Contingency theory of strategic conflict management: A decade of theory development, discovery, and dialogue

Abstract

The contingency theory of strategic conflict management, which began as an elaboration, qualification, and extension of the value of symmetry, has, over the last decade, come into its own and emerged as an empirically tested perspective. Contingency theory argued that the complexity in strategic communication was best represented by a continuum of stance, not by a limited set of models of excellence. This meta-theoretical analysis, while acknowledging the inspiration of the excellence theory, celebrates the maturing of the contingency theory by consolidating the development and advances the theory has made since 1997; documents the discoveries that have either added new insights to the theory or refuted postulations; charts the streams of research that have been extended and expanded from the original framework; and records the on-going dialogue the theory has offered to the field to continually challenge prevailing presumptions and presuppositions.
Contingency theory of strategic conflict management:
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Introduction

It is never easy to question the canon in one’s field, and to offer a theoretical perspective that has emerged to be diametrically opposed to a theory that has dominated research in a field (Botan & Taylor, 2004), or what its much-esteemed founders argued to be normative theory (Grunig & Grunig, 1992). When DeFleur (1998) decried the lack of paradigmatic theoretical advances in communication, he certainly failed to address the enormous resistance one faces in querying existing premises to make that quantum leap of a paradigmatic shift in thinking.

The contingency theory of strategic conflict management, which began questioning excellence theory’s positioning of symmetrical communication as normative theory on how organizations should be practicing public relations that was regarded as the most ethical and effective (Grunig, 1996), might have had its humble beginnings as an elaboration, qualification, and extension of the value of symmetry (Cameron, 1997; Cameron, Cropp & Reber, 2001). Over the last decade, however, it has come into its own, and emerged as an empirically tested perspective that argued that the complexity in strategic communication could not be reduced to excellence theory’s models of excellence. Cameron suggested scholars move forward “from four or five models which place our practice in boxes” (Cameron, 1997, p. 40).

The alternative view pioneered by the contingency theory of how strategic communication ought to be practiced, that communication could be examined through a continuum whereby organizations practice a variety of stances at a given time for a given public depending on the circumstance, instead of subscribing the practice to strait-laced models, was by no means an attempt of contingency theorists to set up excellence theory for a “straw man
argument (Yarbrough, Cameron, Sallot, & McWilliams, 1998, p. 53). Instead, its proponents argued that it was a “sense-making effort to ground a theory of accommodation in practitioner experience, to challenge certain aspects of the excellence theory…” (p. 53).

It was, by all intents and purposes, an attempt to provide as realistic and grounded a description of how intuitive, nuanced, and textured public relations have been practiced (Cancel, Mitrook, & Cameron, 1999; Cameron, Pang, & Jin, 2006, in press). This paradigmatic reconfiguration might have ruffled more feathers than it was initially appreciated (Cameron, 1997), nonetheless, it was a necessity borne out of a need to demonstrate the subtleties of communication management that a single model like the two-way symmetry, though argued to be “real” (Grunig & Grunig, 1992, p. 320), was “too inflexible to be meaningful” (Yarbrough, Cameron, Sallot, & McWilliams, 1998, p. 53).

For a paradigmatic theoretical shift to emerge, Kuhn (1996) suggested it must satisfy three conditions. First, it builds upon “pre-established theory” (p. 16). Second, it receives the “assent of the relevant community” (p. 94) whose “knowledge of [the] shared paradigm can be assumed” (p. 20), and this same community agrees to commit to the “same rules and standards for scientific practice” (p. 11). Third, it represents a “sign of maturity” in the development pattern of the field (p. 11). For the emerging paradigmatic thinking to take root and be accepted, Kuhn (1996) argued that the theory “must seem better than its competitors, but it need not, and in fact never does, explain all the facts with which it can be confronted” (p. 17-18).

By all measures, the contingency theory has satisfied most, if not all of Kuhn’s criteria. Its genesis was in the established work of the excellence and grounded theory; and it has been systematically subjected to the same scientific rigor as any empirical research. While the jury is out whether the contingency theory would be considered a paradigmatic breakthrough in due time, it is timely, on the 10th anniversary of its existence, to celebrate its “maturity” (Kuhn, 1996).
by consolidating the development and advances the theory has made from the time the first article was published in 1997; chart the discoveries that have either added new insights to the theory or refute postulations, and the streams of research that have been extended and expanded from the original framework; and record the on-going dialogue the theory has offered to the field to continually challenge prevailing presumptions and presuppositions.

The significance of this paper is three fold. First, to reassess and recapitulate the theory’s explanatory powers in portraying a realistic understanding of how communication is managed between the organization and its diverse publics as an alternative perspective to the excellence theory. Second, the theory’s initial postulations of 87 factors influencing stance movements may have been more complex than imagined. This paper aims to streamline and redefine the influence of factors into a more parsimonious form by examining which are the more pertinent factors. Third, to understand the theory’s ability to generate new insights and expand the range of knowledge through its application value to the practical world. A theory grounded in the practitioners’ world often adds rich layers of context to understanding how theory and practice can integrate (Pang, Cropp, & Cameron, 2006, in press). Chaffee and Berger (1987) argued a theory’s explanatory power; its parsimony; its internal consistence; and its ability generate new hypotheses and expand the range of potential knowledge were all characteristics of a strong theoretical foundation.

