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A PUBLIC RELATIONS FRAMEWORK FOR INDIGENOUS ENGAGEMENT

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Integrating indigenous communicative principles, protocols and practices is a complex and challenging task for public relations professionals in bicultural and multicultural nations. Within this chapter, we examine the potential of an engagement orientation for indigenous public relations efforts and suggest some approaches for appropriately navigating the complexities of indigenous cultures. Engagement is a core concept for a public relations philosophy grounded in notions of mutually beneficial relationships (Heath, 1994, 1997, 2001), which takes into account the multiple assumptions, values, emotions, beliefs and visions that publics—including indigenous publics—may hold. Mutually beneficial relationships evolve from engagement processes that involve publics in agenda setting (deciding which issues are important), decision making (determining which views ought to prevail) and policy formation (setting the context for action). Engagement processes must be explicitly designed to address issues of power and cultural differences in order to be mutually beneficial. Integrating indigenous communicative principles, protocols and practices, we contend, is therefore a challenging but vital task for public relations professionals seeking authentic and respectful engagement in bicultural and multicultural contexts. We draw upon examples from the Maori culture of the indigenous people of New Zealand to illustrate some of key principles of engagement between Western and indigenous cultures in one national context.¹ Maori use the term *whanaungatanga* to encompass communication that is oriented towards creating shared outcomes and constructing shared understandings (Bishop, 1996). As Mead (2003) highlighted, this important concept emphasises reciprocity and is, we suggest, closely aligned with the engagement principle of mutually beneficial relationships. Introducing *whanaungatanga* into public relations practice is therefore one answer to Holtzhausen's (2000) call

for a more socially, culturally and politically contextualised form of public relations and to Cheney and Christensen's (2001: 182) question 'what would a non-western, non-managerial and nonrationalist form of public relations look like?'

In response to these challenges, we theorise culture as a political, strategic and positional concept and draw upon Curtin and Gaither (2005: 17), who argued that power is a central concern for public relations practice. Curtin and Gaither (2005) provided a theoretical framework for the discursive processes of constructing cultural meanings, which saw public relations practitioners as 'cultural intermediaries' operating within a 'circuit of culture' model. This discursive intermediary role for practitioners was earlier identified by Motion and Leitch (1996, 2009) as a form of 'discourse technology'—a term developed by Fairclough (1992) to explain how public relations is centrally involved in effecting social and cultural transformations. The work undertaken by public relations professionals may facilitate the achievement of socio-cultural objectives that may or may not serve the interests of indigenous peoples (Motion and Leitch, 1996, 2009). That is, public relations professionals may engage with indigenous peoples to co-produce and circulate alternative discourses or they may work to suppress such alternative discourses. Our research agenda is guided by the postcolonial work of Said (2003: xiv), who critiqued 'the difference between the will to understand for purposes of co-existence and humanistic enlargement of horizons, and the will to dominate for the purposes of control and external domination'. The aim here is to advocate for public relations processes and practices that serve to empower indigenous people.

Sriramesh (2009: 47) warned that in a rapidly globalising world public relations will ignore culture at its peril. An emerging feature of public relations engagement with indigenous people is the globalising and potentially empowering influence of social media. The rise of social media makes the suppression of ideas increasingly difficult. We draw on the recent work of Castells (2009: 36), who conceptualises culture as 'a set of values and beliefs that inform, guide, and motivate people's behaviour.' Castells's (2009) work is especially salient because it is crucial that communication with indigenous people be considered in the contemporary context of the global networked society as well as in more traditional terms. Heterogeneity and fragmentation are significant characteristics of globalised network societies and, Castells suggests, 'protocols of communication between different cultures are the critical issue for the network society, since without them there is not society; just dominant networks and resisting communes' (Castells, 2009: 37). Thus, the public relations perspective adopted in this chapter is grounded in a discursive perspective that acknowledges fundamental power relations that underpin communicative efforts—what Castells (2009) refers to as 'communication power'. Our agenda is to construct a cultural public relations framework in order to facilitate 'power-sharing' (Castells, 2009: 52). We define power sharing

