The business of relationships

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Abstract

Public relations is a profession where successful relationships are developed, maintained and effectively managed. This paper suggests that amidst the flurry of relational exchanges personal context, or perspective is important to successful business exchanges making client-consultant relationships vibrant, dynamic and meaningful. Through a qualitative study of consultant-client exchanges an interpretivist approach facilitates understanding and provides insight into delicate relational exchanges that take place within the business of managing public relations programs and activities. Four types of relationships emerged, some successful, some unsuccessful, some appearing to be successful, and others breaking down as relationships become strained and difficult to manage. The paper suggests that within deadlines, demands and business pressures there is considerable opportunity to value relationships and develop long-term partnerships, however, realising relational potential does not seem to be at the forefront of practitioners’ business planning. The theoretical context of these relationships is explored within interpersonal theory and complexity theory as the emergence of relational theory gains significance in public relations scholarship.

Introduction

The business of relationships is about how they are managed and what makes them viable, effective and beneficial for business partners. The study of public relations relationships between organisations and target publics, stakeholders and shareholders, continues to unravel complex relational dynamics (Chia, 2008; Ströh, 2007; Jahansoozi, 2006; Hung, 2007; Philips, 2006) where the “relationship message” (Devito, 2008, p. 19) may be ambiguous as the mix of formal and informal exchanges take place.

Relationships are more than exchanges and transactions for economic benefit (Wood, 2000). Wood contends that “dialectical theory” (p. 44) underpins the understanding of relationships as:
Attention to process clarifies ongoing dynamics that affect how relationships develop and change over time. The emphasis on contradiction highlights interdependency and interaction among competing needs, desires and feelings (p. 44).

Similarly Hung (2007) supports the notion of “interdependent yet opposing tensions” (p. 452) that exist in public relations relationships where change and tension are present in relational exchanges as relational partners react and respond to relational dynamics from their point of view. This paper reports on a study of public relations consultants and their client relationships where the process of relationship development and/or decline, the tensions and the competing relational needs, desires and feelings suggest that effective relationship management requires understanding of business and personal contexts within the subjective and objective relational components of vibrant relationships. Conversely, emphasis on business management only, evident in some of the relationships in the study, makes relationships strained and weak, especially when poor understanding of relationship management is evident.

Wood (2000) describes personal relationships as “continuing and important presences in each other’s life” (p. 5) such as relationships between family members. In the study reported in this paper, the roles of the public relations consultants and clients have a formal component, but the research findings also point to the informal exchanges and interactions that reflect the “presences” proposed by Wood. Business relationships include relational components such as “perceptions, intentions and values” (Carr, 1991, p. 240) within a formal relationship where a prescribed role defines the relationship.

We firstly need to examine the emerging relational paradigm in public relations practice to understand the significance of the study findings and their contribution to emerging relational theory.

Understanding relationships

The relational context of public relations relationships is understood and shaped by interpersonal communication theory, organizational and management theory (Duck, 1984; 1986; Duck & Gilmour, 1981; Hersey & Blanchard, 1988; DuBrin, 2000; Devito, 2008) and emerging relational theory specific to public relations practice (Chia, 2005, 2006; Ni, 2006; Jahansoozi, 2006). Once there is an exchange between two or more participants there is a relationship; it is important to understand what this means to the way public relations consultants and their clients develop, maintain and manage relationships. Scholarly research indicates that the business—personal perspective needs to be viewed as interrelated (Hutton, 2001; Hung, 2007). To make sense of what is happening in a business relationship an understanding of personal preferences of clients, their values and opinions is important (DuBrin, 2000).

