

Public Relations Assessment of
The Office of New York State Senator David Valesky

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PRL 206- Final Examination

Professor Maria Russell

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QUESTION #1

Part One: In no more than two typewritten pages, describe your chosen organization, giving its purpose, size, major product/service, location(s), historical origins, any unique features, name of CEO, name of top public relations practitioner, any other pertinent or interesting facts about the organization.

The New York State Senate was established in 1777 under New York's first state constitution. The Senate is one of two houses that form the New York State Legislature. The New York State Legislature possesses the power to enact, amend, or repeal legislation for the state of New York. The original Senate consisted of 24 members representing four districts. Today, there are 63 Senate members representing the 63 diverse districts across the state of New York.

Since 2005, David Valesky has been a member of the New York State Senate. Senator Valesky represents the 53rd district in the Senate. The 53rd district contains Madison County and parts of Oneida and Onondaga counties, including a majority of the city of Syracuse, the 5th largest city in New York. A map of Senator Valesky's district is included in Appendix A. Senator Valesky represents an approximate 290,000 constituents that live in his district (New York State, 2012). Senator Valesky is the Chairman of the Senate Aging Committee. He also serves as a member of several other committees in the Senate: Senate Commerce, Economic Development and

Small Business Committee; Agriculture; Banks; Education; Finance; Higher Education; and Rules Committees. As a member of these committees, Senator Valesky directly works on legislation that not only has an impact on his district but on all 19 million residents of the state of New York. Senator Valesky is a member of the Democratic Party and is the Deputy Leader of the Independent Democratic Conference in the Senate, an independent democratic coalition in the Senate aiming to find bi-partisan solutions for the state of New York. In a previous term, Senator Valesky served as Vice President Pro Tempore of the Senate, the third-highest government position in the state of New York. While holding this position, Senator Valesky was third in the line of succession for Governor of New York. Senator Valesky and his staff operate two offices, one located in his district and one in Albany where the Capitol is located.

Being an elected official, Senator Valesky and his staff are tasked with representing the interest of 290,000 constituents in his district. Senator Valesky and his staff heavily rely on effective communications to do this. Communications and policy making in today's world go hand in hand and share a special relationship. Valesky in his bio available on his website, states his top priority is "to serve the people of Central New York by providing the highest quality constituent service." Communications and the dissemination of information to different publics play a crucial role in the Senator being able to successfully meet this goal and are services to

constituents as well. Senator Valesky represents a diverse and heavily populated area of New York. He has worked to pass legislation in the areas of Education, Business, and Agriculture. He has also had to use effective communications and PR while running for office to actually get elected.

Part Two: According to systems theory, would you classify your organization as an open system or a closed system? Justify your classification, using the specific criteria for open/closed systems studied as one of the Theories this semester. (10 points)

After reviewing the complete theory, The Office of New York State Senator David Valesky would be categorized as an open system. When viewing the criteria for an open system, Senator Valesky's office meets the criteria and must do so to successfully serve the interest of constituents. Senator Valesky and his staff must also successfully balance legislative initiatives with providing constituent services. The communications department of Senator Valesky's office works in both of these areas. The communications staff (PR subsystem) works with the casework and legislative staff (Production and Distribution subsystems) to achieve the goals set by Senator Valesky and serve the 290,000 citizens he represents. The communications staff works to gauge public opinion in these areas to receive feedback and to interpret the feedback for policy considerations. The communication staff works as a liaison between the office and constituents

helping to disseminate information that the public may need or wants to know. Great examples of this are the numerous new releases the office drafts to inform the public of legislation or bills Senator Valesky is sponsoring. The communications team is constantly working to gauge constituents and public opinion on the key issues the Senator is working on. The communications staff works to help the Senator develop successful communication plans that have a large impact on the initiatives he is working towards. Senator Valesky's office must constantly seek feedback from different groups and changing environments to use communications to successfully serve the citizens of New York Senate District 53.