as a breaking down of the boundaries of organisational discourses in order to make respectful space for indigenous principles, protocols and practices and to advocate for a more influential role for indigenous peoples in society. We offer general insights into the dynamics of indigenous public relations work but specifically focus on one indigenous people, the New Zealand Maori. Lessons from New Zealand—*Aotearoa*—may be applicable for the wider global community, particularly in relation to engagement. However, we emphasise that there is no single 'indigenous culture', and indeed there are significant cultural differences within the various tribal and family groupings within Maori. Given the global need for a more sophisticated understanding of indigenous cultures we identify a significant gap in the public relations literature in this area. First, we theorise the cultural intermediary work involved in indigenous community engagement as a mode of public relations and, second, we offer a public relations framework for indigenous engagement.

Public Relations Engagement

The development of equitable, meaningful communication processes requires openness to cultural differences, and flexibility in response to different cultural priorities and protocols. Policy, organisational and public interests need to be balanced or reconciled with indigenous interests. Public relations communication strategies may include:

- 1 public information campaigns, which are an asymmetrical, one-way mode of conveying organisational perspectives and knowledge;
- 2 public consultation, which is a mode of providing or soliciting information and researching public opinion (Motion and Leitch, 1996); and
- 3 public engagement, which is a form of dialogical exchange and negotiation (Rowe and Frewer, 2005).

Engagement should not be conflated with dialogical approaches. As noted above, mutually beneficial relationships emerge from *whanaungatanga*, from engagement processes that involve indigenous people and communities in agenda setting, decision making and policy formation. The communication design process needs to address and resolve issues of power to the satisfaction of all those engaging. Thus, co-design and co-organization of the engagement process (see Powell and Colin, 2008) and potentially the co-production of solutions must be embarked upon (see Bovaird, 2007).

Public relations engagement processes may be deployed to enable organisations to gain a better understanding of issues of importance to indigenous peoples, as well as to manage or resolve such issues. However, our observation in a New Zealand context has been that, too often, public relations campaigns that involve communicating with indigenous people often

concentrate on promoting the interests of governments and organisations by simply reinterpreting these interests in more culturally palatable ways. The challenge, then, is to move beyond this culturally attuned public information or consultation model to facilitate meaningful engagement with indigenous people. Engagement is not, however, a panacea for the multiple issues that may confront indigenous people and communities. Systemic societal change that involves power sharing is required.

The fundamental question of how to develop meaningful engagement processes that facilitate power sharing, equitable participation and mutually beneficial outcomes forms the focus of this chapter.

Indigenous Contexts: Contemporary Challenges

Experiences of colonization, discrimination, severe socio-economic disadvantage, lower standards of living and health, and struggles for recognition are variously shared by indigenous peoples (Durie, 2003). International attention has more recently been focused on indigenous struggles to publicise issues, to advance opportunities and to claim the right to self-determination and sovereignty, which Maori refer to as *tino rangatiratanga* (Walker, 2004). The establishment of the *United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues* in 2002 (Durie, 2003) has provided a global space for discussion of grievances, aspirations and development issues. Indigeneity, Durie (2003) suggests, has shifted from remonstrance to negotiation as a shift in opinion and opportunities for reconciliation are opening up. The emerging global, moral imperative to act in a culturally inclusive way when engaging with indigenous people can create anxiety for those who are uninformed and may undermine efforts to communicate. It is therefore essential to establish collaborative approaches that ensure that Western organizational communication practices create spaces for and are compatible with indigenous approaches. Culturally compatible approaches evolve from mutual understanding and positive interaction.