Relationships are part of a ‘shifting reality’ (Murphy, 2000, p. 455) where constant change is anticipated and managed so that relational partners expect
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that the way a relationship is understood in one situation, may not be so in the next transaction, exchange or formal discussion between relational partners. Carr (1991) suggests that uncertainty and constant change provide considerable opportunity to find ways to manage relationships in different and more effective ways, in order to realise relational potential. Ströh takes this a step further as she argues that “people enter into relationships without planned strategies to achieve success in their relationships. Healthy relationships tend to be self organising” (p. 215) as they constantly adapt to change. Certainly, the findings of the study reported in this paper support the notion of shifting realities and constant relational change, but it is argued that spelling out and having relational parameters for practice are also important (Chia, 2006). Amidst the dialectical tensions and constant change there is also a planned response to managing relational change. However, Ströh’s perspective is an important one as she argues that “an organization is not a unit of analysis, physical object, or resource, but instead consists of complex relationships among the entities that make up an organization” (p. 216), and complex exchanges are evident in public relations relationships with clients, publics and other organisations. Ströh contends that relationship managers therefore need to manage with creativity amidst the uncertainty and constantly changing organisational contexts where relational exchanges take place. It is suggested that the relational complexity within the business-personal nexus is central to the business of relationships. The findings of the study to be reported in this paper indicate that effective relationship management results when relational complexity is accepted and understood as the essence of relationships, requiring a sophisticated approach to managing all relational exchanges.

Weick’s critical theory perspective (Kreps, 2008) posits that sense-making is important in understanding relational complexity. Retrospective sense-making and learning from the experience of past exchanges and communication, assists, informs and directs public relations practice. Relational sense making means that relational partners together work out ways to continue relationships where the relational expectations are reviewed and constantly reframed, and relational partners given understanding of why relationships are developing or declining, and finding ways to make them effective and vibrant. It is argued that relationships are dynamic (Gower, 2006) as all the participants, or actors in relationships adapt to situations as they unfold; the emphasis is on uncertainty and diversity of exchanges that make relationships robust. Challenging and managing the differences in relationships rather than focusing on consensus “promotes new thinking and new solutions to problems” (Holtzhausen (2000, p. 111) presenting a challenge to practitioners to adopt a more positive stance in their practice. It is also a challenge to scholars to focus less on symmetry and consensus and more on the overall context of relationships.

Scholars (Taylor, 2004; Kent, Taylor & White, 2002, 2003; Kent, 2001; Bruning & Ledingham, 1999, 2000a, 2000b; Grunig & Hon, 1999; Bruning
& Galloway, 2003; Ledingham & Bruning, 2003) point to the emergence of a relational perspective in many areas of public relations practice. The significance of the study reported in this paper is its focus on public relations–client relationships as scholars such as Ledingham and Bruning (2000) have focused on studies outside public relations, as no public relations practitioner was included in their relationship management studies. Very little attempt was made by these scholars to progress understanding of public relations relationship management from a public relations perspective.

Whether relationships are managed primarily online (Seitel, 2006; Samsup Jo & Jung, 2005; Esrock & Leichty, 2000, 1998; Kent, 2001, 2001a, 2001b; Kent, Taylor & White, 2002) or offline, Duck and Gilmour (1981) contend that they are managed according to how they are understood and how they are perceived by relational partners. Some scholars (Hung & Chen, 2008; Kent & Taylor, 2007) emphasise the need to also have an understanding of the cultural context of relationships. Hung and Chen (2008) posit that personal relationships are integral to business management in Chinese culture and that business is not conducted without the establishment of a sound relationship. These scholars focus on the personal perspective or guanxi and face and favour in Chinese relationships, indicating that these relationships and networks contribute to business favours, and to the way one business may react and respond to another because of an established relationship. Their emphasis on the cultural perspective of relationships is continuing to extend the parameters of relational theory as relationships are managed by public relations practitioners in many different ways.

Method

The qualitative study reported in this paper addresses one component of an extensive study of 16 public relations consultants and 16 of their clients exploring the relational focus in public relations practice, the understanding of the management of relationships within new and traditional media, and the relationship characteristics in the practitioner-client relationships. To begin to establish this understanding, questionnaires were emailed to a random sample of 24 registered consultants of the Public Relations Institute of Australia from seven consultancies located in South Australia. The questionnaires included Likert-type questions that made up 50% of the questionnaire and qualitative responses that made up the other 50% of the survey, so there was opportunity to add comment and detail to some of the questions.