This paper, a meta-theoretical analysis based on an extensive review of literature employing contingency theory and integrated with related conflict and public relations literature, is divided into four sections. The first chronicles its origins, its theoretical platform, and the nascent testing and expounding of the theory. The second consolidates the theoretical development and three streams of research the theory has inspired. The third and final section
argues how it can be continually relevant and suggests new research directions as it seeks to engage in a dialogue to further refine the theory for years to come.

The Beginnings of Contingency Theory (1997-2001)

Much of the literature on effective public relations had been built on Grunig and Grunig’s (1992) and Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) excellence theory. Four models of excellence have been posited:

Press Agentry/Publicity model: Here, the organization is only interested in making its ethos and products known, even at the expense of half-truths;

Public Information model: Predominantly characterized by one-way transfer of information from the organization to the publics, the aim is to provide information in a journalistic form;

Two-way asymmetric model: Instead of a rigid transference of information, the organization uses surveys and polls to persuade the publics to accept its point of view;

Two-way symmetric model: Here, the organization is more amenable to developing a dialogue with the publics. Communication flows both ways between the organization and the public and both sides are prepared to change their stances, with the aims of resolving the crisis in a professional, ethical and effective way.

The two-way symmetrical model has been positioned as normative theory, which stated how organizations should be practicing public relations that was regarded as the most ethical and effective manner (Grunig & Grunig, 1992; Grunig, 1996).

The contingency theory, however, saw a different reality. Cancel, Cameron, Sallot and Mitrook (1997) argued there were several reasons why the four models of public relations were inadequate to explain the range of operational stances and strategies that could take place in public relations. Central to their arguments were three key reasons. First, the data collected had
proved the theory to be “weak” (p. 37). Studies conducted to test the models’ reliability had shown to be “below minimum standards of reliability” (p. 37). Second, the authors argued that the assumption that the two-way symmetrical model representing excellence in public relations was methodically flawed because research did not support it. Citing Hellweg’s (1989) findings, the authors noted that evidence to demonstrate “symmetrical techniques produce asymmetrical results” were lacking (p. 39).

Third, inherent in the assumption of the two-way symmetrical model was that the organization must engage in dialogue with the public, even though the public may be morally repugnant. This included “offering trade-offs” to a morally repugnant public, an exercise that could be viewed as “unethical” (p. 38).

Related public relations literature, however, questioned the possibility and ethics of dialogue. There had been instances when the organization would not enter into any form of dialogue with the publics because they were unduly unreasonable, and unwilling to collaborate. Kelleher (2003) found that public relations could be proscribed by circumstances, such as collective bargaining. There were also limits to collaboration, argued Leichty (1997), particularly as collaboration required “two or more parties to cooperate in good faith: Collaboration is a ‘relational strategy’ and cannot be enacted without cooperation” (p. 55). In a recent critical analysis of symmetrical communication, Roper (2005) questioned the motive of open, collaborative negotiation and communication, and in whose interests were concessions made:

“In assessing whether an organization is exercising ‘excellent’ public relations through a symmetrical approach to communication we also need to examine the extent of the concessions made to external stakeholders. Are they ‘just enough’ to quiet public criticism, allowing essentially a business as usual strategy to remain in force? Are they allowing the continuing co-operation between business and
government, preventing the introduction of unwelcome legislation – and at what price?” (p. 83).

Stoker and Tusinski (2006) also thought the goals of symmetrical communication were commendable, they were unreasonable in that symmetry may pose moral problems in public relations, and may lead to “ethically questionable quid pro quo relationships” (p. 174). Holtzhausen, Petersen, and Tindall (2003) rejected the notion of symmetry as the normative public relations approach. In their study of South African practitioners, the authors found that practitioners developed their practice that reflected a greater concern about the relationship between the organization and its publics based the larger economic, social and political realities.

The move from the four models to a continuum began when Cameron and his colleagues found studies indicating that “unobtrusive control” (p. 33) might exist in the symmetrical and asymmetrical models. Hellweg (1989) had argued that symmetrical communication should be refined “along less rigorous lines of a continuum ranging from conflict to cooperation” (Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997, p. 33). Utilizing the findings of Hellweg (1989), Murphy (1991), Dozier, L. Grunig and J. Grunig (1995), Cancel, Cameron, Sallot and Mitrook (1997) argued that public relations was more accurately portrayed along a continuum. “This view is a more effective and realistic illustration of public relations and organization behavior than a conceptualization of four models” (p. 34), the authors argued. Moreover, because of the fluidity of the circumstances, which, in turn, may affect an organization’s stance and strategies, a continuum would be far more grounded to reality that was able to “more accurately portray the variety of public relations stances available” (p. 34).

The continuum, argued Cancel, Mitrook and Cameron (1999), thus explained “an organization’s possible wide range of stances taken toward an individual public, differing from the more proscriptive and mutually exclusive categorization” (p. 172) found in the four models.
Cameron and his colleagues took the idea of continua further, one, which they argued, that emphasized a more realistic description of how public relations was practiced. It examined how organizations practiced a variety of public relations stances at one point in time, how those stances changed, sometimes almost instantaneously, and what influenced the change in stance (Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997). Their reasoning was this: Because public relations, particularly conflict management, was so complex and subtle, understanding it from any of the four models, particularly the two-way symmetrical model, would be far too limiting and rigid. “Effective and ethical public relations is possible at a range of points on a continuum of accommodation” (p. 53), argued Yarbrough, Cameron, Sallot, & McWilliams (1998). Excellent public relations activity, including dealing with conflicts and crises, “cannot and should not be typified as a single model or even a hybrid model of practice” (Cameron, Cropp, & Reber, 2001, p. 245).