QUESTION #2

Part One: Using systems theory, describe in as much detail as possible, the public relations function at this organization. Describe the role of the public relations practitioner(s). Would you describe them as falling within the role(s) of "technician" or "manager?"

Systems theory is best summarized by the “Public Relations as an Organizational Subsystem chart” available in Appendix B. In this theory, public relations should hold a position right below management, and above all of the other sub-systems in the organization to be the most successful. PR is placed in this location because of the subsystem’s role as a liaison between the organization, the environment, and the organization’s subsystems. As information travels between an organization and the outside environment, the public relations subsystem must manage this flow of this information working to create an overall communications plan for the organization.

Public relations in Senator Valesky’s office is found within the communications department of his staff. Communications works as it’s own individual subsystem in the organization. Communications ranks as a dominant coalition in the Office of Senator Valesky. The communications staff works with Senator Valesky to help set the goals and objectives for the other subsystems in Senator Valesky’s office. The communications subsystem primary function is developing and promoting the agenda of Senator Valesky. The communications sub system is tasked with many different

responsibilities within the organization. The communications staff deals with media relations, executive communications, and constituent communications on a daily basis. The communications staff also works with assessing public opinion and creates comprehensive plans.

The role of the communications subsystem is as a manager in the organization. The communications staff is mission oriented and all task work towards accomplishing the mission of Senator Valesky. All decisions Senator Valesky makes have a communication component to them, so the staff counsels Senator Valesky in any decision that he makes outlining outcomes and shaping policy through communications. The communications staff works and is tasked with solving problems that the organization encounters giving it an even more important role in the organization

Part Two: Get to know your interviewee a bit: Educational

background; how he/she got into public relations; previous positions; involvement in professional societies and/or community organizations.

Then: Is the top practitioner a member of the dominant coalition?

What evidence from the course content studied this semester can you give to support your answer? Be specific, using the criteria for dominant coalitions.

The person I interviewed for this assignment was Jessica DeCerce, Chief of Staff and Communications Director for Senator Valesky. Ms. DeCerce graduated from Hartwick College with a degree in Political Science. She eventually went on to receive her MBA from Syracuse's Whitman School of Management. She began her communications career on the journalism side, writing for a group of community newspapers covering local issues and government. She then went to work for a college doing communications that involved marketing, public relations, and government relations for the school. Using the skills from her previous jobs, Ms. DeCerce eventually joined Senator Valesky's staff as Communications Director. She then became Chief of Staff for the Senator while continuing to maintain her role as Communications Director. Prior to Jessica becoming Chief of Staff, Newhouse Professor Cort Ruddy served as Chief of Staff for the Senator. With the title of Chief of Staff, Ms. DeCerce is the chief advisor and aid to the Senator. She oversees and manages all members of the Senator's staff, while also managing the overall communications plan and agenda of the Senator as well. Ms. DeCerce is the primary spokesperson for Senator Valesky and any communications by the Senator or his staff must have her approval or input.

With using the criteria of the Public Relations Role Theory, which helps classify PR practitioners as technicians or managers, Ms. DeCerce would be classified as a manager. Managers are the ones who facilitate communications and assists in setting the overall goals and objectives for the organization. She

is involved in any important decisions made by the Senator or his staff.

Ms.DeCerce sets the goals and standards for the organization's communications. She is the top advisor to the Senator and is a main factor in problem solving for the organization. Despite being a manager, many aspects of Ms.DeCerce's job fit the criteria of a technician as well, the small size of a State Senator's staff being the reason behind this. Ms.DeCerce works with media relations and is a communications liaison for the organization. Ms.DeCerce works also to implement the communications strategy she helps craft as well. She maintains the Senator's twitter and blog, drafts press releases, creates talking points, and analyzes the overall success of communications strategy.