Survey questions were briefly addressed by four consultancies and the other two consultancies included more detailed and informative responses, but the survey responses did not provide a good understanding of what was happening in consultant-client relationships. The questionnaire became the pilot study and pilot study findings framed the main study so that one method, the online surveys, became critical to directing the second method, the semi-
structured interviews. Those participating in the pilot study and main study were from a variety of consultancies. Small, medium-sized and several international consultancies were represented and clients, similarly, were from small, medium-sized and large enterprises in the non-profit, private business and government sectors.

To understand the relational context of business relationships research questions focused on the understanding of the consultant-client relationship, what was important to it, was the relationship regarded as a business relationship, and what did that mean. The literature review indicated that relationships were complex so it was important to find out what this complexity meant, whether it included personal and business relational components, and how consultants managed clients when relationships were strained or difficult. For this reason semi-structured interviews were important as they were integral to the inductive research process. These interviews provided opportunities for the researcher, firstly, to ask further questions in order to understand what is being said when the meaning seems difficult to grasp or it seems incomplete and, secondly, to reflect on the responses that may include many different perspectives. The construction of meaning around practitioners’ and clients’ responses developed understanding of the reality of their relationships; they are the “actors” (Flick, 2006, p. 75) who construct the basis of meaning giving context to what is being uncovered and explored (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). As Stacks suggests “the in-depth interview, like all informal research methods provides rich detail and the ability to understand what the individual being interviewed really thinks about something” (p. 86). This was integral to uncovering the meaning of the personal-business relationships and to understand the peculiarities of business developments. “The general, open ended questions asked during interviews allowed participants to supply answers in their own words” (Creswell & Clark, 2007, p. 6) so that in the study reported here, consultants and clients explained what personal and business relational context meant to them. This provided an understanding of the business-personal nexus in most relationships or understanding of a relationship as a purely business exchange.

Findings

The study findings were substantial and cannot be reported in full in this paper but findings critical to the paper’s focus on business and personal contexts in relationships, and to the four identified consultants groups detailed below, are reported here.

Four groups of consultants

By exploring relationships as the consultants and clients understood and described the relationships, a comparative analysis was conducted from the data of consultants’, and clients’ descriptions of consultants’ activities given in the
study interviews. From these descriptions four groups of consultants emerged. The specifics of these four groups and how they understood and practised their relationships provided understanding of how the relationships in each group were managed according to each group’s understanding of the relationship. The following four groups emerged:

- The expert promoters promoted themselves, their consultancy and their clients according to their expertise. There were six consultants in this category. These consultants perceived that their role was to manage the clients’ account as experts who would take control of all aspects of the account, with little focus on client consultation.

- The second group, promotional relationship managers, were beginning to focus on increased collaboration with clients in their public relations practice; there were four to six consultants in this category as two of the consultants sometimes managed as dynamic relationship managers, so the way they managed their relationships varied according to different aspects of the consultant-client relationship.

- Group three was represented by the dynamic relationship managers who adapted to clients’ needs, were creative and able to successfully implement new and different public relations approaches. They carried out all aspects of their relationships through collaboration and respect for each partner’s point of view; there were four in this category.

- The fourth group, unproductive managers, were those whose relationships broke down because they were unable to manage their clients’ accounts, especially the management of their clients’ new media needs. There were two consultants in this category.

These groups of consultants range from the unproductive managers who practised in business-to-business relationships and did so unsuccessfully, to the dynamic relationship managers who were simultaneously developing the business and personal components of their client relationships in all areas of their client work. A transition in the relational management approach was evident in the promotional relationship managers as they reported that they had begun to recognise the need for a more collaborative approach in managing their clients’ accounts so that their relationships could develop and thrive.

