Tough calls to make: Contingency theory and the Centennial Olympic Games

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ABSTRACT
KEYWORDS: public relations theory, public relations models, contingency theory, conflict management, advocacy versus accommodation, Centennial Olympic Games,

This paper offers a quick overview of Cameron’s contingency theory of conflict management in public relations. It then applies the theory to three cases that occurred during the 1996 Summer Olympic Games that were taken from the policy position papers, notes, diaries and tape recordings of C. Richard Yarbrough, Managing Director-Communications of the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games (ACOG). The areas analysed include: the moving of preliminary volleyball matches from one venue to another which was forced by conflict between gay activists and local politicians who passed an anti-gay resolution — a sustained effort at accommodation that shifted to advocacy; conflict between the ACOG board of directors and the media resulting from the disclosure of ACOG executive salaries — a strong advocacy stance that led to compromise; and conflict threatened between ACOG and a minority minister who was disgruntled about an Olympic sponsor — a case of marginality too insignificant to bother with. The cases not only illustrate and support factors in the contingency theory, but highlight the impracticality and inflexibility of two-way symmetrical or mixed-motive public relations as models of choice.

INTRODUCTION

Purpose

Working with colleagues and graduate students, Cameron has developed a contingency theory of accommodation in public relations.1 This paper applies this
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Contingency theory of conflict management in public relations to three cases drawn from the policy position papers, notes, diaries and tape recordings of C. Richard Yarbrough, Managing Director–Communications, of the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games (ACOG). The cases illustrate the dynamic and complex analysis needed to determine the degree of accommodation accorded to a given public at any given point in time.

Three points on the continuum from pure accommodation to pure advocacy are explicated here by example. The first case is typified by a sustained effort at accommodation that ultimately devolved into a shift towards advocacy forced by circumstance. The second is a fairly brief episode that began with staunch advocacy of a position that led to a compromise. Finally, the third case illustrates how factors found in the contingency theory led Yarbrough to counsel that a particular public was too marginal to justify employing resources that were better spent on other communication efforts. This paper argues that the cases not only illustrate and support factors in the contingency theory, but highlight the necessity and effectiveness of opting for non-accommodative stances in some cases. The dynamics of the cases support Cameron's contention that a normative model to define excellent public relations is too inflexible for circumstances encountered daily in the external environment managed by public relations practitioners.

The contingency theory in a nutshell

The contingency theory of accommodation is a logical extension of work to date that has broadened the role of public relations far beyond persuasive arts and publicity gathering, largely through the development of the normative theory of excellence in public relations.\(^{1,2}\) The contingency theory argues for a continuum of accommodation (see Figure 1) and offers a matrix of factors that affect the location of an organisation on that continuum at a given time regarding a given public. Figure 2 shows a hierarchical organisation of the contingency factors.

The contingency theory suggests that the matrix of factors presented in Figure 2 affect whether pure accommodation, likened to the orientation in two-way symmetrical communication (the authors believe that some degree of accommodation or openness to accommodation is at the crux of two-way symmetrical communication) will be feasible and effective in achieving departmental and organizational objectives in the short and long term. Accommodation may be more costly than any benefit to be derived from public approval. Certainly, uncritical adoption of accommodative public relations would strain organisational resources. The drain on resources to proactively accommodate marginal publics is unlikely to provide a return on invested time and energy.

The contingency theory further argues that an accommodative or dialogic stance may not be inherently ethical. On the contrary, accommodation of morally repugnant publics may be unethical, at least from the perspective of those whose fundamental beliefs define that public's behaviour and beliefs as immoral. (Resorting to cliché, the authors would argue that any accommodation at all or any openness to accommodation of the Hitlers of the world is not taking the high moral ground.) Furthermore, the world–view of an organisation and its public relations professionals may lead to an intractable stance based on strongly held convictions that the organisation's position is the only morally defensible stance to take. Organisations necessarily weather charges of paternalism when members of the organisation are convinced that they know more about the situation and are
acting in the best interests of all parties or for a greater societal good.

The contingency theory sorts out clusters of activity and techniques that may be typified as models (publicity model, public information model, etc) from the strategic position or stance taken by an organisation. For example, providing public information may be the precursor to a highly persuasive campaign or may be part of it. The public information techniques, then, are tools in an asymmetrical or advocative stance.

The contingency theory also points out that accommodation may be legally prohibited under anti-trust laws. The contingency theory claims to offer a structure for better understanding the dynamics of accommodation as well as the efficacy and ethical implications of accommodation in public relations practice.

Field test supported contingency theory

In a field test of the contingency theory, Cancel conducted in-depth interviews with mid- or upper-level public relations managers at 18 different corporations. A continual shifting in public relations practice between pure advocacy and pure accommodation was found, with shifts occurring as a function of a number of variables. There was strong evidence that the interaction between an organisation and an external public can be and probably also will be influenced by the dynamics of simultaneous interactions with other external publics. A corporation’s situational decisions on how to interact with a particular external public at a particular moment result from combinations of variables at work in a situation that may change according to the dynamics of the situation. How organisations relate to their external publics and thus how organisations practise public relations often is not simply the result of the influence of one variable or even the result of the influence of a small number of variables.

The field test of the theory that further suggested the likelihood that an organisation will accommodate an external public first is dependent upon how close to pure accommodation or how far away from pure accommodation the predisposing variables move an organisation. It is possible that an organisation’s stance may not move from its predisposition stance if the situation variables are not powerful enough to influence the position or if the situational variables are a mixture of potential costs and potential benefits that cancel out each other’s influencing power.