The organizational response to the public relations dilemma at hand, according to the contingency theory, which has, at one end of the continuum, advocacy, and at the other end, accommodation, was, thus, “It Depends”. The theory offered a matrix of 87 factors (see appendix 1), arranged thematically, that the organization could draw on to determine their stance. Between advocacy, which means arguing for one’s own case, and accommodation, which means giving in, was a wide range of operational stances that influenced public relations strategies and these entailed “different degrees of advocacy and accommodation.” (Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997, p. 37). Along this continuum, the theory argued that any of the 87 factors, culled from public relations literature, excellence theory, observations, and grounded theory (Cameron, 1999, p. 31), could affect the location of an organization on that continuum “at a given time regarding a given public” (Cancel, Mitrook, & Cameron, 1999 p. 172; Yarbrough, Cameron, Sallot, & McWilliams, 1998, p. 40).
The theory sought to understand the dynamics, within and without the organization that could affect an organization’s stance. By understanding these dynamics, it elaborated, specified the conditions, factors, and forces that under-girded such a stance, so that public relations need not be viewed by artificially classifying into boxes of behavior. It aimed to “offer a structure for better understanding of the dynamics of accommodation as well as the efficacy and ethical implications of accommodation in public relations practice” (Yarbrough, Cameron, Sallot, & McWilliams, 1998, p. 41).


To test the theoretical veracity and the applicability of the theory, Cancel, Mitrook, & Cameron (1999) took it to the practitioners. In wide-ranging and extensive interviews with public relations professionals, the authors sought to understand how the practitioners managed conflict and whether the theory made sense to them. “In effect, we set out to see whether ‘there is anything to the contingency theory’ and if so, to see how the theory can be grounded in the words, experience and perspective of practitioners” (p. 172), the authors stated. This was done through the use of a few broad questions about when and how practitioners “reach out” to key publics.

This study broke new ground. Besides the study participants’ unknowing concurrence with the nascent contingency theory’s assertion that a continuum of advocacy and accommodation was a “valid representation of their interactions and their corporations’ interactions with external publics” (p. 176), further insights were shed on the relative influences...
of the 87 factors in positing the organization’s position on the continuum, spawning the contingency terms, predisposing and situational variables.

While practitioners’ unsolicited views meshed with a dynamic and modulating representation of what happens in public relations, they argued that some of the 87 variables featured more prominently than others. There were factors that influenced the organization’s position on the continuum before it interacts with a public; and there were variables that influenced the organization’s position on the continuum during interaction with its publics. The former have been categorized as predisposing variables, while the latter, situational variables.

Some of the well-supported predisposing factors Cancel, Mitrook and Cameron (1999) found included: (1) The size of the organization; (2) Corporate culture; (3) Business exposure; (4) Public relations to dominant coalition; (5) Dominant coalition enlightenment; (6) Individual characteristics of key individuals, like the CEO. These factors were supported in the crisis management literature. For instance, organizational culture had been found to be a key factor in ensuring the formulation of a sound crisis plan and excellent crisis management (Marra, 1998).

Situational variables were factors that were most likely to influence how an organization related to a public by effecting shifts from a predisposed accommodative or adversarial stance along the continuum during an interaction. Some of the supported situational factors included: (1) Urgency of the situation; (2) Characteristics of the other public; (3) Potential or obvious threats; (4) Potential costs or benefit for the organization from choosing the various stances (Cancel, Mitrook, & Cameron, 1999).

The classification of the factors into two categories was by no means an attempt to order the importance of one over the other in a given situation. The situational variables could determine the eventual degree of accommodation an organization takes by “effecting shifts from a predisposed accommodative or adversarial stance along the continuum during an interaction.
with the external public” (Yarbrough, Cameron, Sallot, & McWilliams, 1998, p. 43). At the same time, an organization may not move from its predisposed stance if the situational variables are not compelling nor powerful enough to influence the position or if the opportunity costs of the situational variables do not lead to any visible benefits (Cameron, Cropp & Reber, 2001). Consequently, both predisposing and situational factors could move the organization toward increased accommodation or advocacy. What was important in determining where the organization situates on the continuum involved the “weighing of many factors found in the theory” (Yarbrough, Cameron, Sallot & McWilliams, 1998, p. 50). Notably, the factors explain movement either way along the continuum.

While Cameron and his colleagues had, by this time, managed to explain the complexity, contextual, and even the conundrum of a dialogic process, they had yet to answer one of the central questions they posed in arguing why symmetrical communication could not be normative. The question was whether communication could still take place with a morally repugnant public. A broader casting of the question was whether other factors precluded or proscribed communication termed variously as dialogue, trade-offs, accommodation or symmetrical communication.

That question took them to a further elaboration and explication of the theory in a paper published two years later. Cameron, Cropp and Reber (2001) argued that there were occasions when accommodation was not possible at all, due to moral, legal, and regulatory reasons. They labeled them as proscriptive variables. Six were identified: (1) When there was moral conviction that an accommodative or dialogic stance towards a public may be inherently unethical; (2) when there was a need to maintain moral neutrality in the face of contending publics; (3) when legal constraints curtailed accommodation; (4) when there were regulatory restraints; (5) when senior management prohibited an accommodative stance; and lastly, (6) when the issue became a
jurisdictional concern within the organization and resolution of the issue took on a constrained and complex process of negotiation. The proscriptive variables “did not necessarily drive increased or extreme advocacy, but did preclude compromise or even communication with a given public” (p. 253), argued Cameron, Cropp and Reber (2001).