These categories presented four different groups managing relationships around their understanding and perception of the relationship. This affected the way they managed all aspects of the relationship.
What is personal-relational context?

When consultants and clients were asked about their relationships the following responses indicated that for some the understanding of a relationship meant that the personal and business components were important to them but for others, such as expert promoters, emphasis was only on the business, or contract agreements. They considered that they had a job to do and they had to manage it. However, even the unproductive managers said that the personal context of the relationship was important and yet their relationships were breaking down.

Table 1: The personal and business management aspects of consultant-client relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Business and personal aspects of relationship management</th>
<th>Consultants</th>
<th>Clients</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The relationship is a business relationship</td>
<td>3 (expert promoters)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The relationship is mainly a business one but the personal aspects are important in managing the overall relationship</td>
<td>13 (promotional managers, dynamic relationship managers, expert promoters, and unproductive managers)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The personal side of the business needs careful management but business matters also have to be well managed</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2 (clients of unproductive managers)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Personal aspects included, for example, paying attention to the clients’ concern about an unanticipated business outcome and therefore listening and providing counsel to the client to work on new initiatives for a more positive outcome. Two clients reported, for example, that personal relational components such as informal chats about tension and conflict in relationships were important on occasions when delicate matters needed attention, but they pointed out that their consultants had poor interpersonal skills that contributed to their unproductive relationships. A third of the consultants and clients reported that they were wary
about being too personal as that could be construed as wanting to manipulate the relationship, or it might confuse what is integral to business management. It became apparent that personal factors were difficult to define, although the personal or human side of relationships was acknowledged as also being important to the relationship.

The study indicated that consultants and clients addressed clients’ personal needs both formally and informally. The formal ways to encourage a more personal relationship were strategic, as there was specific planning for an expected outcome. The formal meetings and occasions were attempts by most consultants and clients to get to know each other, but those consultants and clients in categories 1 and 3, of Table 1, reported that their relationships were not progressing well so that meeting with their business partners outside of business, or for informal exchanges, was not an option, or a way of improving the relationship.

The informal approaches included the following behaviours:

- Consultants organised special meetings through network nights with the aim to put clients in contact with other clients and other organisations in their line of business. Consultants asked clients if network nights were valuable and they only continued to organise them if client feedback was positive. Clients reported that they found the feedback beneficial and they also appreciated occasional social gatherings, although seven of the clients said that time constraints made it difficult for them to attend all these functions.

- Taking clients to a special lunch or inviting clients to a special event was another strategy to ensure that clients were valued. This occurred once or twice a year. All consultants had at least one special occasion for their clients each year. Five of the clients were wary of special lunches as they said that there was always some expectation of them to sign another contract. However, eight of the clients liked to attend an annual party or special event as they found these occasions important to meet away from the immediate demands of business. Two of the clients also travelled together with their consultant on business trips. This shared experience was valuable, with one client experiencing a much better understanding of the way his consultant worked after they had spent considerable time together.

- Some clients included consultants in their celebrations as a deliberate strategy to make the consultants feel that they
were part of the organisation; these consultants shared in the clients’ successes. Their consultants said that this was one of the best relational experiences, and that they felt that they were part of their client’s team. These same consultants and clients also reported that their overall relationship was well managed by their consultants; they were the clients of dynamic relationship managers.

The informal ways to manage the consultant-client relationship worked well when they became part of the day-to-day management of the consultant-client relationships, but there were also issues around focusing on a personal approach in communication exchanges. The following points were raised:

- Consultants needed to be approachable and be available to the client; ten of the consultants placed emphasis on understanding clients and taking time to do so. The word blending best described the mix of a personal and business management approach as one being part of the other. This was primarily the focus of dynamic relationship managers and promotional relationship managers.