Those variables labelled as predisposing are most likely to influence a corporation prior to interaction with a specific external public. Therefore, predisposing variables influence a corporation’s location along the continuum before it enters into a particular situation involving an external public. Of the predisposing variables cited by interviewees, the following variables received the most support in the overall data analysis: corporation business exposure, public relations access to dominant coalition, dominant coalition’s decision-making power and enlightenment, corporation’s size and individual characteristics of involved persons.

Secondly, the situational variables determine how much closer to pure accommodation or farther away from pure accommodation the corporation’s stance moves. Those variables that were labelled as situational are most likely to influence how a corporation relates to an external public by effecting shifts from a predisposed accommodative or adversarial stance along the continuum during an interaction with that external public. Of
Figure 2

Contingency variables of organisational accommodation

An organisation's stance with a given public at a given time can range from pure advocacy to pure accommodation. Practitioners draw from the welter of factors outlined below to arrive at that stance.

External variables
1. External threats
2. Competitive environment
3. Sociopolitical environment
4. Public's characteristics
5. Issue under question

Internal variables
1. Organisation's characteristics
2. Public relations department's characteristics
3. Dominant coalition characteristics
4. Internal threats
5. Attributes of public relations decision makers
6. Relationship characteristics

External variables in detail
1. External threats
   A Litigation
   B Government publicity
   C Negative publicity
   D Damage to reputation
   E Legitimisation of extremist opponents

2. Competitive environment
   A Dynamic or ostensibly static
   B Level of competition
   C Market maturity
   D Competitive turbulence

3. Sociopolitical environment
   A Political base of public
   B Societal base of public
   C Political base of organisation
   D Societal base of organisation

4. Public's characteristics
   A Membership size
   B Powerful members/connections
   C Source credibility
   D Previous successes
   E Previous extremism
   F Member commitment to cause
   G Public relations counsel at hand
   H Community's perception of public
   I Media coverage that the public garners
   J Mutual liking of public and organisation members
   K Mutual respect of public and organisation members
   L Public's inclination to compromise
   M Most recent moves/countermoves of public
   N Relative power of public

5. Issue under question
   A Size
   B Stakes for your organisation
   C Complexity
   D Number of publics involved
   E Moral ambiguity of issue
   F Precedent setting

Internal variables in detail
1. Organisation's characteristics
   A Open/closed culture
   B Centralised/decentralised
   C Level of technology to produce product/service
   D Homogeneity of employees
   E Traditions
   F Managerial sophistication
   G Economic stability
   H Issues management practices
   I History with given public
   J Decision making power structure
   K Formality of procedures
   L Stratification/hierarchy of positions
   M Legal counsel influence
   N Business exposure (product mix and customer mix)
   O Corporate culture

2. Public relations department's characteristics
   A Department size
   B Staff education by major and degree
   C Staff experience (reportorial, marketing, legal)
   D Location of department in organisational scheme
   E Level of marketing encroachment
   F Place in dominant coalition
   G Experience in conflict management
   H Communication competency
   I Autonomy of department
   J Physical location near dominant coalition
   K Research methods
   L Financial support
   M Staff support
   N Gender makeup

3. Dominant coalition characteristics
   A Political values
   B Management style
   C Inclination to altruism
   D Support and understanding of PR
   E Frequency of external contact with publics
   F Attention to departmental assessment of publics
   G Awareness of cost/benefit impacts by publics
   H Line manager involvement in external affairs

4. Internal threats
   A Cost of accommodation
   B Damage to employee relations
   C Damage to financial relation
   D Damage to self-respect of dominant coalition

5. Attributes of public relations decision makers
   A Training in PR, marketing, journalism, engineering, etc
   B Personal ethics
   C Uncertainty tolerance
   D Conflict tolerance
   E Change tolerance
   F Issue proactivity
   G Innovativeness
   H Grasp of other's worldviews
   I Personality: dogmatic, authoritarian, optimistic, etc
   J Communication competency
   K Cognitive complexity: ability to handle complex problems
   L Predisposition to negotiate
   M Predisposition to altruism
   N Influence and information processing style
   O Familiarity with public or its representative
   P Gender

6. Relationship characteristics
   A Mutual trust between organisation and public
   B Mutual dependency of organisation and public
   C Ideological barriers between organisation and public
the situational variables cited by interviewees, those that received the most support were: urgency of situation, characteristics of the external public’s claims or requests, characteristics of the external public, potential or obvious threats, and potential cost or benefit for a corporation from choosing various stances. Of those variables cited as being particularly pertinent to community relations decisions, the following variables were highly supported by the interviewee data: the public’s power to positively impact the corporation, support of the public by dominant coalition and employees, and availability of resources in the corporation. Variables with little support included: influence of legal department, general social or political external environment, corporation being publicly traded versus privately owned, homogeneity or heterogeneity of employees, formalisation of the corporation, stratification or hierarchy of positions in the corporation, public relations staff trained in research methods, and marring of employee’s perception of the corporation.

The predisposing variables most strongly supported by Cancel, Cameron and Mitrook’s study are not cited in existing public relations literature. However, these variables are cited in co-orientation theory, game theory and conflict theory literature. Many of the situational variables in Cancel, Cameron and Mitrook’s study are quite new to public relations theory, and several can be linked to theories about the effects of the relative power of two sides in an interaction. New variables frequently cited in the study are manifestations of the relative power of the organisation and publics: the corporation’s reputation, the external public’s characteristics, the characteristics of the external public’s claims or requests, the external public’s actions and urgency of the situation for the organisation.