Identifying how to communicate and engage with indigenous people may, however, be challenging for those who are unaccustomed to stepping outside Western cultural perspectives. Common problems may be as basic as not being able to identify whom to communicate with or how indigenous cultural groups are organised. For example, during a public policy engagement process, public relations practitioners wishing to communicate with Maori will not find one single individual who represents the community. Depending upon the issue involved, they will need to engage with a number of social groupings including traditional tribal affiliations, community groups, urbanised individuals or members of indigenous organisations and corporations. From a traditional Maori perspective, social grouping affiliation is linked to *whanau* (family; members are all relatives), *hapu* (kinship; extended family groups) and *iwi* (people, nation) (Mead, 2003). However, urbanisation has isolated many

from traditional groupings and there is an extensive, widespread international diaspora. Maori thus shift between traditional and contemporary identities and groupings, and public relations professionals need to understand and flexibly respond to identity shifts and dynamic, possibly ambiguous social groupings in order to engage effectively. They must also take account of multiple viewpoints. Just as there is no individual who speaks for Maori, there is no single viewpoint that represents all Maori. In addition, although traditionally indigenous cultures and knowledge have been orally transmitted, they are not static. The dynamic nature of indigeneity means that the multiplicity of viewpoints within Maoridom is constantly evolving.

Recently, there has been a strong growth in Maori culture, in particular with language undergoing a renaissance: 24 per cent of Maori can hold an everyday conversation in *Tē Reo Maori* (Maori language) (Statistics New Zealand, 2007). Such a renaissance has led Maori researchers to reiterate the importance of understanding *Tē Aro Maori* (the Maori world), and recognising and valuing Maori *tikanga* (customs) and traditions (Harris, 2007; Walker, 2006).

Indigenous cultures are often characterised as collective and cooperative. There have been many cross-cultural studies that have unveiled significant differences between different countries (e.g. Hill et al., 2004; Spector et al., 2007). Spector and colleagues (2007) noted that an important difference between nations is the level of collectivism or individualism. Societies that are concerned with one's self and immediate family are considered to be individualist, as they focus on independence and personal achievement (Markus and Kitayama, 1998; Hofstede, 2009). Collectivist societies are typically focused on interconnectedness with extended family groups and a broader range of social networks (Spector et al., 2007; Markus and Kitayama, 1998; Hofstede, 2009). Collectivist regions include Asia, Latin America, eastern Europe and the Pacific Islands (Spector et al., 2007; Hofstede, 2009). Although North America and western European countries are most individualist, New Zealand—in which people of European descent constitute the majority of the population—is also considered to be an individualist country (Hofstede, 2009).

In contrast, New Zealand Maori are considered to be collectivist even though they live in a individualist society that was colonised by the British more than 150 years ago (Guthrie, 2001; Hofstede, 2001; Ratima and Grant, 2007). Ratima and Grant (2007) suggested that Maori base their individuality on a connection to the past, present and future generations, whereas the Europeans of New Zealand tend to base their individuality on freedom, autonomy and self-interest. Similarly, Hook, Waaka and Raumati (2007) suggest that the fundamental difference between New Zealand Europeans and Maori is perceptions of individuality. Although Maori, Asian and Pacific peoples are more collectivistic, they are also citizens and residents of an individualistic society (New Zealand). Thus, Maori, Asian and Pacific people are likely to vary in collectivistic tendencies. Engagement with indigenous groups in a context that

situates a collectivistic culture in the midst of a dominant, individualistic setting clearly creates significant challenges for public relations practice.

In this chapter we emphasise authentic, inclusive engagement as a communicative process that is more appropriate for the collectivist orientations of indigenous peoples. In New Zealand, the task of engagement with Maori communities is generally delegated to either public relations consultancies that specialise in communicating with Maori communities or Maori employees who act as cultural intermediaries for organisations. Engagement processes are therefore more likely to take cultural considerations into account but, in order to be effective, the organisational contexts in which these processes operate must also be inclusive. In the following sections we examine the implications of indigenous principles, protocols and practices for successful and respectful public relations engagement.

Principles

An understanding of cultural principles provides an insight into the foundations that guide judgements about what is important and valued by indigenous communities. Despite the fact that principles vary across communities, they are an important indication of the belief and value systems that influence engagement processes. It is therefore essential for public relations professionals to identify and understand the principles that connect and unify an indigenous community or organisation so that efforts to engage are culturally appropriate.