- Two of the clients, of dynamic relationship managers, in category 2, Table 1, agreed that they needed a more personal approach as part of their business management. This was possible when consultants were available to them on weekends and at odd hours so that they could discuss business matters over breakfast or late night coffees. These two clients experienced sound relationship management at all levels so that they were happy with their business management, and they had a favourable regard for their consultants. It was a mutually beneficial exchange and one that each partner described as rewarding.

- When consultants were unproductive managers personal relationships broke down. The two clients who experienced relationship breakdowns said that they tried to meet informally, but the business management was so poor that the personal side of the relationship also became difficult to manage. Their responses highlighted the need for balance in relationship management so that business and personal needs of clients are attended to, as one cannot completely take the place of the other, or be the entire focus at the expense of the other.

- Two of the consultants as expert promoters, category 1, Table 1 said that the personal side of a relationship had no
part in business management, but they demonstrated that they had little idea that their clients were very disappointed with this approach. These consultant interviews were addressed in a matter-of-fact manner indicating that they perceived their role as consultants who were hired to undertake a job for a client and nothing more.

- Six of the clients were cautious of the way they were given special treatment that seemed excessive and they reported that this was not the way to enhance the relationship. They were clients of expert promoters.

- Understanding and knowing the consultant at a personal level was important because without it relationships became strained. Clients of expert promoters said that they did not consider that the consultant made enough effort to get to know them and their organisation and this resulted in the relationship being a distant one. This was even more evident when there were disagreements or disappointments about project outcomes, as a personal approach was necessary to work through business concerns. When this was not happening, clients compared their public relations consultants’ business-like response to that of other marketing and management consultants who were more personal and easy to approach, as well as business-like in their approach. They concluded that there was a lack of people skills in the public relations practice that they experienced. These clients were more likely to channel their consultancy work to more approachable professionals.

Although 14 of the 16 consultants said that they were interested in their client at a personal level and that a personal approach added another dimension to the relationship, ten of the clients reported that the personal side of their relationships was not managed effectively. These clients’ main concerns were lack of transparency and openness in consultant-client relationships which in turn led to distrust and disappointment between relational partners.

Discussion

It is important to acknowledge that the discussion of findings of the wider parameters of the relationship management study reported here have been addressed in terms of relationship complexity, online relational contexts and overall context of relationships (Chia, 2008, 2007, 2006, 2004). This paper discusses the business-personal nexus, or the lack of it, as one aspect of the overall understanding of relationships. The personal context is reported in terms of what was understood by the consultants and clients interviewed.
about the business-personal mix. This paper does not allow for an extensive
discussion of relational characteristics such as trust, commitment and relational
satisfaction that affect the way relationships are managed. It is important to
point out that characteristics such as trust were found to be outcomes of effective
relationships where the business-personal context was understood as embedded
in the relationship. Embedding implied that consultants were beginning to
together that they were not in a service role to the clients, rather consultants
and clients collaborated in developing mutual understanding in all aspects of
their communication exchanges, especially when relationships became strained
and difficult to manage. Dynamic relationship managers understood this and
practised their public relations as relationship management professionals that
valued all aspects of their relationship with their clients. Where communication
was open, transparent and formal and informal dialogue, face-to-face or online
communication was managed ethically, respect for all relational partners was
evident. The relationship was a trusting one where the public relations consultants
and their clients worked harmoniously despite deadlines and demands.