Theoretical discussions aside, to show how contingency theory was a realistic description of the practitioners’ world and why two-way symmetrical was impractical and inflexible, Yarbrough, Cameron, Sallot and McWilliams (1998) applied it to how conflicts were managed by C. Richard Yarbrough, managing director-communications of the 1996 Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games (ACOG). Three episodes, one involving the moving of preliminary volleyball matches from one venue to another due to the conflict between gay activists and local politicians who had passed an anti-gay resolution; the second involving a conflict between the ACOG board of directors and the media concerning the disclosure of executive salaries; and the third involving a conflict between the ACOG and a minority minister over an Olympic sponsor, illustrated how textured the conflicts were and how dynamic changes in stance were effected on the continuum. For the second episode, for instance, even though the ACOG initially practiced an advocacy stance against the disclosure of salaries, it finally relented due to the influence of situational factors, particularly changes mandated by a higher authority, the International Olympic Council (IOC) that forced its hands to move to the end of the continuum towards accommodation. The study proved not just the “sophisticated process” of assessment and management of a given situation, but that effective, ethical public relations can be practiced “in a full range of places on the continuum from advocacy to accommodation” (p. 55).


Over the years, the central tenet of the contingency theory has resolutely remained, that organizations practice a variety of stances on the continuum, and the stances taken are influenced
by a welter of factors. Based on the key words, stance on the continuum and factors, a wealth of research has been carried out, either to explain and illustrate the theory further, or to expand and extend key aspects of the theory, leading to developments of new theoretical frameworks. Three streams of research are evident: first, research has been carried out to elaborate, affirm, explain or add new factors that further expounds on the dynamism of movement along the continuum; second, explicating of stance movement along the continuum; and third, predicting the enactment of strategies based on the stance adopted.

Analyses of Factors Influencing Stance

With over 80 distinct factors identified in the contingency theory, Cameron and his colleagues acknowledged that to manage them in “any useful way” (Cameron, Cropp & Reber, 2001, p. 247), parsimony was needed. While the proscriptive variables had been found to limit dialogue and accommodation, further delineation of the relative influences of factors was needed. Acknowledging that much of the claims of the theory had been found based on qualitative research, Reber and Cameron (2003) set out to test the construct of five thematic variables through scale building on 91 top public relations practitioners. The five thematic variables were external threats, external public characteristics, organizational characteristics, public relations department characteristics, and dominant coalition characteristics. The authors found that the scales supported “the theoretical soundness of contingency and the previous qualitative testing of contingency constructs” (p. 443). Significantly, for each of the thematic variables, they discovered the attitudes of public relations practitioners towards each of the thematic variables that would affect the organizations’ willingness to dialogue. Some of the key insights the authors found relating to the thematic variables included:

External threats: Contrary to their earlier study, government regulations would not impede dialogue with a public because they were “infrequent enough” (p. 443). However,
organizations would not engage in dialogue with a public if that legitimized its claims by talking to them.

External public characteristics: The size, credibility, commitment, and power of the external public were attributes an organization would consider in their willingness to engage in dialogue.

Organizational characteristics: The past negative experiences and the presence of in-house counsel were likely to affect the organization’s willingness to dialogue.

Public relations department characteristics: Public relations practitioners’ membership in the dominant coalition would affect the organization’s willingness to dialogue.

Dominant coalition characteristics: When public relations practitioners are represented in the dominant coalition, organizations are likely to practice symmetrical communication.

The need for public relations practitioners to be represented in the dominant coalition was also a similar finding made by Shin, Cameron and Cropp (2002). In their survey of 800 practitioners, they found the dominating factors influencing public relations activities and by extension, the enactment of organizational stance, to be the dominant coalition’s support and understanding of public relations and the dominant coalition’s involvement with its external publics. In a further study, Shin, Cameron and Cropp (2006) argued that in the midst of the constant call for public relations to be given a seat “at the table,” public relations practitioners should ensure that they were “qualified and empowered to practice autonomously” (p. 286).

The theme of the need for public relations practitioners to be represented in the dominant coalition and to be involved in the frontlines of conflict management was further emphasized in the study by Reber, Cropp and Cameron (2003) in which the authors described the tension of a hostile takeover for Conrail Inc. by Norfolk Southern Corporation. While legal practitioners’ involvement in high profile crisis was a given, the study found that the dynamism of a conflict
necessitated conflicts to be fought not just on the legal front but the public relations front as well. Where regulatory, legal, and jurisdictional constraints forbade dialogue and negotiations to move to a higher level, public persuasion through the utilization of strategic communication initiatives and ingenuity went a long way to assuage hostile opinion. When legal and public relations worked together, as did the practitioners at Norfolk Southern, much could be achieved. Where legal involvement was restricted, the authors argued that public relations could be viewed as a “constructive creator of antecedent conditions for alternative dispute resolution” (p. 19).

With studies showing evidence of the theoretical rigor and validity of the contingency theory’s grouping of the factors into existing themes (Reber & Cameron, 2003; Shin, Cameron, & Cropp, 2002; Shin, Cameron, & Cropp, 2006), subsequent studies progressed to examine how the theory could be used to address issues of international conflict and public relations practice across cultures.

New Factors and New Tests

In the first test of the contingency theory in the management of an international conflict, Zhang, Qiu and Cameron (2003) examined how the United States and China resolved the crisis over the collision of a US Navy reconnaissance plane with a Chinese fighter jet in the South China Sea in April 2001. The authors found that further evidence that supported dominant coalition’s moral conviction as a key characteristic in precluding accommodation and proscribing dialogue.