A very important member of her organization, Ms.DeCerce would be categorized as a member of the dominant coalition. A dominant coalition "[has] great influence on how the organization responds to conflict and threats" (Wilcox and Cameron, P. 258, 2014). Ms.DeCerce, as Chief of Staff and Communications Director, is the chief advisor to the Senator. She devises and creates the strategy to respond to any problems or issues that arise. The rest of the Senator's staff responds directly to her and she sets the goals and objective of the entire staff. She is a key decision maker in the organization with only one person ahead of her, the Senator himself.

QUESTION #3

Using Harlow's FULL definition of public relations, create a checklist of each of the elements of that definition found in your organization. Give a concrete example of each element found.

Rex Harlow's definition is one that defines the full scope and role of PR in an organization. The full definition can be seen in Appendix C. The definition states "Public relations is the distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance, and cooperation between an organization and its publics" (Russell, 2014). Harlow's definition also contains subsections that help to further clarify the definition of public relations. A definition such as Harlow's is important to PR professionals because it successfully clarifies and defines all aspects that go into public relations. The Communications Department in Senator Valesky's office deals with all of the aspects that Harlow's definition outlines.

- **Involves the management of problems or issues**

Senator Valesky's office handles all problems or issues through the successful creation and implementation of strategic plans. The communications subsystem has a direct role in these plans. The communications department works with the other areas of Senator Valesky's staff to successfully create and implement the agenda of the Senator. An example of this is when Senator Valesky is working to enact legislation. The legislative staff works to craft

and create the legislation, the communications staff then works to help communicate details of the legislation to constituents and to the media. The communications staff gauges public support for the legislation and creates a strategy to help increase the support for the legislation. The communication and management of Senator Valesky's agenda involves dealing with any problem or issues that arise as well.

- **Helps management to keep informed on, and responsive to, public opinion**

Being an elected official, Senator Valesky's primary goal is to successfully represent the interest of the constituents who elected him. A major role in doing so is successfully being informed on and responsive to public opinion. The communications staff is always working to gauge public opinion on important issues and the stances of Senator Valesky. The communication staff does so by surveys and direct communications from constituents. These are two great ways to receive feedback from the public about the policies Senator Valesky is working towards.

- **Defines and emphasizes the responsibility of management to serve the public interest.**

Being an elected official, serving the public interest is the primary goal of Senator Valesky. The communications staff aids in all messages being sent to constituents and those impacted by the policies Senator Valesky is working on. Without effective communications, Senator Valesky would not be very

successful in promoting and implementing his agenda. With political and government PR, the communications system must effectively balance the public interest with the interest of political alliances, interest groups, and even an official's own self interest. Elected officials are expected to make decisions that could benefit the public interest but hurt the official politically. It is up to the communications system to balance the two and effectively strategize with both in mind.

- **Helps management keep abreast of, and effectively utilize change, serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends**

Senator Valesky's office and communications staff relies heavily on research for success. Ms. DeCerce explained the communications staff analyzes the public views on legislation and legislation being worked on by other officials to help set Senator Valesky's agenda. Public opinion plays a large role in the shaping of Senator Valesky's agenda. It is up to the communications staff to interpret public opinion and use it effectively in shaping the Senator's agenda. The communications staff must also identify the key groups they need the support of when working on certain policies or issues.

- **And uses research and sound and ethical communication as its principal tools**

Research plays a crucial role in the success of Senator Valesky's agenda being achieved. Research helps with setting and successfully creating the Senator's

agenda. Ethical communications are vital to the success of implementing the Senator's agenda as well. Being an elected official, Senator Valesky and his staff are held to high ethical and moral standards. All decisions made are carefully viewed and judged by the media and public. Any unethical practices would be very difficult to conceal from the public and would go against the high moral and ethical standards being an elected official entail.

QUESTION #4

Describe in detail the "boundary spanning role" of the practitioner(s) in your chosen organization. Give concrete examples, both internally and externally of how the practitioner interacts with subsystems internally and with the external environment. By playing this role, how does the public relations practitioner advance the mission of the organization?

