analysis." However, as part of the strategic plan, a clearly documented situation analysis, defined communication objectives, segmented target public profile, strategies, key messages and tactics were not found in the department's communication interventions.

Resulted from the absence of strategic framework, the Ministry's PR department seems to be found confining with pure tactical role. The department is busy in addressing urgent tasks often responding to immediate situations. If the PR department is supposed to play a true strategic role, essential communication activities need to be prioritized in accordance with the mission and goals of the organization.

As can be noted from the data, the department is also managing a volume of non-communication activities that do not fit to the function of public relations. For example, the printing machine (other industry), routine protocol activities, managing meeting refreshments (bottled water, tea, coffee...etc) and covid-19 related supplies (face masks and sanitizing sprays) should have not been the responsibility given to the PR

department. Such activities may result in rather an administrative burden which implies that the PR department is less important in the strategic management of the organization.

The other key limitation of the PR department revealed from the data analysis is the lack of a clear evaluation mechanism. The department tends to justify its effectiveness by simply compiling immediate output reports instead of connecting the communication outcomes with the strategic objectives of the organization.

- **The value given by the organization to the contributions of the strategic public relations approach.**

As it has been detailed out in the introduction section of this study, currently the Ministry of Finance is engaged with a wide-ranging reform aiming to develop its effectiveness in helping to meet the challenges of the country's financial and economic insecurity. The public relations department is therefore expected to contribute a strategic value with a range of communication activities to support the Ministry's efforts. However, as the data reveals out in chapter four, the true value of strategic PR did not seem well recognized in this Ministry in many aspects.

There is no appropriate system that enhances the alignment and integration of PR activities with the organization's priorities and policies, and there is no standard evaluation of the impact of strategic public relations. As manifested from data, this is because the leadership is too busy in other urgent matters than to explicitly determine what will be best accomplished with the PR department. As mentioned by the interviewees, this management gape could again impact the PR practitioners to continue their own way of thinking and practice which does not correspond to strategic public relations.

As stated in the literature section of this study, the current global claim of strategic PR is about moving more to the strategic management level instead of serving the mere technical communication activity. In this regard, however, the ministry is appreciated for allowing the head of the PR department to participate in the strategic management committee even though the participation is limited to coordinating public information or media relation activities.

The PR department can only successfully influence on important communication decisions if it is only equipped with strategic information resulted from relevant research and analysis. Effective organizations enjoy their PR/communication department increasingly as a policy tool rather than solely as a means of conveying routine information.

Related to restructuring, the ministry seems aware of the perception and value challenge that will be posed by the two-communication apparatus within a single organization when it has recently integrated in one PR department. As many of the research participants expressed their concern, however, the issue of re-structuring still needs a significant specialist revision to help align the function of the department with the mandate and communication needs of the ministry.

The other challenge of practitioners that has been revealed from this study is the issue related with training and professional development. Obviously, trained communication professionals are extremely important to integrate strategic communication planning and implementation across the organisation. However, as the data indicates the current capacity of the PR department does not reflect this expectation. This necessitates further training and capacity building programs as such practitioners possess the capacity to strategically communicate to get the right message to the right public. To the contrary, practitioners who participate in this study were kept seriously complaining that PR training programs are not available in the ministry that helps build their strategic competency as it does for other departments. This indicates a low knowledge potential for the strategic role since practitioners are involved in routine operational/technical activities.

- **The perceived strategic competency of the public relations practitioners in the Ministry of Finance.**

Findings from both the focus group discussion and the interview session already indicate that practitioners have no as such a big problem in understanding the concept and relevance of strategic PR/communication. Unfortunately, it seems that they lack the courage and commitment of demonstrating strategic PR in practice. They still found

considering themselves as communication technicians which sounds contrary to their belief,

This means, even though many other factors also need to be considered, they are not practically engaged with strategic public relations. To move from perceived to actual value, public relations practitioners, therefore, need to make an attitudinal shift from the view that they are communication technicians. Hence, until this desirable attitude is formed, developing any communication strategy or structure may not automatically help to achieve public relations improvement. The researcher supposes that in addition to the minimal training programs, part of the reasons for this challenge may stem from the absence of active national professional association and networking opportunities that offer the chance to communicators in acquiring and sharing of new ideas with their colleagues. Due to such limitations, the communication practitioners were therefore remained to be non- strategic.

CHAPTER FIVE

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Summary

The principal objective of this study was to critically analyze and describe the perception and practice of strategic public relations in the Ministry of Finance. To meet this main objective three specific questions were outlined:

- I. To examine the Ministry of Finance's public relations department engagement with the strategic function of PR/communication.
- II. To analyze to what extent the Ministry of Finance perceives the value of strategic PR/communication.
- III. To scan the strategic competency of the Ministry of Finance's public relations/communication practitioners.