The theory was also applied extensively to examine public relations practice in South Korea in various studies. In their survey, Shin, Park and Cameron (2006) reinforced the earlier findings of Shin, Cameron and Cropp (2006), that organizational variables such as the involvement of the dominant coalition played a dominant role in defining public relations
practice. This in turn constrained public relations activities, most notably, in the release of negative information and in the handling of conflict situations.

Choi and Cameron (2005) sought to understand how multinational corporations (MNCs) practiced public relations in South Korea and what contingent factors impacted their stances in conflict situations. The authors identified a new contingent variable that was added to the matrix when they found that most MNCs tended to utilize accommodative stances based on fear. They feared the Korean media’s negative framing of issues toward MNCs, which often caused them to move from advocacy to accommodation. They feared the cultural heritage of Korean people, a concept based on Cheong where clear distinctions were made between those who were part of them and those who were not. “In Korean culture, We-ness that tends to clearly distinguish our-side from not our-side, and Cheong is usually given to our-side (e.g., Korean firms) seem to influence how Korean audiences interpret MNCs messages and behaviors” (p. 186). Cho and Cameron (2006) also uncovered another new contingent variable (“Netizen”) in their study of how an entertainment company dealt with its promotion of public nudity in cell phones.

In all the studies, the contingency theory had been conceived to explain inter-organizational conflicts and practice between organizations and their diverse publics. Pang, Cropp and Cameron (2006, in press) extended the theory further to understand how it could be used to explain conflict and practice in an intra-organizational setting. In their case study of a Fortune 500 organization, the authors found that within an organization, the most important public, and by extension, the greatest source of conflict for public relations practitioners was the dominant coalition. A less enlightened dominant coalition, coupled with a conservative corporate culture, and the lack of access and representation of public relations in the dominant coalition were found to be factors that impeded the effectiveness of practitioners.

*Stance Movements (2004 – 2007)*
In terms of the driving force of stance movement, Pang, Jin and Cameron (2004) found that situational variables could play a significant role in moving an advocacy stance towards accommodation. Shin, Cheng, Jin and Cameron (2005) argued that an organization and its publics that are involved in a conflict often began with an advocacy stance rather than accommodation.

Though the contingency theory had conceived stance movements as exclusively advocacy, accommodation, or a point between advocacy and accommodation along the continuum, subsequent studies have found dynamism in stance movements where both advocacy and accommodation could be utilized and embedded one in the other at the same time. In their study of how the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) was managed, for instance, Jin, Pang and Cameron (2006) found that though the Singapore government adopted an advocacy stance towards its publics, it also used accommodative stance to “sugar” if you will, seemingly harsh medication it was advocating” (p. 100). For instance, the authors found that while the Singapore government imposed strict regulations on the quarantine of infected patients and caregivers, especially after it became known that more medical practitioners such as nurses were becoming infected by their patients, it was also accommodative and promptly instituted measures to provide financial relief to ease the pain of the policies it was imposing.

In their study of the intra-organizational tensions between public relations practitioners and their dominant coalition, Pang, Cropp and Cameron (2006, in press) found that even though an organization’s dominant coalition accommodated to the formulation of a regional crisis plan, it began to assume a more advocating stance even as it appeared to accommodate. The authors found that this was due to the conservative values, production-driven, and patriarchal management style of the dominant coalition, coupled with its apparent lack of support and understanding of communication functions. The authors termed the simultaneous advocacy and
accommodative stance as “advocacy embedded in accommodation”. At the same time, the authors also found a reverse phenomenon, what they termed as “accommodation embedded in advocacy.” This happened when acts of accommodation were displayed by line managers towards the public relations practitioners even when the prevailing atmosphere instituted by the dominant coalition was one of advocacy.

Beyond further testing of the contingency theory, theory development over the last two years has taken on a new dimension by inspiring the formulation of two theoretical frameworks in crisis communication, the threat appraisal model by Jin (2005) and the conflict positioning conceptualization by Pang (2006).


Stance Analyses: Measuring Stance as Degree of Accommodation

Facing a lack of any multiple-item scale or inventory being developed and tested in terms of evaluative qualities, Jin and Cameron (2006) first conceptualized stance as the degree of accommodation or the willingness of taking accommodations toward publics in varied situations, then developed a multiple-item scale for measuring stance as degree of accommodation, which advances contingency theory at the measurement level. One judge panel and two survey data sets from PRSA members were employed. A systematic scale development and psychometric assessment procedure provided a valid and reliable scale with two clusters of enactments of stance in terms of action-based accommodation and qualified-rhetoric-mixed accommodation (Jin & Cameron, 2006):

Given the situation, I will be ________________ (1 = Completely Unwilling, 7 = Completely Willing):

**AA: Action-based Accommodations:**
To yield to the public's demands
To agree to follow what the public proposed
To accept the publics' propositions
To agree with the public on future action or procedure
To agree to try the solutions suggested by the public

QRA: Qualified-Rhetoric-mixed Accommodations:
To express regret or apologize to the public
To collaborate with the public in order to solve the problem at hand
To change my own position toward that of the public
To make concessions with the public
To admit wrongdoing

Therefore, in a given situation and a given public, a public relations practitioner’s stance varies in the degree of how much he or she “will be __________ (1 = Completely Unwilling, 7 = Completely Willing)”: 1) to take action-based accommodations as yielding to the public's demands, agreeing to follow what the public proposed, accepting the public's propositions, agreeing with the public on future action or procedure, and agreeing to try the solutions suggested by the public; and how much he or she “will be __________ (1 = Completely Unwilling, 7 = Completely Willing)”; and 2) to take qualified-rhetoric-mixed accommodations as expressing regret or apologizing to the public, collaborating with the public in order to solve the problem at hand, changing his or her own position toward that of the public, making concessions with the public, and admitting wrongdoing. The two indices captured the domain of accommodation as one key aspect of stance movement on the contingency continuum.