The boundary spanning role is defined as, “[standing] at the edge of the organization, serving as a liaison between, and among, various subsystems, and between the organization and external systems.”(Russell, 2014). Jessica DeCerce and her role as Chief of Staff and Communications Director fit the criteria of this theory.

•The boundary spanner stands at the edge of the organization

This part of theory describes the role of the boundary spanners role as being in a position to communicate both internally and externally. This correctly describes Ms.DeCerce’s role with the organizations. She is the contact for all outside groups and organizations. She is also the person that assesses and makes decisions regarding the outside environment.

•serving as a liaison between, and among, various subsystems, and between the organization and external systems

Ms.DeCerce in her role as Chief of Staff and Communications Director can be accurately described as a liaison among various subsystems, and also between the organization and external systems. She is the primary spokesman for the Senator. If any organization or groups wants to contact the Senator, they must coordinate with Ms.DeCerce, whom is the primary source for information for outside groups. She also must coordinate communications between the various parts of the Senator's office. The Senator's office is divided into mainly two areas, one that focuses on legislation and the other that deals with caseworks. Ms.DeCerce is constantly coordinating between the two parts of Senator Valesky's office to make sure all of the Senator's staff is on the same page and working collectively towards the Senator's agenda. Coordinating effective communications between the various sub systems is crucial in the success of promoting Senator Valesky's agenda.

Ms.DeCerce is in constant communication with the media and groups in the external environment as well. The groups play a significant role in the success of promoting the Senator's agenda. The media and outside groups primarily go through her for any information regarding the Senator. She also stays in contact to receive input from external publics. Her position as a liaison coordinating communications from the organization to external groups and managing communications between internal subsystems is her primary function as Communications Director and Chief of Staff.

QUESTION #5

Part One: Identify the key linkages (or publics) of this organization.

The linkages theory is an important theory in public relations and is one that can be used to analyze any public relations organization. The linkage theory is used to help identify and successfully communicate with an organization's key publics (Russell, 2014). The linkages included can range from the head administrator of the organization to the organizations viewed as competition. The theory breaks linkages into four groups, all four groups are important to the decision making of the organization as a whole. Identifying these four linkage groups is important in crafting successful and unique communications for all public the organization is attempting to communicate with. Each linkage group plays a separate but important role in the success of the organization. A full diagram of the linkage theory is available in Appendix D.

- **ENABLING LINKAGES**

The enabling linkages are those individuals, groups, and organizations that provide control and authority for the organization (Russell, 2014). For Senator Valesky's office this would be New York State government as a whole because this organization is the body that created his senate seat and

formulates procedure for the New York State Senate. Another enabling linkage would be the Federal Government of the United States. The Federal government oversees and is the body in which state government is modeled after. The Federal Government through the constitution creates the parameters and rules for state governance.

- **FUNCTIONAL LINKAGES**

The functional linkages are classified in two groups, input and output. The input linkage would be the members of Senator Valesky's staff. This group is made up of the people who are responsible for the day-today operations of the organization. This group could also include people who volunteer through Senator Valesky's office or volunteered for his election campaigns. The output linkage is defined as the groups or groups that receive the services of the organization. This would make the output group for Senator Valesky's office all of his constituents that he represents as Senator. This group could also classify all citizens of the state of New York because Senator Valesky works on policies that affect not only his district but also the whole state.

- **NORMATIVE LINKAGES**

Normative linkages are the organizations or groups that share common problems or interest as Senator Valesky and his office. The members of this

linkage would include all members of Senator Valesky's political party and all elected officials in New York State, whom all face similar problems being elected officials. Another member of the linkage would be all members of the committees Senator Valesky serves on, all members share common problems and interest of passing certain policies. The explanation for reason behind the necessity of these linkages is best explained by an example given by Maria Russell during a PRL 206 lecture on December 2nd. If the New York State government decided to decrease funding for all colleges and universities in New York State, then all of the colleges and universities would use these linkages to devise a strategic plan to combat the issue (Maria Russell, December 2nd, 2014).