Within New Zealand, Maori are referred to as *tangata whenua*—the people of the land. The commonly accepted use of this term establishes the first nation principle that Maori are the indigenous people and as such have rights protected in law. In New Zealand, the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi enshrined in legislation the rights of Maori. The Waitangi Tribunal is the legislative organisation that administers the Treaty of Waitangi. Four key principles underpin the Waitangi Tribunal interpretations of the treaty: 'the principle of active protection, the tribal right to self regulation, the right of redress of past breaches and the duty to consult' (Waitangi Tribunal, 2010).

Public relations professionals working in indigenous contexts need to understand and work within the legislative principles that guide interaction. In this instance, the duty to consult is a significant principle for all interactions with Maori. The intention is to ensure that Maori are recognised as 'custodians of the land', to guarantee a governance role and to draw on the knowledge of Maori. The duty to consult has been variously interpreted as the need to inform, to establish dialogue and to actively engage with Maori to co-produce solutions. Consultation has not always been a positive or productive experience for Maori—in many cases it has been perceived as an exploitative, superficial attempt to comply with legislation rather than an attempt to genuinely engage with Maori and co-produce solutions. Consultation processes have consumed

Maori resources and time; senior Maori leaders or *kaumata* have been expected to participate in consultation processes that do not reflect Maori principles or benefit Maori people. Such practices inherently function as power relations that serve to legitimise inherently unequal processes that disproportionately benefit the powerful. They also lead to cynicism amongst Maori who have experienced engagement as neither purposeful nor useful. Public relations practitioners must be aware that such practices engender a level of reluctance and suspicion towards engagement. However, Maori have actively resisted attempts to coopt them into tokenistic engagement; one common response has been to identify themselves as consultants and charge for their time. In doing so, Maori establish that their contributions have an economic value and reclaim some power in the relationship. Clegg and colleagues (2006: 364) suggest that, as new issues and agendas emerge, decision-making processes and power distribution will be challenged. Models of consultation or engagement should not act as strategies of exclusion or exploitation. Working within the cultural principles of indigenous peoples offers the opportunity to balance public relations, power relations and ethical practices. It means that the role of indigenous people as experts is acknowledged and respected. It means that there is a more equitable distribution of power in decision-making processes, and engagement may shift from a consultation model to a partnership model.

Protocols

Observing cultural protocols—the unwritten rules or guidelines that regulate conduct in certain situations—is essential for public relations-led engagement. For Maori, cultural protocols are derived from *tikanga*. *Tikanga* has a wide range of meanings (Gallagher, 2008) but generally refers to Maori culture, ‘customary concepts’ (Mead, 2003: 1) and related knowledges (Macalister, 2005). Durie (1996: 449) defined *tikanga* as the ‘values, standards, principles or norms to which the Maori community generally subscribed for the determination of appropriate conduct’. Williams (1998: 2) explained that *tikanga* is ‘the Maori way of doing things—from the very mundane to the most sacred or important fields of human endeavour’. Traditionally *tikanga* was communicated orally and governed Maori political, legal, social and spiritual behaviour (Gallagher, 2008). *Tikanga* may also be understood as a discourse about cultural concepts, values and beliefs that regulates what is right and moral, communicates the values that underpin such norms and values, and establishes appropriate Maori cultural practices.

The colonisation of Maori people led to a subjugation of their culture and beliefs (Mead, 2003; Smith, 1999). Gradually, a revival of Maori *tikanga* was driven by cultural events such as internationally acclaimed exhibitions of Maori art and the *waka tua* (war canoes), followed by various influences such as the establishment of the Waitangi Tribunal, a Maori language movement and the

acknowledgement and acceptance of the role of *tikanga Maori* as a normative system in certain legislation (Mead, 2003). However, the revival and role of *tikanga Maori* in New Zealand society has been partial and often highly contested. Foucault (1980: 81) suggested we are now experiencing 'an insurrection of subjugated knowledges' (italics in the original). The term *subjugated knowledges* had two meanings for Foucault. First it referred to 'historical contents that have been buried and disguised in a functionalist coherence or formal systematisation' (Foucault, 1980: 81) and second it referred to a set of knowledges that have been disqualified—*tikanga* may be understood as a subjugated knowledge in both senses. The insurrection and re-examination of subjugated knowledges or discourses, according to Foucault (1980), provides opportunities and scope for criticism and interrogation of the power relations at play. Indigenous systems of knowledge need to be integrated into engagement protocols in order to facilitate power sharing.