A single case study qualitative research design was adopted for this study, and relevant data were gathered by means of focus group discussion, in-depth interview, and document review.

This chapter presents inferential conclusions and key recommendations of the study based on the data analysis in chapter four. Details of the data gathering instruments were presented under chapter four and copies of the interview guides and focus group discussion questionnaire are attached as Appendices. The following conclusions and recommendations were then made based on the data analysis and findings in chapter four.

5.2 Conclusion

Based on the findings and analysis of chapter four it is confirmed that the public relations department in the ministry of finance did not practically engage with the long-term PR/communication strategic plan which is considered to be an essential strategic PR management tool. However, the public relations unit is rather limited to tactical activities that do not much contribute critical inputs to the achievement of the organization's strategic objectives. The communication objectives, target publics, key messages, strategy and monitoring and evaluation approaches are not comprehensively outlined.

Thus, it can be concluded that the ministry's public relations/ communication programs are not strategically managed.

It can be also concluded that the ministry is not yet fully aware of the importance of integrating the PR/communication function with its overarching strategic plan. That means the PR function is not regarded as an important component of the ministry's strategic plan. Even though the head of public relations is participating in the management meetings, PR is not generally considered to be a source of strategic information for the management to make more informed decisions. This poor perception of the management signifies that the true value of strategic communication is not well recognized by the ministry.

Furthermore, the finding revealed that the public relations staff in the ministry of finance had little perceived strategic competency and motivations. That means their proficiency to see broader issues and implications for PR planning and implementing is limited. Similarly, relevant communication policy and procedural guidelines are virtually non-existent. The focus of the department remained on responding to immediate conditions often through networking with media, event organizing, and social media management.

5.3 Recommendations

From the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. The Ministry of Finance is basically a macro-organization that handles many complex aspects of financial and economic policy interacting with diverse stakeholders. It is, therefore, undoubtedly difficult to coordinate the communication function properly without a coherent PR/communication strategy. Planning and strategizing PR activities are the primary functions before implementation or operational plan. Therefore, based on research and analysis, the public relation department should first articulate a comprehensive communication strategy that identifies measurable communication objectives and relevant stakeholders to be targeted along with the whole communication efforts.
2. Operational communication plans must be founded on the broader communication strategy that links to the ministry's strategic objectives. As it has

been already discussed, a communication strategy particularly focuses on *what* shall be done (knowing where to go), while implementation plan is concerned with detailed operational steps on *how* things should be carried out. Without a communication strategy, starting with implementation plans connotes a journey without a known destination. Operational plans are generally about coordinating actions and available resources towards the designed communication strategy. Therefore, the PR department should go beyond the usual reactive approach focusing on the longer-term perspective. To ensure *flexibility*, different initiatives of communication actions can also be taken parallel to the developing trends both to the internal and external circumstance of the ministry.

3. In the present digital ecosystem where today's publics seem highly complex and powerful, PR become more challenged and that requires sensitivity to the interests, desires, and concerns of each public. Especially in the current Ethiopian case where economic difficulty and political turbulence is the context, the practice of PR will undoubtedly be more difficult. This shows that unless both the management perspective and PR practitioners conform to the key preconditions of *strategic thinking*, only the public relations unit may not add any significant value to the organization. To make public relations department a valuable part of the ministry's decision-making process, the PR department must therefore gain the top management's strong support and understanding. In doing so strategic PR not only serves the organization's effectiveness but also the publics' interest, thereby PR can prove its *social value* in the larger society.
4. The public relations department, as much as possible, should justify the more meaningful outcomes or results of the organization that exactly supported by the communication effort i.e., by properly evaluating the impact of strategic PR against the ministry's top priorities. This helps to the department to be perceived as a value adding professional unit. Preoccupation with the traditional tactical communication activities (media publicity, event organization, social media management) means public relations will continue to be perceived as a peripheral or low-level profession.