- **DIFFUSED LINKAGES**

The hardest linkages to define are the diffused linkages. These are the linkages that possess elements in society that cannot be clearly identified by membership in a formal organization. They are also audiences who arise when an organization has consequences on people outside of the organization. Being an elected official, Senator Valesky and his office are constantly doing work that affects all citizens in the state of New York. The two most prominent members of this group though would be the media and special interest groups such as the NRA or AARP. A great example of effective

communications with this linkage was when Senator Valesky was receiving backlash from AARP after a study the group conducted showed that a large amount of the retired population could be leaving Onondaga County for other states taking billions of dollars with them to these states (Senator Valesky, Blog, 10/20/14). As head of the Senate Aging Committee, this group and these statistics hold a high priority with the Senator. Senator Valesky response was to take an opportunity to speak at an AARP presentation to respond and help frame the issue this study brought up. Ms.DeCerce in the interview discussed that most communications are directed at constituents but when key issues like this come up, communications are directed to respond to these interest groups.

Part Two: How does the public relations operation "build and maintain lines of communication" with these publics? Give a total of at least 3 specific examples total from among all of the linkages you identify.

Rex Harlow in his definition of public relations states a key role is to “establish and maintain mutual lines of communication”. This statement shows the role of public relations in cooperating and working with these linkages.

Senator Valesky's and his office uses social media and digital correspondence as tools to stay efficiently connected with the output linkage. Citizens through social media and Senator Valesky's website can contact his office about concerns or viewpoints on certain issues that Senator Valesky has influence over as an elected official. Ms. DeCerce described social media as "allowing for a much quicker and fast response to constituent concerns." This efficient line of communication allows for citizens to have a much greater response an input on key issues.

Senator Valesky and his office to achieve success must main mutual lines of communication with the Normative Linkages. The political process is one that requires coalitions and cooperation to achieve success. When working on legislation or dealing with key issues, Senator Valesky's office is in constant communication with the Normative Linkages in order to calculate successful responses. An example of this, in 2009 Senator Valesky worked with elected officials from both political parties to create a temporary committee to oversee the improvement of Senate operation (Senator Valesky, Press Release, 12, 16, 2009). For Senator Valesky to have aided in the creation of this committee, he was in constant communication with the Normative Linkages, other Senators and officials, to aid him in the creation of the committee and respond to shared criticism from other groups. This is just one example of ways Senator Valesky and his office must maintain mutual lines of communication with Normative Linkages to successful

combat key issue or problems—the nature of politics and governance call for it.

Another key linkage that is vital to the success of Senator Valesky and his office are the Diffused Linkages, one that is especially important is the media. The media constantly covers elected officials and their actions. The Senator and office must stay in constant communication with the media to successfully promote the Senator's agenda. An example of this is the issue of news releases, these news releases contain information of any prominent actions by the Senator. The news releases are released sometimes multiple times in a day to keep the media well informed.

QUESTION #12

After reviewing the pre-readings and class lecture on the topic of "public relations and social media," and/or outside sources on the topic, discuss how your organization's public relations department is using social media to engage its publics and to build relationships.

“The use of social media is becoming a feature of political and civic engagement for many Americans.”(Smith & Rainie, 2012). The development and growth of social media has allowed for government communications to deliver information to a large audience in a relatively short span of time. This development in the use of social media is recent, really only beginning six years ago when President Obama began using social media to connect to publics in a way never before done in government communications. Most elected officials, Senator Valesky included, have attempted to use social media to engage and build relationships with different publics. Social media not only provides a cheap and direct communication to publics but also offers a medium for publics to voice concerns with Senator Valesky as well.