Public relations professionals could use this scale to measure the organization and its publics’ degree of accommodation or willingness to take accommodation in a given situation, as well as how these stances evolve and/or persist longitudinally. Jin and Cameron (2006) argued that public relations professionals might take or adjust different stance enactments upon different situations so as to make optimal decisions on prioritizing action-based or qualified-rhetoric-mixed accommodations.

Threat Appraisal Model

Jin and Cameron (2003) called for attention to the role of emotions as central to public relations theory-building. Closely related to the new focus on affective factors in the public
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relations decision-making process regarding the stance of an organization, threat assessment was introduced into the theory. Threats, both internal and external as identified in the original contingency factor matrix, have been commonly used to describe the state a nation, organization, or individual endures during a crisis. Jin, Pang and Cameron (2005) conceptually differentiated threats from “risk,” “fear,” and “conflict,” which are the cause and the effect of crisis. Drawing on the rich tapestry of literature from cross-disciplinary perspectives involving behavioral, business, and the communication sciences, the authors developed a threat appraisal model to examine the fabric and faces of threat, and how it can be communicated.

This model proposes to appraise threat at two levels, (1) A primary appraisal (situational demands) based on degrees of (a) perceived Danger, (b) Uncertainty (lack of prediction and control increase difficulty of threat) of the issue, (c) Required Effort to address the threat; and (2) A secondary appraisal (resources) based on the following as required to deal with the threat: (a) Knowledge; (b) Skill; (c) Time; (d) Finance; and (e) Support from the Dominant Coalition. Additionally, threat communication is examined along three distinct dimensions: Threat level, threat duration, and threat type.

Two empirical tests were conducted to test this threat appraisal model. Jin (2005) conducted an online experiment on the effects of threat type and threat duration on public relations professionals’ cognitive appraisal of threats, affective responses to threats and the stances taken in threat-embedded crisis situations. Using a 2 (external vs. internal threat type) x 2 (long-term vs. short-term threat duration) within-subjects design, 116 public relations professionals were exposed to four crisis situation scenarios. Research findings revealed the main effects of threat type on threat appraisal, emotional arousal and qualified-rhetoric-mixed accommodations, and the main effects of threat duration across all threat consequences.
Interactions of these two threat dimensions revealed that external and long-term threat combination led to higher situational demands appraisal and more intensive emotional arousal. This study further examined the relationship between cognitive appraisal, affective responses and stances as key aspects of threat consequences. High cognition and stronger affect regarding threats were found to be related to more accommodating stances.

Further, Pang, Jin and Cameron (2006) adapted threat appraisal model to examine the fabric and faces of threat on an ongoing issue and how it can be communicated. The issuance of terror alerts by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was analyzed in terms of how the terrorism related threat was appraised by the DHS, and the conservative and liberal audiences. Findings showed a shared view by the DHS and the conservative audiences while the liberal audiences thought otherwise. Though there appeared to be consensus in threat communication, more internal consistency within the DHS is needed to optimize its effectiveness. These recent advances in stance measurement and threat assessment shed light on the feasibility and the imperative of integrating cognition, emotion and conation in public relations research, as well as provided insights for public relations professionals on how to apply the theory to their daily strategic conflict management practice.

Extension of Theory: Conflict Positioning through Strategy Analyses (2006)

Integration of Stance and Strategies

Cameron introduced the term conflict positioning, which he defined as positioning the organization “favorably in anticipation of conflicts” (Wilcox & Cameron, 2006, p. 244). This, he argued, was the culmination of sound pre-crisis preparations, like environmental scanning, issues tracking, issues management, and formulation of crisis plans, among the recommended measures organizations should engage in before crises erupt.
Taking this concept further, Pang (2006) argued that the key in organizational strategic thinking was to position itself favorably in anticipation of crisis. Practitioners must understand what factors were critical in determining an organization’s position, or what Pang called conflict stance. The organization’s conflict stance, or sometimes multiple stances for multiple publics, which encapsulated organizational assessment of threat, would in turn, influence its crisis response strategies during the crisis, leading to outcomes that matched what the organization had prepared for in the first place. For instance, if an organization was predisposed not to engage in communication with its publics during a crisis because of a directive from its dominant coalition, the conflict stance assumed would be one marked by obstinacy and dogged resistance, or advocacy, as described in contingency theory. The strategies the organization was most likely to employ during the crisis might be denial of, or evading of, responsibility. On the contrary, if an organization was predisposed to a more accommodative stance of engaging its publics with the aim of working through the crisis, it was most likely to employ accommodative strategies like corrective action.

Favorable positioning in a crisis thus involved first understanding what factors, within and without the organization, that played critical roles in the organization’s ability to handle the crisis; second, based on the influence of these factors, what stance the organization was likely to adopt; and third, what strategies were likely to be used based on the stance. Understanding the conditions (factors) that facilitated its reaction (stance) that influenced its action (strategies) enabled the organization to understand what caused the effects of its actions. A major premise of conflict positioning was that crisis factors led to conflict stance which in turn led to response strategy selection.