In the study reported here the interrelationship of business and personal
components of a relationship did not need to include ‘a fifth personal influence
model’ (Toth, 2000, p. 211) that “focused on establishing and maintaining a
personal relationship, sometimes aside from organizational boundaries” (p. 213).
When personal influence in relationships is separated out from the relationship,
or is given inflated position in the relationship, there tends to be a mixed relational
perspective which results in confusion as to whether partners are conducting
business, or they are having more personal and interpersonal exchanges. Both
are of value, but not in themselves and the responses of some clients indicated
that they were wary about being given special personal attention as it seemed
to be to gain more business from them. This was especially so when clients
were in retainer contracts, or those that “retain the services of a professional
consultant, usually exclusive of competitors” (Franklin, 2000, p. 86). Clients
reported that these relationships needed delicate and sensitive management.
As Heath and Coombs (2006) put it “the diplomatic premises of exchange,
empathy, and maintenance that characterise personal relationships also hold true
for relationships between organisations and stakeholders” (p. 79), and they are
relevant to public relations consultant-client relationships. Heath and Coombs
(2006) use phrases such as “like a knowing friend” the practitioner “must take
into account the excitable, fragile and even fickle feelings of stakeholders” (p. 79)
as emphasis is on having empathy, being strategic and ethical in all aspects of
relational, partnership building. It is important to meaning making that alternate
viewpoints are debated and understood as integral to all relationships so that the
promotional relationship managers and expert promoters identified in the study,
would have benefited from increased debate and dialogue with their clients in all
aspects of their relationships.
The dynamic relationship managers in the study understood the importance of dealing with the delicate and often difficult aspects of their relationships as misinterpretations and sensitive responses often moved into a reactive mode, requiring careful management. Their focus was in proactively managing differences as they were aware of the complexity of communication exchanges and the need to constantly clarify, define verbal communication and non-verbal cues to realise relational potential, rather than be held back by relational difference. Kent and Taylor (2002) refer to the importance of a “supportive psychological climate” (p. 22) as essential to public relations relationships that are managed through dialogue between parties to develop fulfilling and meaningful relationships.

The point that five clients emphasised during their interviews reported in the study in this paper, was that there is little point in consultants saying that relationship management is important if they only place intermittent value on the relationship to keep it going, or retain that relationship for further business. Clients in these relationships indicated that there was unease and fragility in their relationships.

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When the business-personal context is understood as one, issues are managed as they arise (Beard, 2001; Kitchen & Pelsmacker, 2004) whether they are of a personal nature, such as a practitioner getting on with a client, or whether from a business perspective clients have become disillusioned with organisational infighting. If the business relationship only is addressed, it is argued that this is not public relations but rather management of business activities for clients. Clients in the study reported here said they could be carried out more effectively by other professionals.

The complexity of relationships is such that Kreps (2008) posits that they require “a sophisticated public relations response” (p. 23) and one that cannot be linear, strategic and “rule governed” (p. 230). This supports Ströh’s (2007) and Murphy’s (2000) notion that linear and strategic responses cannot be central to dynamic, constantly changing relationships underpinned by unrelenting change in every aspect of the relationship. Strategic and planned approaches to relationships are only effective if they are integral to a flexible, relational approach that allows for adaptation to varied client needs and changes in organisational expectations. This is recognised as requiring considerable endeavour to ensure that personal context and attention to personal matters is managed simultaneously with business matters (Ni, 2006). Interpersonal exchanges and the sustenance and development of relationships are therefore diverse and complex and they need to be viewed and understood within the dynamic nature of relationship development or decline. As Hersey and Blanchard (1998) contend relationships are effectively managed through an “open contract” where there is always room for renegotiation and a focus on “shared responsibility if goals are not met”
The business of relationships (p. 299). These scholars posit that relationships should not be locked into a way of managing. Feedback and discussion constantly reframe relationships within the wider relational interactions that take place between team members and management, as a relationship exists within many other relationships (Hung, 2007).

Scholarly research (Hon & Brunner, 2001; Huang, 2001a, 2001b; Grunig & Huang, 2000) has focused on the measurement of relationships but increasingly relationships are understood as multifaceted exchanges where many parties and teams contribute to relationships (Hung, 2007; Heath & Coombs, 2006; Ni, 2006; Jahansoozi, 2006). Ni (2006) suggests that relationships require considerable effort if they are to be successful.