Senator Valesky and his office maintain active social media accounts on Facebook and Twitter. The accounts are used to communicate and promote the Senator’s agenda. Senator Valesky and his office communicate through these platforms on average once a day. The accounts are used to communicate to the broad public issues Senator Valesky is working on and also describe any key actions he takes. Along with that use, Senator Valesky

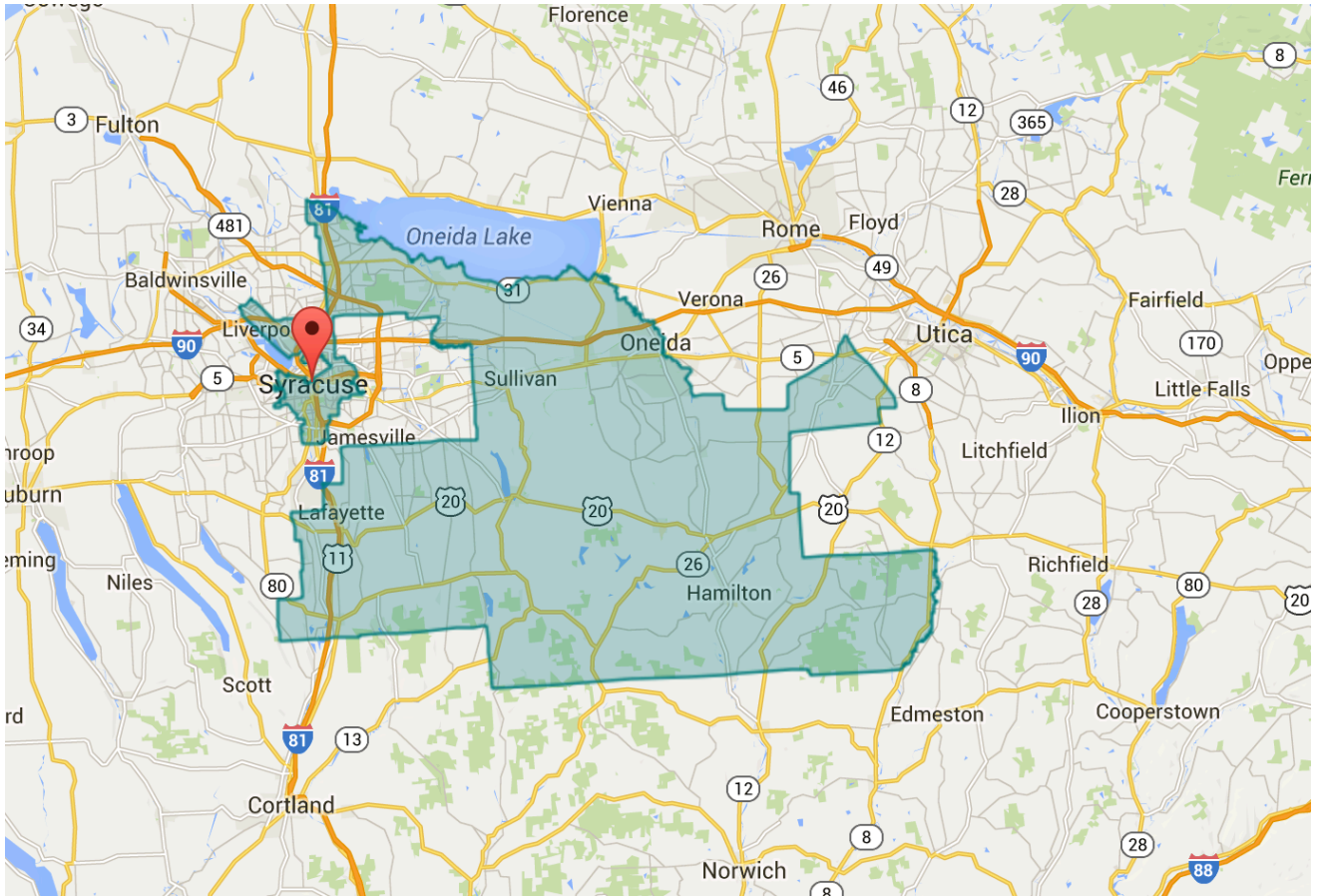
uses social media platforms to share articles and information that support his agenda from other organizations. The use of social media to share information from other organizations and groups is a valuable tool used to promote the Senator's agenda.