It is not new for corporations to handle their community relations activities separately from other relations with external publics; however, this distinction has generally been ignored in public relations theory. For example, none of the literature reviewed extensively in Cancel, Cameron, Sallot and Mitrook makes a distinction between potentially negative and potentially positive interactions with external publics. The interviews conducted by Cancel, Cameron and Mitrook revealed a number of new variables related to community relations: politics, tradition in philanthropic giving, availability of resources in a corporation, and general public expectations of corporations to accommodate community relations requests. The present study uses a new approach — case study analysis — to further test Cameron’s contingency theory.

METHOD

Co-authors of the present study asked Yarbrough to scan his hundreds of hours of tape recordings, numerous policy position papers that he personally wrote, voluminous notes and diaries from his tenure with ACOG, and press clipping files, to identify seminal examples depicting different stances taken along the accommodation-advocacy continuum. The co-authors then met with Yarbrough on two occasions to review the candidate instances for potential analysis in this study. The candidate instances were narrowed to three cases. A third interview session, lasting two-and-a-half hours, and attended by all four authors during which Yarbrough recounted details of the cases, was tape recorded. Transcriptions of these tapes, supplemented by Yarbrough’s position papers and notes, and press clippings, provided the data used in this case study analysis.

Cameron made a first pass through the final case studies to identify variables from the contingency theory at play in the cases...
and to offer implications of the cases for development of the contingency theory. His analysis was then reviewed through several rounds of revision and discussion to arrive at a consensus about the meaning of the cases for contingency theory.

FINDINGS: THREE POINTS ON THE CONTINUUM OF ACCOMMODATION

This paper presents three cases derived from the policy position papers, notes, diaries and tape recordings of and in-depth interviews conducted with Yarbrough. To maintain the narrative flow of the cases, they are presented without annotation. Following the three cases, this paper discusses the contingency theory in light of these challenging episodes from the files of the man who managed communications for the world's largest special event.

Polar diplomacy — a case of concerted accommodation

In December 1993, Cobb County, located in north-west metropolitan Atlanta, was selected as the venue for the preliminary volleyball events for the 1996 Summer Olympic Games. The venue was not announced, however, until January 1994 during a Super Bowl pre-game television programme. ACOG had arranged as part of its contract with NBC, its official television broadcast sponsor, to produce 10 programmes about the Summer Olympic Games and air them at 'significant' times prior to the start of the Games.

The first programme aired before the Super Bowl included a preliminary map showing where the events would take place in Georgia. Among those who saw the programme was Jon-Ivan Weaver, a gay activist with a high profile locally. In response to the location of the venue, the gay activist mounted a protest against the site because Cobb County had recently passed a resolution condemning the gay lifestyle. Cobb County maintained that its resolution was an economic move to forestall paying health insurance benefits to partners of employees in same-sex relationships or to unmarried partners of employees in opposite-sex relationships, a concept which had recently been legislated in a 'domestic partnership' ordinance in the City of Atlanta. The gay protest began with a march in downtown Atlanta at Woodruff Park on a Sunday in February 1994, and the episode grew from there.

According to Yarbrough at the time 'You never know starting out how serious something is...Experience said that gay rights groups are very sophisticated. Inherently, you must not underestimate them. This is a group to be listened to because they have experience and abilities to stay high-profile in the environment.' While the protest march only included about 70 gay supporters, it received prominent news coverage, signifying it as an issue with great potential. ACOG realised that this was not an issue to be ignored, since 70 people marching against cruelty to animals would not have drawn front page coverage. The issue mushroomed fairly quickly, in part because the activists had a well organised network and ACOG began hearing from people around the country. In addition, the activists started a letter writing campaign to Juan Antonio Samaranch, Chief Executive of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). On the other side, the Cobb County Commission, headed by Chairman Bill Byrne, immediately dug in its heels. ACOG immediately faced two publics for the issue, two strong, recalcitrant opposing sides, neither of which showed a willingness to accommodate each other or ACOG. On one hand, the gay activists were saying that they would accept nothing less than rescindment of the resolution. On the other, the county claimed to be amenable to compromise, but was not willing to moderate its position by
rescinding the resolution. ‘You sort of stake out the “hell no” position right up front’, said Yarbrough, ‘you don’t normally accommodate somebody until you see whether or not they have to be accommodated...If you’ve made a decision based on good quality information, whether it’s about a venue or a line of business or whatever, you must accept as a given that good quality has gone into that decision. So to react to something immediately is to say you didn’t make a good decision in the first place. So it’s non-accommodation until you can more ably evaluate the worth, by which I mean potential, of the opposition. And that doesn’t take a long time.’

Unlike other organisations, the Olympics offered activist groups a major, worldwide platform to let themselves be heard. ‘We have the ability to give them an instant profile, so a lot of it is not just assessing their potential, but looking at where you’re vulnerable,’ said Yarbrough. ACOG learned through early communication that the gay activists had no motivation to be reasonable in their opposition, for they really had nothing to lose and much to gain if the issue persisted into the Olympic spotlight. ‘It was a question of coming to an accommodation because these people would do what they said ... If they said they were going to run out into the road and throw a bucket of water on the torch [during the Olympic torch run], they would do that.’

ACOG also realised early that the gay rights community was not monolithic. In addition to a vocal gay group called ‘Olympics Out of Cobb’, Yarbrough identified gay supporters who were trying to moderate and find a middle ground, such as Cherry Spencer-Stark, Jon Greaves and Noel Lytle, who headed up the Cobb Citizens Coalition, a human rights group in Cobb County which became involved in the issue due to the larger issue of equality. ACOG attempted to deal only with moderates while trying to keep extremists such as Jon-Ivan Weaver out of the discussion. Yarbrough termed this ‘softening the hard edges of a public’.