Within Maori culture, communication protocols are informed by *tikanga*. Mead (2003: 13) explained that 'concepts such as *tapu* (the state of being set apart), *mana* (prestige), *noa* (neutrality), *manaakitanga* (hospitality), *take* (cause), *utu* (reciprocation), *ea* (satisfaction) and many others' all play a part in explaining customary practice. The protocols (customs and ceremonies) inherent within *tikanga* are underpinned by the principles of *whanaungatanga*, *manaakitanga* and *aroha*. These principles focus on the relational aspects of interaction and guide the customs or protocol for engaging with others. The concept of *whanaungatanga*, which was introduced above, involves a sense of relationships and kinship and focuses on the notion of collective support and mutual obligations (Macalister, 2005; Mead, 2003). Individuals are supported by the group but the collective group also expects support. The implication for public relations is that engagement practices must incorporate and integrate these collective obligations. Indigenous engagement, therefore, is not a process of circulating key messages and achieving desired organisational outcomes; instead it is a process of fostering supportive collective relationships. Furthermore, engagement with Maori should also typically include *kaumatua* and *kuia*, the elders of Maori knowledge and lore; they are viewed as repositories of knowledge and likely to be strong gate keepers and providers of acceptance. Thus, indigenous engagement may require interacting with experienced elders well versed in *tikanga Maori* even when they lack contemporary knowledge about specific topics that public relation consultants might seek to address. Similarly, *manaakitanga* is concerned with nurturing relationships and looking after people (Macalister, 2005; Mead, 2003). It establishes a protocol of being very careful about how others are treated. For example, it is essential to ensure that visitors are treated hospitably and fed. Underpinning all engagement with others is the principle of *aroha*: love, respect, and compassion (Macalister, 2005; Mead, 2003). Understanding indigenous protocols may initially occur at a more superficial level that lacks conceptual depth, but an appreciation of

the foundational relational principles will partially mitigate insensitivity and lack of understanding of the nuances and subtleties of cultural knowledge and protocols.

Practices

In order to understand how to engage with indigenous people it is necessary to understand the interrelationship between principles, protocol and communication practices. The ways in which indigenous people meet and congregate, the ways that they communicate and the ways that they make decisions need to form part of the co-design of engagement practices. Engagement practices may be developed from an understanding of the practices associated with a *marae*—a Maori meeting house or place.

A *marae* is a place where Maori culture can be celebrated to the fullest extent, where the language can be spoken, where Maori can meet Maori, where intertribal obligations can be met, where the customs can be explored, practised, debated, continued or amended, and where necessary ceremonies—such as welcoming visitors or farewelling the dead—can be carried out.

(Mead, 2003: 110)

Participation in decision making in a *marae* is decided according to *mana*; those with prestige speak first. A *koha* (gift/money) is given to the hosts, and meetings are opened with a *mihimihi*: information sharing about genealogy, connection to spaces and places and acknowledging relationships to those who are present (Scott and Du Plessis, 2008: 110). Maori have a tradition of oration, which may take the form of traditional speeches, blending mythical and contemporary story telling. The use of speeches and story telling in engagement processes has implications for public relations engagement processes: these approaches tend to be more one-sided in nature, but may be the catalyst for discussion. Within Maori culture, a *hui* or meeting adopts a consensus-based approach to decision making: differences of opinion are aired and discussed until a consensus is reached (Tremaine, 1990). Engagement may thus be a lengthy process. However, such an engagement process would be viewed as culturally acceptable to Maori, who are thus more likely to perceive the engagement process (and those undertaking it) in a favourable light, irrespective of the actual outcome.