Relational interpretation and perception evolves from the way we convey what we feel, think or perceive and it thereby creates meaning for all relational participants (Wood, 2000). As meaning is created the potential to commit to a relationship and develop trust is realised. It also means that when communication is difficult or strained that, according to the study reported here, some relationships collapse as interpersonal and business skills are weak, making every aspect of the relationship unstable. In these relationships it was difficult to continue any business management as there was a need to discuss and understand differences and work on new ways to manage the business and the relationship. Unproductive managers were too focused on the business perspective of their relationships so collaboration was not achieved. Expert promoters were also locked into a strategic, contract-based focus that often overlooked the need to also manage personal preferences and needs. When relationships were managed on public relations consultancy terms only, the human face of the relationship was not given the necessary respect or recognition.

Hung (2007) suggests that exploitation of relational partners may occur “when legitimacy is absent, one side may easily exploit the other” (p. 464) and when there is an imbalance of power in the relationship, exploitation of the dominant party results in relational strain. The expert promoters in the study did not perceive their dominance as exploitation, but it affected the way their relationships were managed as the consultants perceived that they were in control. It is argued that the real issues in managing effective relationships are to understand relationships and facilitate relational dialogue unique to each relationship, thereby establishing meanings specific and relevant to the business and the relationship.

Relational realities

The realities of relational difficulties in interpersonal and organisational relationships are such that scholars (Devito, 1997; Carr 1991; Goodall & Goodall, 2002) contend that even if relational partners have problem-solving skills, misunderstandings prevail because of personality differences, different abilities and different aspirations. Similarly in public relations practice Leichty
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(1997) asserts that “collaborative public relations represents the ideal practice of public relations” (p. 53), but when this is not possible, relationships cannot be made to happen and mutual benefits will not be realised. Put simply, public relations practitioners experience the same personal differences that are evident in all relationships so they should expect that there will be personality clashes, differences of opinion, and that some relationships will not be manageable. However, the study reported here suggests that if partners, in this case public relations consultants and their clients, decide from the beginning of their relationship to conduct their business in an open and transparent way, where unease and personal difference are recognised as part of the relationship, then contracts can become workable business relationships.

Conclusion

This paper explores the interrelationship of business and personal context as all relationships have subjective and objective components; the human factor is an essential relational component. As Duck and Gilmour (1981) contend a relationship is “likely to be affected both by what actually happens and by what the participants perceive to happen, the latter including the comparisons they make with what they believe should happen” (p. 7). Relationships are affected by partners’ understanding, perception and relational experience. In the study reported here four different groups of practitioners were managing their relationships according to their understanding, their past experience and their perceived role in the relationship. For some this resulted in a poor understanding of the importance of the personal and subjective component of all relationships. Heath and Coombs (2006) posit that public relations practitioners need to establish “shared meaning” (p. 94) with publics important to them so that the relationships essential to practice will be successful if underpinned by “similar values, attitudes, and beliefs” (p. 94). Hung (2007) argues that “from the dialectical aspect, relationships are not static” (p. 19); public relations practitioners also need to be aware that those relationships where values and attitudes are different require considerable effort and dialogue to develop relationship potential.

The study reported here found that the informal and formal exchanges required careful management and that relationships at the formal business level or in informal exchanges were managed in line with the understanding of practitioners’ relational and business role. The identification of four groups of consultantssuggests that from the beginning of the relationship more time needs to be allowed to spell out relational parameters and expectations. Even so some relationships do not work when there are significant personal differences and poor interpersonal skills.

Limitations of the study are recognised as this was a small random sample of a diverse group of consultants and clients. A case study approach and a longitudinal study of relationships managed over one, or two years may
provide an understanding of the way relationships are thriving or declining and whether the intricate human, or personal component, can be better understood. Public relations educators and practitioners need to be aware that the understanding of relationships is evolving as relational context changes with changing professional demands and developments. Relationships are complex and that makes the study of relationships a fascinating and necessary component of ongoing public relations scholarship.

References