Idealists on the gay and civil rights side of the debate were matched by those on Cobb County’s side as well. The Cobb Commission was being hammered by large and powerful churches, with clergy who preached on this issue against the gays every Sunday morning. Again, ACOG tried to soften hard edges through moderates, such as a rabbi who tried to form a coalition of ministers. Pressure was building on both sides, a negative pressure applied to the commission, and a positive one applied in the gay community, because the gays, in contrast to the commission, were picking up a lot of positive support.

‘The newspapers or the media obviously weren’t going to say “we support Cobb County’s right to pass a gay resolution”, so they were hammering the commission, and putting pressure on us to move [the venue], and we were getting letters from members of Congress who were grandstanding’, said Yarbrough. ‘The Cobb side could only grow so far, there are only so many preachers, fundamentalists and hard-edged people. The other side had much more potential. You not only had the people who believed in what they did, you had a lot of fair-minded people who just said that’s wrong. That’s just not right to pass a resolution like that. I know a lot of people who abhor gay rights but who just thought that [resolution] was unfair.’ Of course, Bible-based activists in Cobb County saw things entirely another way, referring to an authority higher than the Constitution.

ACOG knew that whatever decision was made, it was setting a precedent for the remainder of the Games. ‘We knew Cobb County would get thrown up: “Well, you did it for Cobb County, why can’t you do it for us”, or “You did it for
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gay rights, why can’t you do it for whatever’’. In addition, ACOG realised the need to set aside personal ethics for the benefit of the event because ACOG was not in business to make social moral judgments, it was in business to put on the Games. ACOG knew that if it made a moral judgment on this issue, the next issue that it expected to face would be the Georgia state flag, with its controversial Confederate battle flag motif. ‘Of course’, said Yarbrough, ‘that just fired the media up, it didn’t appease the gays, and Cobb County didn’t care.’ Nevertheless, the need to avoid an untenable precedent as moral arbiter or as a political pawn between two opposing factions were overriding ACOG considerations.

Along with the gay community and its supporters and the Cobb County Commission and its supporters, there was a third public involved — ACOG itself. According to Yarbrough ‘while you’re talking about managing the gay rights side of it and managing the Cobb side of it you also have the internal piece of it which can make the definitive decision.’ The bottom line was to move the venue would cost ACOG US$4m in sunken costs. ‘So in addition to looking at the external, who’s where, who does what, and how can this group affect that group and all that, you have a very practical internal management factor that is in some ways tougher because if Billy Payne [Chief Executive Officer of ACOG] says we’re not going to move the venue and that’s it, that changes the external dynamics. So while you’re trying to accommodate and compromise, you’ve got to get inside the mechanism and be sure that whatever decisions you make internally are consistent with the expectations you want externally. It’s not just managing the external environment, it’s managing the internal environment.’

Finally, in May 1994, Cobb County Commission Chairman Bill Byrne decided to draw up a different resolution, which did not rescind the previous resolution as Jon-Ivan Weaver wanted, but it was a new, softer expression welcoming ‘all’ to the county and eliminating parts of the first resolution that were offensive to gays. The moderate rights activists felt that they could live with it, which would draw attention away from ACOG to an internal battle on gay issues. The same problems would still exist, but at least ACOG would have someone on its side to moderate the other side. But, just as this compromise was to be announced, an editorial appeared in the Marietta Daily Journal that attacked Byrne, who had just been introduced at an Atlanta Braves game and was roundly booed by the crowd of baseball fans. In response, Byrne promptly scrapped the new resolution. Yarbrough was forced to advocate strongly to his peer public, ACOG management, that the venue be moved, in spite of the US$4m price tag. He argued successfully that the costs to the entire Olympic movement from protests and turmoil would far exceed that figure.

On a Friday afternoon in July 1994, ACOG moved the venue from Cobb County to Athens, Georgia. The announcement was meticulously planned and timed and carried out with the precision of a military manoeuvre. Once the decision was made, Yarbrough’s role as mediator was over for this issue. Through the course of the controversy, Yarbrough had revised his own internal written strategy at least four times. A shift had occurred on the continuum towards advocacy, employing public information methods. The marketing of Athens as a ‘wonderful place’ to hold preliminary volleyball was left for Athens to do. In addition, once the decision to move was made, ACOG emphatically moved to bury the issue. Yarbrough held a final press interview about the topic, stating that this would be his last discussion of it. He said ‘The
most frequently asked question I got by a factor of two was how did I feel about what Cobb County had done and my answer was “That’s not important.” It’s not my personal judgment that matters; it’s what’s the right thing to do for the Games.’ Setting a precedent as moral arbiter and political pawn was thus avoided.

It seemed pointless to move the venue for volleyball preliminaries but still to run the Olympic torch through Cobb County, so ACOG told Cobb that the torch would not be run there. The case was closed, or so it seemed, until many months later a ‘transplanted New Yorker’ convinced the Spartanburg Commission in South Carolina to pass an identical resolution condemning the ‘gay lifestyle’. The same issue was back, a year-and-a-half after it had first erupted in Cobb County, pointing out the potential life span of an issue.

The car manufacturer, BMW, was one of the Olympic sponsors and happened to have a major manufacturing plant in Spartanburg. ACOG urged plant officials to speak with the commission and the resolution was rescinded. But, while ACOG was congratulating itself over that, the issue gravitated a few miles to Greenville, South Carolina, right next door to Spartanburg. Greenville passed an anti-gay lifestyle resolution that included moral condemnation of ACOG for failing to support anti-gay sentiment. Greenville proved immune to any organisational pressure from ACOG because there were no sponsors or other affiliates of the Games in Greenville.