5. To make a meaningful contribution toward the achievement of organizational goals, strategic PR/communication requires enthusiastic professionals having intentional and creative state of mind that meets the needs, values, and perceptions of the organization. Thus, public relations practitioners need to have a better conceptual understanding of strategic PR/communication and should demonstrate its value in practice. Reconsidering its imbalanced attention, the management should build the department's capacity such as by arranging training opportunities and appropriate structure that fit with the expected role and interactions. As the same time, practitioners are also recommended to continuously develop their strategic competency to be considered as a trusted professional communication advisor. To this end, first and for most, the public relations staff should prove effectiveness in ending from preoccupation with the tactical role. If they are first enlightened from the influence of such a prejudice, they can confidently assert that PR is basically a management function. Otherwise, the work of public relations is continuing to be perceived by others as a low-level discipline.
6. In harmony with the researcher's conceptual model presented in the literature section, before deciding to implement any communication activities, practitioners should check whether these activities could contribute to the larger organizational strategic objectives or not. As a 'purposeful use of communication', strategic PR/communication does not simply focus on activities that generate media coverage or publicity. It is about engaging with a long-term communication effort that contributes a value adding outcome to the organization's strategic objectives. Beyond focusing on tactics such as counting number of press releases, strategic PR is expected to focus on the concrete outcomes which give more meaning to the management. This helps to the practitioners to demonstrate their impact, so that they will be respected by the management.
7. Finally, the management should be aware that PR is not a magic tool that could substitute unsuitable overall organizational goals, policies and decisions. Yet, strategic public relations can add important values to the organization when it

designs aligned communication objectives, identifying the most important publics and conducting targeted communication programs to develop long-term relationships with those publics. This means, even though the organization has appropriate goals, it may not achieve them unless it develops strategic relationships with its publics.

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APPENDIX A

Focus group discussion guide for communication practitioners

1. Let us start our discussion by getting a clear sense of the PR department's role. Referring to strategic and tactical roles, what role do you believe the department is playing in the communication process?
2. To what extent the PR department manages its communication activity in a planned and coordinated way? Please describe the communication planning, research, and design process from a strategic perspective?
3. What relevant PR/ communication policies, procedures, and rules are available that helps for the smooth implementation of strategic and operational plans?
4. What measurement and evaluation tools are employed by the PR department to assess its success of communication program, campaign, or project objectives?
5. Looking back all the PR/communication planning, implementation, and evaluation stages, in what areas do you think the effort could have been improved?
6. To what extent the PR department is participating in the strategic management of the organization? If participation is prevented or not satisfactory, what do you think the reasons; and valuable insights the management will miss?
7. Do you suppose the PR department is recognized as a trusted advisor in the eyes of top official on communication matters? If that is not the case, what do you assume the reasons?
8. How often the PR department is active in monitoring Media's activities and researching on emerging trends or changes in the socio-economic environment to keep update the management team?
9. Please describe the effort of the organization in developing the capacity of the PR department such as designing suitable structure, organizing training programs, providing necessary resources and budget?
10. Are there any functional actors of communication other than the PR department in the organization? If any, how well coordinated and complementary are their communication activities?

11. Have you ever learned of important decisions or policies of the organization from the newspaper or broadcast media? Please mention a specific situation that you would remember.
12. To what extent the PR department enjoys the co-operation and support of the organization's staffs?
13. How do you perceive the strategic competency of PR practitioners? What major strength and weakness are exhibited in this respect?
14. Do you notice team issues such as conflicts on priorities, beliefs, or ways of operating in PR department? If any, what do you suppose the reason and how would it have been managed?
15. In your opinion, to what degree the PR department's communication effort are strategically supportive to the overall organizational goals and priorities?
16. Would you like to add anything to this discussion?
17. I am heartily thankful for your valuable contribution to my research!

APPENDIX B

Interview protocol for management teams and senior experts

1. Let us start our interview by getting a clear sense of strategic public relations. What do you generally perceive on the strategic role that PR could play in the achievement of organizational goals and initiatives?
2. Do you think the organization is particularly aware of the strategic value that the PR department could provide to the realization of its goals and initiatives? If that is so, to what extent it is coordinated and planned at senior management level?
3. What valuable insight do you think the organization is missing for the PR department is not participating in the strategic decision-making process of senior management?
4. If the PR department is not supposed to play strategic role, what do you think is the major outcomes that the organization expects from this department?
5. In your opinion, what possible indicators can the organization use to judge the success of the PR department?
6. Do you suppose the PR department is recognized as a trusted advisor in the eyes of top officials on communication matters? If that is not the case, where do you think they receive the right counseling?
7. How often the PR department is effective in updating the management team based on Media monitoring activities and research on emerging trends in the economic environment?
8. Considering to the planning and implementing process of strategic communication, how do you see the strategic competency level of PR practitioners?
9. How reasonably the management is supporting the PR department with the necessary structure, human skills, budget, facilities, and trainings?
10. In your opinion, what do you think the changes, if any, should be adopted in the PR department for the future?
11. What is your general perception of the organization in setting up frameworks (systems and processes) that support strategic thinking?
12. Would you like to add anything to this discussion?

13. Thank you for your willingness and the time you offer me!

APPENDIX C

Organizational Structure of Ministry of Finance