*Predictor of Strategy through Enactment of Stance*
Using contingency theory as the foundation to further his understanding, coupled with an extensive literature review drawn from a tapestry of literature from inter-disciplinary fields, Pang (2006) identified five key factors that influenced organizational stance. These included involvement of the dominant coalition in a crisis, influence and autonomy of public relations in the crisis, influence and role of legal practitioners in the crisis, importance of publics to the organization during the crisis, and the organization’s perception of threat in the crisis.

In conflict positioning, Pang (2006) argued for a plausible integration of contingency theory’s stance perspectives with image repair theory’s strategy analyses on a continuum. Both these theories were complementary and supplementary in that contingency theory was based on analyzing an organization’s stance before it entered into communication, while image repair theory was based on analyzing an organization’s strategies as it entered into communication. While contingency theory was based on a continuum of two diametric stances, image repair theory’s five general strategies – denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification – could be seen as existing on a continuum, with denial sharing similar characteristics as advocacy (i.e., insisting on one’s right and point-of-view), and mortification sharing similar characteristics as accommodation (i.e., giving in).

Thus, based on the factor-stance-strategy conceptualization, for instance, if the dominant coalition (factor) was predisposed to communication with the publics during a crisis, it would be likely to adopt a more accommodative approach (stance), and the strategies the organization used were likely to be reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. On the contrary, if the dominant coalition (factor) was bounded by moral, legal, regulatory and jurisdictional constraints, it was likely to adopt a less accommodative approach (stance), and the strategies it was likely to employ would be less accommodative strategies like denial and evading.
responsibility. Based on the five critical factors, Pang (2006) established 10 propositions in conflict positioning that were empirically tested.

In proposing this conflict-positioning conceptualization based on factor-stance-strategy, Pang (2006) argued that three assumptions were critical. First, the stance an organization took would be based on factors that affected this stance. Second, the stance the organization took would affect the strategies it employed. Changes in stance would, concomitantly, affect changes in strategies. Third, the stance would be consonant with strategies. An a-synchronized, wildly differential stance from strategy is argued to jeopardize an organization’s position during a crisis.

By integrating the contingency theory with image repair theory, Pang (2006) argued that conflict positioning offered a new theoretical perspective that called for a synoptic and systemic, rather than a symptomatic approach to crisis communication that the current field is inundated with. The conceptualization also served as a predictive model for organizations. By understanding the enactment of strategies through the confluence of factor and stance, the conceptualization gave organizations greater insights into how its crisis communication campaign was likely to shape as well as the likely outcomes through the linkages of all three elements.

Future of Contingency Theory: Where Do We Go From Here?

Building on foundational work across ten years since its inauguration, the contingency theory as a paradigm in the arena of strategic communication has been evolved, modified, tested and improved consistently.

Insert Figure 2 about here

The most recent advances of contingency theory suggest the future direction lies in further conceptualizing and applying it across the strategic conflict life cycle from issues management, through conflict positioning, crisis management and reputation repair. Possibilities
are immediately and particularly strong in strategic conflict management (Cameron, Pang, & Jin, 2006, in press), ranging from traditional PR, crisis communication, litigation PR, health communication and public administration. As an essential component of contingency theory, the matrix of contingent factors provides a systematic spectrum of understanding the dynamics and stance movement in public relations practices and decision-making processes. Further research projects need to be carried out to determine what dimensions and groupings exist within the matrix while embracing the simple fact that “complexity happens in life!” Doing so enables us to understand what are the more potent factors that are likely to affect stance movement in particular conditions.

Cameron argues that public relations scholars must emulate colleagues in fields such as law, engineering and medicine to mature as a science and to gain further respect in organizations. Medical doctors do not insist that cancer conform to a small handful of factors. For example, MDs take into account the type of tumor, the stage of disease, the patient’s age, gender, race and health history (dozens of factors in itself), genetic factors, interaction effects of radiological, chemical and surgical interventions, and so forth. Embracing complexity has lead to more powerful diagnoses and treatment, flying in the face of easy closure or what Cameron calls “cubist” depictions of social reality – the offering of facets of a complete image that must then be pieced back together intuitively.

It follows that the continuing empirical studies in contingency theory, as well as progress made by the theory-inspired models like the threat appraisal model may offer a more complete, though complex understanding of how conflict is managed, how stance is determined, and what strategies follow from a stance. The internal structure and interrelationship among contingency factors will lead to a far more sophisticated approach to determining stance and strategy, leading
Contingency Theory of Strategic Conflict Management

to a more mature art and science of public relations that accords far greater earned influence with top management.

Another further area of exploration is the inter-relationship between stance and strategies, such as the integration of stance and strategies, as evident in the conflict positioning conceptualization, as well as the disentanglement of stance from the cluster of strategies and tactics. Unlike strategies and tactics, stance is operationalized as the position an organization takes in decision-making, which is supposed to determine which strategy or tactic to employ. Future research on stance movement may cross-validate Jin & Cameron’s (2006) scale and further identify other enactments of stance to fully capture the domain of both accommodation and advocacy along the contingency continuum. Further tests on criterion validity, convergent validity and discriminant validity (especially against the concepts of strategy and tactics) of this scale will make the stance scale a more rigorous measurement of stance as degree of accommodation. To better capture the advocacy facets of the contingency continuum, future scale development and theory advancement efforts are needed. Having established that the stance of an organization is dynamic in response to a complex set of factors, future work on how that particular stance is enacted through public relations strategies and tactics will advance contingency theory as a more complete theory of public relations.