Previously, the media had asked how ACOG would handle other situations across the country, such as Arizona where Martin Luther King, Jr’s birthday is not recognised as an official holiday, as it now is in all but a few states. ACOG responded from its policy stance that, “We’re not in business to make social judgments. We’re in business to put on the Games.’ Furthermore, ACOG said that it could not establish criteria outside of its realm of influence, and that influence was in Georgia. ACOG now faced another ‘moral judgment’ situation in South Carolina. If ACOG ran the torch through Greenville, it would not be fair to Cobb. But, by avoiding Greenville, ACOG would act counter to its moral and political neutrality precedent and its claim that it could not ‘affect things’ outside its Georgia realm of influence. Even though gay activism was not significant in Greenville, ACOG faced a double bind. The problem was compounded by the intricate planning for a torch run that is an 84-day event, mapped months in advance and scheduled block by block. The route could not be changed at the last minute. ACOG opted to put the torch in a van and drive it through Greenville. With that decision, a single issue had evoked concerted accommodation, then advocacy of a new venue and its advantages at huge monetary costs and, ultimately, a form of compromise as the issue emerged again one-and-a-half years later.

Absolutely not
When ACOG was originally formed, the lawyers, including Horace Sibley from King & Spalding in Atlanta, negotiated with key Atlanta media about the topics that would be made public and those that would not. For instance, ACOG would not disclose any contracts, marketing agreements or salaries, as these items were deemed highly sensitive or private by sponsors and executives of ACOG. However, soon after Yarbrough was hired, the IOC mandated changes of staff titles to conform with those of the IOC. These titles and their accompanying salaries had not yet been approved by the ACOG board, 25 people appointed by the Governor of Georgia, the Mayor of Atlanta, the IOC, the United States Olympic Com-
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mittee and business people. It included neighbourhood activists, union people, bank presidents, sports federation people and others, as well as ACOG Chief Executive Officer, William Porter ‘Billy’ Payne and ACOG staff, Charlie Battle, Ginger Watkins and Linda Stephenson. The media’s perception, however, was that the ACOG board was just a group of people with no real authority and that Billy Payne could do whatever he wanted to do. Consequently, Bert Roughton, a reporter with the Atlanta Journal-Constitution’s (AJC) Olympic Games news team, demanded that details of executive salaries were run in a Saturday article. Attorney Sibley and Yarbrough agreed almost immediately to give details of some salaries when the figures were finalised. But Yarbrough refused to release details of the proposed salaries until the board had approved them, resulting in derogatory stories and editorial cartoons in the paper.

A number of factors led to the accommodation of the AJC’s demand. ACOG could have let the paper sue, as they were threatening, and then stalled in the courts until the Games were over, some three years later. But to let that occur would have antagonised the media. Yarbrough also knew that the state attorney general was prepared to file the lawsuit as a friend of the court on the paper’s side, which would mean government antagonism as well. The bottom line was that it was just not worth the public approval in the long run. As well as antagonising two key publics, if ACOG did not disclose the salaries, questions would arise, such as ‘Why won’t you give us this information?’ ‘What are you hiding?’ ‘What else is going on?’ Based on these deciding factors, Yarbrough promised the paper details of the salaries, but not until they were approved by the board. Thanks to some long-term relationships with editors who over-ruled the individual reporter, the AJC agreed to give Yarbrough the opportunity to get the salaries passed by the board.

The next question was how many salary figures to give to the paper. ‘Senior management by one definition could be about 40 people’, said Yarbrough. ‘Well, we didn’t want to give them 40 salaries. So then we thought we’ll give them the top five. And then we thought, they’ll say, “well why not the top ten?” Because how high up is up?’ The final list was for about 13 people who reported either to Payne or to A. D. Frazier, Jr., the Chief Operating Officer. Fortunately, the list was fairly well balanced between male, female, black and white. According to Yarbrough, ‘That’s a whole other issue because let’s say we went over to the paper, and we’re going to give you the salaries of the 13, all white males, all making over US$150,000, then we’ve got a different kind of problem.’

After the decision was made to disclose the salaries, and after that decision had been approved by CEO Payne, Yarbrough and Sibley took the proposal to the compensation committee, which agreed to release the information, pending ACOG board approval. That is where the real problems began, according to Yarbrough. Due to long-term frustration with the local media, and because of a legitimate concern over what the media would ask for next, the ACOG board was concerned about setting a dangerous precedent. Therefore, board sentiment was against salary disclosure. Yarbrough realised that his credibility with a key public, the media, was at stake. He had promised salary figures. However, an even more important issue was at stake with an equally important public, the ACOG board. Yarbrough functioned as counsel to the board and to lose this issue would erode his position, forcing him to resign. ‘I would have no credibility with the media because I had failed, and secondly I wouldn’t have any influence inside the
organisation and that's not much to commend you to stay there', said Yarbrough. 'By convincing the paper of the board's authority, I trapped myself in having to live with the decision they came up with. Had they voted not to do it, then they would have been exercising the authority that I said they had. And it would have made me credible by that argument, but it would not have made me very credible in terms of being able to manage them.'

Yarbrough described his arguments to the board as almost frantic in nature — pure advocacy to one public on behalf of another. Reluctantly, the ACOG board voted to release the details of the salaries to the AJC, on the condition that the paper would not use the details to compare salaries along race or gender lines. 'I called Thomas Oliver who was the AJC's chief Olympics editor and I said, "We won". And I remember him saying you have just saved us and you a lot of money because I am throwing the lawsuit in the trash can as we speak. To which I replied, "You son of a bitch, if you take this one step further than this, I will personally come down there and kill you. I mean I will God damn kill you in a minute". And he said, "We won't". And I said, "And don't editorialise over I make more than some female makes, or some African-American makes. Don't get into that either". Except for criticising the amount of the salaries, which was always an issue, the paper lived up to its agreement.'