The other effective use of social media that Senator Valesky and his office have employed is the use of social media to receive citizen and interest group feedback in a quick way. Ms. DeCerce spoke about how the office has effectively used social media as a way to not only analyze public opinion but respond with information regarding entitlement program eligibility, business development opportunities, and the implications of changing laws to make sure interest groups and individuals remain aware.

Social media has really become an incredibly prominent tool in a PR practitioner's toolbox of skills. It has the benefits of being a form of quick, cheap, and direct communication for practitioners to use. Social Media does also have negative implications as well. Social media creates a constant need for content, it is easy while using social media to generalize an audience and not address key population, and with the use of social media content quality decreases. These are some of the very important factors accounted for communication through social that Ms. DeCerce spoke about. Overall, Ms. DeCerce evaluated social media as having more positive implications rather than negative implications. All aspects, positive and negative, must be successfully evaluated to effectively use social media.

APPENDIX A

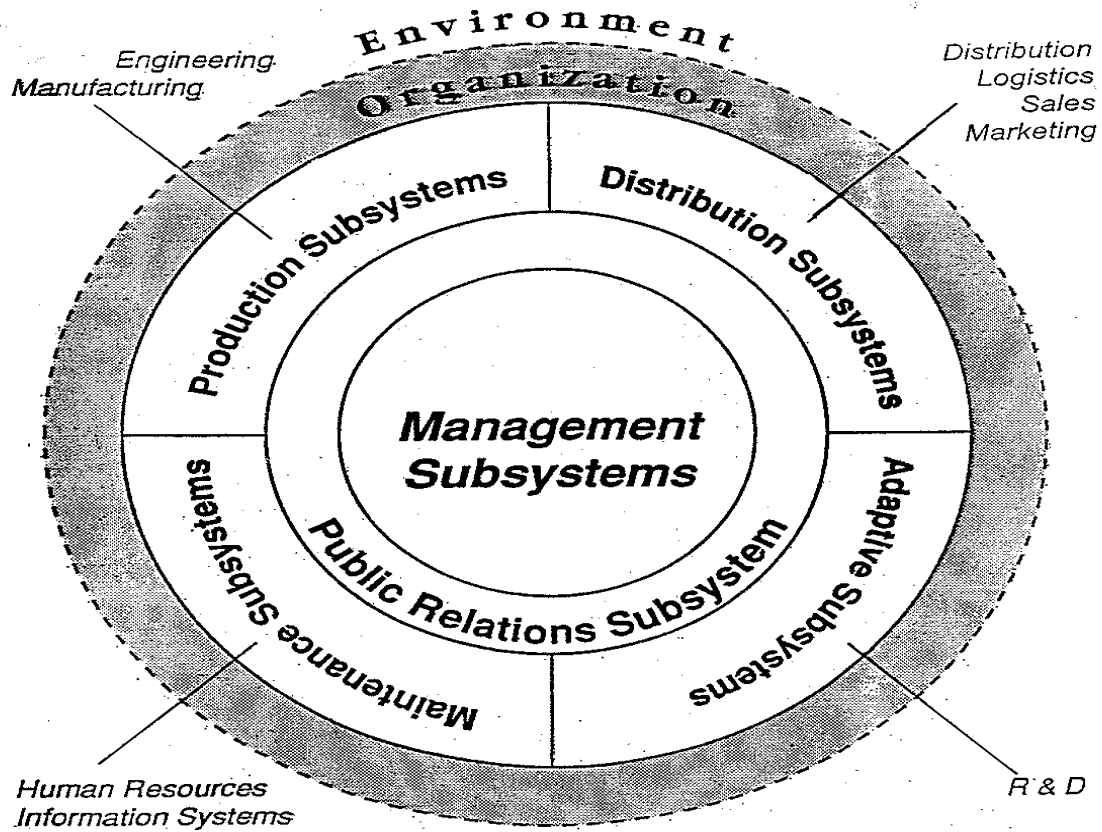
New York State Senate District 53



APPENDIX B

Public Relations as an Organizational Subsystem chart

Public Relations as an Organizational Subsystem



Based on work of Grunig and Hunt

APPENDIX C

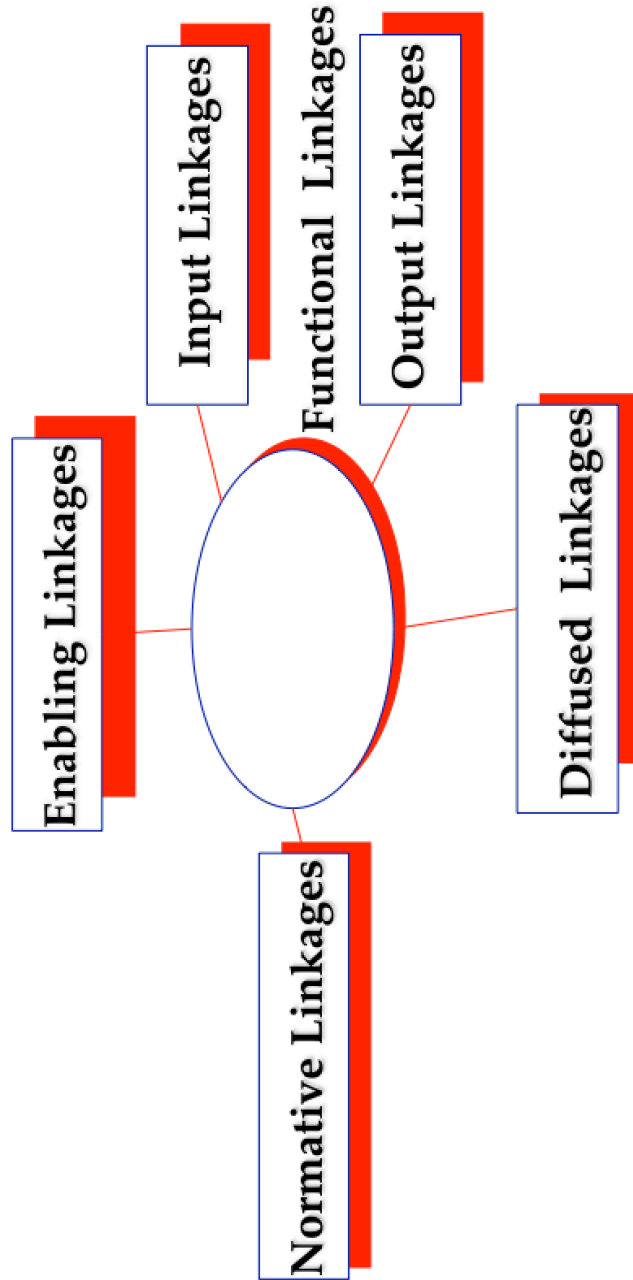
Rex Harlow's Full Definition

“Public relations is the ***distinctive management function*** which helps establish and maintain ***mutual lines of communication***, understanding, acceptance, and cooperation ***between an organization and its publics:***

- *involves the management of problems or issues*
- *helps management to keep informed on, and responsive to, public opinion*
- *defines and emphasize the responsibility of management to serve the public interest*
- *helps management keep abreast of, and effectively utilize change, serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends*
- *and uses research and sound and ethical communication as its principal tools”*

APPENDIX D

Linkages Theory Diagram



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