A paradigmatic advance, argued Kuhn (1996), embodied two essential characteristics. First, its achievement is sufficiently “unprecedented to attract an enduring group of adherents away from competing modes of scientific activity”. Secondly, it is “sufficiently open-ended to leave all sorts of problems for the redefined group of practitioners to resolve” (p. 16). In both of these regards, the contingency theory has thus far offered a perspective supported by empirical foundations (both qualitative and quantitative in nature) initially as an extension of the existing normative theory. Yet, the work is cut out for contingency theorists to address the unanswered
questions that need to be resolved, refined, and redefined. Even as the theory has offered a
dialogue about the veracity of dialogic communication, due recognition and respect must be
accorded to the inspiration and relentless work of the excellence theory. Acknowledging the
contribution excellence theory has made, Cameron (1997) referred to Grunig’s motivation for his
pioneering, revolutionizing work in public relations,

“He (Grunig) said that he left Storm Lake, Iowa, with a sense that he should do
something through research for the good of society. And so he set out in the world
determined to make a difference and I think the Excellence Theory has done that, that
it has made a difference for us and our profession, and that with a full array of tools
and skills, as well as an orientation to the value we provide society when we are able to
effect accommodation of an organization and its publics. I think it is essential for us as
practitioners, but also as human beings, to wrestle with, identify and determine ways to
make the Excellence Model better. That is the point of the work that I am doing with the
Contingency Theory” (p. 41).

We look forward to another decade of development, discovery and dialogue.

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Appendix 1: Contingency Factors

Internal variables

Organization characteristics
- Open or closed culture
- Dispersed widely geographically or centralized
- Level of technology the organization uses to produce its product or service
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Homogeneity or heterogeneity of officials involved
Age of the organization/value placed on tradition
Speed of growth in the knowledge level the organization uses
Economic stability of the organization
Existence or non-existence of issues management officials or program
Organization’s past experiences with the public
Distribution of decision making power
Formalization: number of roles or codes defining and limiting the job
Stratification/Hierarchy of positions
Existence or influence of legal department
Business exposure
Corporate culture

Public Relations department characteristics
Number of practitioners total and number of college degrees
Type of past training: Trained in PR or ex-journalists, marketing, etc
Location of PR department in hierarchy: Independent or under Marketing umbrella/experiencing encroachment of marketing/persuasive mentality
Representation in the Dominant Coalition
Experience level of PR practitioners in dealing with crisis
General communication competency of department
Autonomy of department
Physical placement of department in building (near CEO and other decision makers or not)
Staff trained in research methods
Amount of funding available for dealing with external publics
Amount of time allowed to use dealing with external publics
Gender: percentage of female upper-level staff/managers
Potential of department to practice various models of public relations

Characteristics of Dominant Coalition (top management)
Political values: Conservative or liberal/open or closed to change
Management style: Domineering or laid-back
General altruism level
Support and understanding of PR
Frequency of external contact with publics
Departmental perception of the organization’s external environment
Calculation of potential rewards or losses using different strategies with external publics
Degree of line manager involvement in external affairs

Internal threats (How much is at stake in the situation)
Economic loss or gain from implementing various stances
Marring of employees’ or stockholders’ perception of the company
Marring of the personal reputations of the company decision makers

Individual characteristics (public relations practitioners, domestic coalition, and line managers)
Training in diplomacy, marketing, journalism, engineering, etc.
Personal ethics
Tolerance or ability to deal with uncertainty
Comfort level with conflict or dissonance
Comfort level with change
Ability to recognize potential and existing problems
Extent to openness to innovation
Extent to which individual can grasp other’s worldview
Personality: Dogmatic, authoritarian
Communication competency
Cognitive complexity: Ability to handle complex problems
Predisposition toward negotiations
Predisposition toward altruism
How individuals receive, process and use information and influence
Familiarity with external public or its representative
Like external public or its representative
Gender: Female versus male

Relationship characteristics
Level of trust between organization and external public
Dependency of parties involved
Ideological barriers between organization and public

External variables

Threats
Litigation
Government regulation
Potentially damaging publicity
Scarring of company’s reputation in business community and in the general public
Legitimizing activists’ claims

Industry environment
Changing (dynamic) or static
Number of competitors/level of competition
Richness or leanness of resources in the environment

General political/social environment/external culture
Degree of political support of business
Degree of social support of business

The external public (group, individual, etc)
Size and/or number of members
Degree of source credibility/powerful members or connections
Past successes or failures of groups to evoke change
Amount of advocacy practiced by the organization
Level of commitment/involvement of members
Whether the group has public relations counselors or not
Public’s perception of group: reasonable or radical
Level of media coverage the public has received in past
Whether representatives of the public know or like representatives of the organization
Whether representatives of the organization know or like representatives from the public
Public’s willingness to dilute its cause/request/claim
Moves and countermoves
Relative power of organization
Relative power of public

Issue under question
Size
Stake
Complexity

Figure 1: Threat Appraisal Model
Figure 2: The Evolution of Contingency Theory of Strategic Conflict Management

Influence of Emotion/Affective Factors
Threat Appraisal

Original Matrix of Contingency Factors
Internal vs. External
Situational vs. Predispositional

New Contingency Factors Identified

Pure Advocacy
Stance Movement &
Stance Measurement

Pure Accommodation
Conflict Positioning

Strategies in Conflict Management