The press called the salary disclosure 'a turning point' in ACOG's 'search for its own character', which it found by demonstrating the 'very best of moral, ethical and responsible behaviour'.24 It was a case of advocating outside in', said Yarbrough. 'We're great at the sort of inside out, telling the story about organisation A to all the constituencies out there. But we don't always represent the constituency's view back in at a level that you can influence the decision. One of the things that I have been frustrated about is that I look like I am more loyal to the media than I am to my organisation. You know, "the company's paying your salary, whose side are you on?" Well, what you’re trying to say is I’ve got suspicions that this action is going to cause this reaction. And so I'm on the company's side because I don't want this kind of reaction to occur. A CEO would not go out and say we're just going to hire white men, because they'll get sued. Lawyers will say you can't do that. But they'll do that in the external environment. And it's because we haven't done a good job of convincing people of the potential of the external environment … We've got to quit telling people how important we are to the process, and start telling them how dangerous the external environment is. Then our importance will follow.'

Knowing which dogs will bite — and which just bark

In the spring of 1995 ACOG decided to secure an official television station and an official radio station to have single broadcast sources to which volunteers and staff could turn for information. An arrangement was made with Channel 11, Atlanta's NBC affiliate, which was fairly easy because of the NBC Games's sponsorship. For radio, ACOG talked to WQXI, a Jefferson-Pilot station; WSB, a Cox affiliate; and WGST, owned by Jacor. WQXI was deemed unsatisfactory because at night its signal is weak. WSB wanted to be paid by ACOG to be a sponsor, which was unacceptable to ACOG. So that left WGST, which paid a fee to become an official sponsor and was then treated like any other sponsor. The problem with WGST was that it had a conservative talk format, with hosts such as ultra-conservative Rush Limbaugh and local shock conservative, Kim Peterson. Peterson had recently mimicked a woman on welfare.
whom the station had interviewed and the parody stirred controversy.

As a result of its affiliation with WGST and following Peterson’s on-air parody of the welfare woman, ACOG received a letter from an African-American minister, asking ACOG to sever its affiliation with the station or the minister would be prepared to take ‘official action’. In addition, he contacted the IOC. Yarbrough turned over the issue to Shirley Franklin, an African-American on the ACOG staff who ‘knows all the people’, but had never heard of this man. The minister arranged a meeting with ACOG to outline his plan of attack. ‘On the face of it, you would just ignore it’, said Yarbrough. ‘But again, if you do your job right, you’ve got to say: What is its potential to bring people into this issue and cause us a real problem? … What if all of a sudden this guy could make a case that ACOG is a racist organisation because they support this radio station that has really racial kind of programming? And then get some of these very bright, articulate, special interest people who say, “And they support this flag”. And then off we go. So, it had nothing to do with the WGST issue. You’ve got to be constantly assessing the potential for impacting your business. You’ve got to make some subjective guesses as to what’s going to happen. And one of the things you have to do, you have to stay about two or three moves ahead of it.’ After a period of time, Yarbrough decided that this man just could not pull it off, so he just did not deal with the minister. The minister and the WGST issue went away and that decision was made without consulting CEO Payne. However, Yarbrough pointed out that the stance depends on a number of factors. ‘Any number of people could have been in the position that this particular individual was in and made a lot of different things happen’, says Yarbrough. As an example, if the issue had been raised by Jesse Jackson’s large and professional coalition or if the minister had been willing to ‘share’ the issue with other Atlanta activists, ACOG’s stance would have been entirely different.

DISCUSSION

‘Polar diplomacy’ discussed

In the Cobb County case, a number of contingency theory factors came into play, some of which will be identified in parentheses. The purpose of this paper is not to exhaustively inventory contingency factors found in the cases, but to illustrate a central point of the theory — the degree of accommodation does indeed depend upon the weighing of many factors found in the contingency theory.

Yarbrough’s 37 years of experience enable him to incisively recap his reading of both the Cobb County Commission and the opposing gay group as publics for ACOG. For the commission, Yarbrough mentioned several considerations that led to an accommodative stance towards the commission. Some of those considerations were pressure from church leaders (powerful members with a societal base), zealous Biblical ideals (member commitment to the cause and willingness to compromise), high profile persons (negative publicity) and majority position on the commission (political base, relative power of the public and source credibility). Gay activists formed an opposite pole in the debate, also deemed by Yarbrough to merit accommodation of its position for the following reasons. The activists were experienced (previous successes) and sophisticated (public relations counsel at hand), with a well organised network that was already into a letter-writing campaign (membership size, previous successes and most recent moves). They were extremist in views (member commitment, willingness to compromise and previous extremism), had a desire to use the Olympics as
‘the world’s largest megaphone’ (negative publicity, legitimisation of extremist opponents and stakes for organisation) and obtained extensive coverage of the first protest (media coverage the public garners and previous successes).

Pragmatism spurred month after month of effort to mediate between the commission and the gay community as a means of accommodating the world-views (moral ambiguity of issue) and positions of both publics (complexity of number of publics involved). The effort was mounted to achieve an organisational objective: an incident-free Games. The ACOG board, and particularly Yarbrough’s executive colleagues, formed a third, highly involved public for the issue in the face of a US$4m operational loss and a logistical nightmare in making the move (stakes for the organisation). Furthermore, ACOG management was concerned about starting a landslide of pressure groups with their own agendas (precedent setting), the CEO was not particularly sympathetic to the gay position (mutual liking and mutual respect) and the meddling with efforts to put on the best Games ever were irritating (negative publicity and damage to reputation).