Traditional ways of engagement and decision-making approaches shape and influence contemporary decision making. The Internet and digital technologies, with their potential for interactivity, offer interesting possibilities for organisations that seek increased engagement with indigenous people. It may be possible to create digital spaces that accommodate collectivist principles

and power sharing. For example, in New Zealand the creation of a digital *marae* could amalgamate *tikanga* and *marae* protocol and practices and be readily available to local Maori and the international diaspora. The first issue that must be addressed if public relations professionals want to trial Internet and mobile engagement process is access to technology. According to the Ministry of Social Development (2009), in 2006 46.7 per cent of Maori had access to the Internet at home, compared with 70.4 per cent of European New Zealanders. This disparity is a serious concern. However, because Maori have a younger age profile, their use of technology is comparable to young European New Zealanders and they are making more extensive use of the Internet (Statistics New Zealand, 2007). Coleman and colleagues (2008) cautioned that a high level of usability is also important. Another potential issue is that online digital public engagement may emulate the more limited traditional deliberative democracy approaches (Wiklund, 2005) and simply function as one-off exercises that are restricted by the limited number of participants (Powell and Colin, 2008). Another issue to be considered is that younger Internet users are less politically engaged and more interested in entertainment (Coleman et al., 2008). Furthermore, as suggested above, young Maori may be less likely to be deeply set in and knowledgeable about *tikanga* Maori than elders—*kaumatua* and *kuia*—making digital engagement likely to be less culturally demanding. Online engagement approaches such as digital story telling and alternative reality gaming may serve to re-engage and empower Maori. Digital stories are personal reflections published on the Internet that make use of 'low-cost digital cameras' to create short multimedia stories (Meadows, 2003: 189). Alternative reality games are large-scale brainstorming tools that rely on technology and teamwork to solve puzzles, problems or create future scenarios and are characterised by a high level of interactivity and 'optionality' or multiple choices (McGonigal, 2006). An interesting result of large-scale alternative reality games is that participants sometimes take control of the game and decide how it will play out and what it means. Innovative approaches such as digital stories and alternative reality games have the potential to create a democratic 'cybercommons' or 'digital *marae*' that is highly usable and creates ongoing empowering opportunities for large-scale engagement processes, inspires young people and changes the way people engage through 'conversational media' (Couldry, 2008: 387). Consequently, technology may play a role in the process of engagement with indigenous people, providing them with greater control and autonomy to thus improve their participation and perception of the process.

Conclusion

The fundamental question underpinning this chapter was how to develop meaningful engagement processes that facilitate power sharing, equitable

participation and mutually beneficial outcomes forms. We have sought to offer public relations practitioners and scholars some insights into the challenges and complexities of engagement with indigenous people. Our intention was to emphasise the relational, people-oriented nature of cultural engagement and the need for genuine power sharing. To illustrate the potential of an engagement orientation we have drawn upon examples related to New Zealand Maori; in particular the concept of *whanaungatanga*. It is important to stress, however, that, although indigenous peoples share many challenges in relation to equity, the principles, protocols and practices that underpin their communication may differ substantially. Public relations practice must thus be firmly rooted in particular cultural contexts. A significant issue we identify, then, is the need to develop a culturally contextualised public relations practice. Such a practice will encompass both traditional and contemporary understandings of indigenous publics and engender culturally sensitive approaches to designing engagement processes. The collaborative, collectivist nature of indigenous publics means that engagement is neither quick nor straightforward. It requires openness to the multiple cultural principles that underpin an indigenous culture, adaptability and flexibility in the adoption of indigenous protocols and a commitment to engagement processes that genuinely inform and transform public policy and societal discourses.

Note

- 1 Jarrod Haar is Maori of Ngati Maniapoto and Ngati Mahuta descent; Judy Motion and Shirley Leitch are descended from European migrants to New Zealand.

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