It should be obvious that practitioners do not simply strive to use a two-way symmetrical model nor automatically advocate a particular position, but can arrive at some state of accommodation when many factors are weighed. Accommodation was on the cusp of success by 9 pm one evening, but had blown apart within 12 hours, largely due to one negative editorial. This turn of events points out another central tenet of the contingency theory — dynamism. An accommodative stance exists at a given time for a given public. Note also that all this time an ‘army’ of employees was putting out news releases, with all the trappings of the public information model. This illustrates how the contingency theory suggests that the four models in the excellence theory may distinguish clusters of practices and techniques, but the models are used in conjunction with any number of different stances towards publics. Clearly, communication techniques and the stance of the organisation must be distinguished rather than confounded as elements of particular models of public relations. Public information was operational while accommodation occurred and continued when ACOG turned its back on both the gay activists and the commission in Cobb County to market a new venue.

Later, activists were able to do what the AJC did not, which was to reopen the gay rights issue, first in Spartanburg, South Carolina, and then in Greenville. Pure advocacy in the form of BMW pressure was used in Spartanburg; based on experience with the issue and the activist publics that would form around the issue, no time or effort was wasted on accommodation or a two-way symmetrical approach. When adjacent Greenville adopted the anti-gay resolution, including moral condemnation of AGOG for leaving Cobb County, after nearly two years of accommodative effort, ACOG was pilloried on moral grounds. This illustrates another tenet of contingency theory — dialogue is not inherently ethical, especially from the perspective of polarised publics. Ironically, unless that ‘dialogue’ leads to adoption of a contending public’s position, that public will brand the organisation as ethically suspect at best.

‘Absolutely not’ discussed
Another tenet in the contingency theory launched the issue that legal and anti-trust considerations can constrain two-way symmetrical communication about certain topics. Attorney Sibley set communication policy in the interest of confidentiality. Nevertheless, he and Yarbrough agreed almost immediately to compromise based on a number of contingency factors:
threat of lawsuit based on Sunshine Laws (litigation), with a loss in courts perhaps opening up other information such as sponsors’ marketing and contracts for the Games (government regulation, level of competition and competitive turbulence). Additionally, there were powerful media involved (previous successes, source credibility, media coverage that the public garners, relative power of the public and societal base), real risks of backlash from legal stonewalling (societal base, damage to reputation, negative publicity and moral ambiguity of issue) and concern over the hostile role of the Attorney General (government regulation and powerful members/connections).

The picture seemed fairly clear until ‘a buzz saw internal public’ was encountered. The board was already really angry at the media for carping at them as they tried to put on the greatest event ever in city and state history — the largest media event in the world (mutual liking, previous extremism and negative publicity). Most importantly, a precedent could be set by conceding to the paper (precedent) and allowing salary information to lead to an editorial (negative publicity and damage to the self-respect of the dominant coalition).

Several lessons can be drawn from this case, aside from illustration of contingency factors. Yarbrough stood in a ‘no man’s land’ or ‘demilitarised zone’ between two crucial publics. His credibility with a key public, the media, was at stake in the form of promised salary figures. But an even more important public was at stake. Yarbrough functioned as counsel to the board and to lose this issue would erode his position, requiring him to resign. He faced the accusatory question: ‘Whose side are you on?’ As is often the case, public relations practitioners apply persuasive powers towards internal and external publics to achieve accommodation. A second lesson: compromise, ie a shift to accommodation, can occur yet be grudging and not particularly dialogic in spirit; note Yarbrough’s choice words in delivering the salary figures to the AJC. Note that again, through all of this, an army of people issued public information about the Games and ACOG.

‘Knowing which dogs will bite/bark’ discussed

Yarbrough arranged to meet with the disgruntled African-American minister in this case because, in his words, ‘you have got to be constantly assessing the potential for impacting your business’ and ‘you need to stay two or three moves ahead’. The essential questions were not the merit of conservative radio, but an assessment of this public based on certain contingency factors:

— Does the minister have a reasonable ‘beef with ACOG (moral ambiguity, source credibility and member commitment to the cause)?

— Can he mount a significant campaign with media interest (relative power, previous successes, most recent moves, media coverage that the public garners and negative publicity)?

— Will the minister form an alliance with other organisations or will ego and proprietary concern for keeping an issue prevent coalition-building (powerful members/connections and societal base)?

— Will the issue shift to related racial issues such as the Confederate battle flag motif (stakes for the organisation and issue proactivity)?

— Above all, is the limited threat worth the time and effort to either combat or accommodate (stakes, precedent setting and awareness of cost/benefits)?

A judgment (the key process in contingency theory) was made that this man could not pull off a major communication
effort and a decision was made simply to ignore the man's protestations, without even broaching the issue with CEO Payne (non-accommodative or asymmetric stance). Yarbrough emphasised that there are not enough resources and hours in the day to engage in full, ongoing dialogue with every public that would like to 'make the organisation's radar screen'. This case is notable because it illustrates a relatively moderate position on a continuum from advocacy to accommodation, which could be termed advocacy by means of neglect. More importantly, the case argues that two-way symmetrical communication will not always be effective in achieving organisational objectives nor can it be undertaken as a normative approach to professional practice. In fact, practitioners must marshal limited time and resources to best manage the external environment, ultimately to the satisfaction of internal publics — a process that is inherently opposed to universal adoption of a two-way symmetrical or even mixed-motives model.

CONCLUSIONS
Many factors were found in just these three cases with the focus on publics. Similar analysis could have been directed at the internal variables, given more editorial space here. The cases show achievement of public relations objectives with stances on a range of places from accommodation to advocacy. The cases also show movement along the continuum over both long and short time spans. Effectiveness in public relations will always be a judgment call, but in these cases, Athens remained a 'polar-free' zone for the gay issue and the Games were not marred by the issue. Saying 'Absolutely Not' safeguarded the financial underpinnings of the profitable Games by preventing disclosure of marketing agreements while also assuaging the media. Finally, the barking dog never did bite; the WGST issue never arose and few resources were used for this issue.

Arguably, in all three cases, the stance of ACOG was at least ethically neutral, if not positive. Ongoing dialogue through a two-way model would have gained little more ethical high ground and, for the gay issue, the dialogue lasted nearly two years without earning ACOG a place beyond moral reproach from either external public. This case study is illustrative and instructive, not a systematic test of contingency theory nor an attempt to set up excellence theory for a straw man argument. It is a sense-making effort to ground a theory of accommodation in practitioner experience, to challenge aspects of the excellence theory that persist even after Grunig has moved beyond the four models to use of continua.

It can be concluded that the main points of the contingency theory ring true for a top public relations practitioner:

— Conflict management is complex and subtle;
— A single model, such as two-way symmetrical public relations, is too inflexible to be meaningful;
— Effective and ethical public relations is possible at a range of points on a continuum of accommodation;
— An accommodative stance should not be confounded with methods of practice such as public information.

NEW INSIGHTS FOR CONTINGENCY THEORY
— Initial position in most organisations will be 'hell no'. Faith in the decision and the organisation and the inefficiency of immediately reaching out to others at the slightest sign of difference drive this observation. The shift from 'hell no' can be very rapid as in the salary case or may not occur at all, as in the WGST case. Notably, this theory runs counter...
to the normative theory of excellence. The contrast may account for the bafflement among practitioners introduced to the two-way symmetrical model that has been noted anecdotally. 'Initial accommodation' is the exception and typically results from issue tracking and identification of significant issues related to important or powerful publics, e.g., the state flag as a racist issue or the union and stadium construction issue. Ironically, both these managed issues were relative non-starters during the Olympics in Atlanta.

— Crucial advocacy in public relations is often directed at one's own organisation. In public relations the aim is not so much striving for 'getting to yes', as moving the organisation from 'hell no'. The actions of practitioners can fit the two-way symmetrical model, even when the organisation concedes little or nothing at all in changing its own behaviour. Enormous risk and effort may go into minor concessions by entrenched organisations. Practitioners in this circumstance can find themselves in a 'de-militarised zone' where they are taking fire from both sides. Within the organisation, costs and headaches can be immense resulting from accommodation, with the retort from peers being that 'you could save us trouble and money by doing your adversarial job better' — that is 'fix it with the media and the people'.

— Precedent seems to be a powerful factor, perhaps a superfactor, as decisions about accommodation are made. Through further research, a hierarchy of factors may be established, with some being moderating or mediating variables, while others are clearly controlling variables when present. The precedent concern goes something like this: 'if the organisation caves on this issue, what will be next?' This concern with precedent can even override personal values, i.e., if a personal world-view or a moral compass is allowed to intrude, a precedent is set for doing that with issues that have polarised humankind for decades with no resolution. For many people, certain intractable and polarising issues have no obvious right or wrong, yet these issues are quite clear to the activists at both poles. For example, in the Cobb County lifestyle case, both sides are genuine in their position about what is right, one side largely from their deeply felt biblical interpretation, the other side from their strong conviction that constitutional rights ought to be sacrosanct.

— Dialogue with contending publics towards compromise as an outcome will often lead to an 'immorality charge' from one or both of the publics. Ironically, dialogue could guarantee moral approbation for the organisation from at least one, perhaps several different publics. A brand of pragmatism leads to suspension of moral arguments as an alternative to sorting out intractable moral positions. This pragmatism also appeals because it sets a tenable precedent for organisations, avoiding the role of social arbiter or moral referee.

— Issues and publics are indeed dynamic, yet often long-lived as well. Cobb County issues and publics re-emerged a year later in the torch run through Greenville, South Carolina. The issue was there one-and-a-half years later, while the stance was necessarily different.

— Publics are not monolithic. Stereotypes must be avoided, good data gathered and who to dialogue with chosen based on contingency factors. This must be done with the interests of one's organisation in mind, alternatively, change the organisation's definition of its interests, or leave the organisation as a matter of principle.

— Distinction between internal and external publics is arbitrary and it is perhaps better to
think in terms of publics (internal and external) forming around an issue or episode. Advocacy can co-occur with accommodation for an issue — compromise with AJC about salary disclosure took place simultaneously with heated advocacy towards the board to release salaries.

The contingency theory does reflect a subtle, sophisticated process of assessment by top practitioners that leads to an organisational stance. The assessment is intended to provide the most effective, ethically defensible or morally neutral position for the organisation, with the stance contingent upon a wealth of factors. The qualitative data discussed here supports the contingency theory, elaborating circumstances when accommodative public relations (which have been equated with the stance in the two-way symmetrical model) can be practised, while suggesting that effective, ethical public relations can find itself in a full range of places on the continuum from advocacy to accommodation.

References


23. Only one of the cases, involving the release of executive salaries to the press, has had any mention whatsoever — much less been analysed — in academic journals. It was mentioned in one paragraph of a 1995 commentary by John Budd, Jr. published in Public Relations Review, Vol. 21, No. 3, pp. 177–179.

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1. Lan Ye, Augustine Pang. 2011. Examining the Chinese Approach to Crisis Management: Cover-Ups, Saving Face, and Taking the “Upper Level Line”. *Journal of Marketing Channels* 18, 247-278. [CrossRef]


