Organization–public relationships: An exploration of the Sundre Petroleum Operators Group

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Abstract

This study explored the organization–public relationship (OPR) within the context of the Sundre Petroleum Operators Group (SPOG) and the local community in Sundre, Alberta, Canada. A qualitative orientation was adopted because of the case study’s focus on the individual experience of the relationship and the interest was to explore how the relationship was perceived by the people involved. Key relational elements such as trust, transparency, dialogue, control mutuality, commitment and satisfaction were examined in relation to the importance for relationship building and maintenance. In-depth interviews were conducted with both SPOG industry and community members (N = 18). The results indicated that after a crisis transparency was critical for rebuilding trust which was the foundation for the development of the industry–community relationship. Other relational elements were also considered important for maintaining healthy OPRs, but were considered secondary in relation to trust.

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1. Introduction

In the late 1990s public relations research increased its focus on the importance for organizations to build mutually beneficial relationships with their key publics, which had an impact on the organization’s license to operate. This relational perspective in public relations was initially discussed as early as 1984 by Ferguson but was not taken up seriously as a research area until a number of key academics started publishing in this area (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 2000; Bruning & Ledingham, 1999; Grunig & Huang, 2000; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Huang, 2001; Ledingham & Bruning, 2000).

Theory development and research into the area of organization–public relationships (OPRs) has continued. In 2003 Ledingham proposed the following theory of relationship management as the general theory for public relations which suggests that collaboration is necessary:

“Effectively managing organizational–public relationships around common interests and shared goals, over time, results in mutual understanding and benefit for interacting organizations and publics.” (p. 190).

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Academic interest in OPRs mirrored the need in practice for organizations to understand, listen, and develop a dialogue with their important publics so that crises originating from organizational activities were reduced. This ‘cost reduction’ perspective can be linked with the ideas of sociologist Ulrich Beck (1992, cited in L’Etang, 2007) who proposed that alongside the benefits of industrialization and globalization there were also risks created by organizational activity. Whilst organizations reap benefits from their activities there are also negative as well as positive consequences which may impact their publics and in turn could have implications for the organizations’ social license to operate. Within the relationship management perspective the negative consequences of an organization’s activity causes tension in the OPR that needs to be addressed in order for the relationship to continue.

Much of the literature and research on OPRs is from the perspective of the organization and has a corporate bias. In this perspective publics that are not supportive of the organization’s goals are viewed negatively and the organization is required to ‘win them over’ or placate them. However, if the OPR is viewed as a collaborative relationship where the parties involved participate in the decision-making processes the public involved is no longer viewed as being problematic but rather as a partner.

The relational paradigm provides an opportunity to shift the perspective away from the organization being viewed as the central point in a stakeholder map and instead focus on relationships which are considered important for maintaining the organization’s social license to operate and provide organizational legitimacy.

OPRs have been categorized into different relationship types such as exchange and communal (Clark & Mills, 1993), as well as covenantal, exploitative, and contractual (Hung, 2005). Exchange relationships rely on the relational parties to exchange benefits with each other whereas in communal relationships the relational parties have no expectation of an exchange of benefits but merely provide benefits in an altruistic fashion. An exchange relationship often breaks down because it has degraded into an exploitative relationship where one party takes advantage of the other without the reciprocal exchange of benefits. Whilst communal relationships are an ideal state their existence is doubtful. Contractual relationships are similar to legal agreements in that both parties agree on their roles and responsibilities whereas covenantal relationships are based upon collaboration and cooperation for the common good, with the ‘win–win’ outcome in mind.

2. Relational characteristics

The public relations literature on relational characteristics has highlighted and defined trust, commitment, satisfaction, control mutuality and dialogue (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Rusbult, 1983, cited in Stafford & Canary, 1991) as essential characteristics, because without them the relationship degrades. For long-term relationships, trust becomes even more important as there is a higher level of investment involved. It is only when trust has declined due to a crisis or has been eroded over time owing to perceived negative organizational behavior that transparency becomes a ‘critical’ relational characteristic as it becomes important for rebuilding trust and commitment within the OPR.

Transparency provides a number of outcomes that are beneficial for relationship building. As well as rebuilding trust, transparency can be viewed as a relational condition or variable that promotes accountability, collaboration, cooperation and commitment. When an organization’s decision-making and operational processes are transparent accountability is possible as it is clearer where responsibility lies. As organizational transparency increases the level of trust and accountability, collaboration and cooperation becomes possible as the parties involved can both trust and verify the situation (Parks & Hilbert, 1995, cited in De Cremer & Dewitte, 2002; Jahansoozi, 2006). Once levels of trust have been developed within the OPR the other relational elements such as dialogue, control mutuality, commitment and satisfaction can be developed.

Relational dialogue ensures the OPR strengthens and possibly leads to a long-term relationship as it is central for conflict resolution. Kent and Taylor (2002) clarify the concept of dialogue in public relations and describe it as “one of the most ethical forms of communication and as one of the central means of separating truth from falsehood” (p. 22) and is applicable for building and maintaining relationships.

Control mutuality was defined by Stafford and Canary (1991, p. 224) as: “the degree to which partners agree about which of them should decide relational goals and behavioral routines”. Ideally relational parties should feel they have the ability to influence each other, otherwise the relationship breaks down. Research on relational commitment indicated it was positively associated with satisfaction and long-term investment in the relationship (Rusbult, 1983, cited in Stafford & Canary, 1991, p. 224). High levels of commitment are explained by the relational parties having a sense of satisfaction with the relationship and that it is worth investing in because of the cost–benefit analysis.
Research in this area has mostly focused on quantitative approaches for analyzing OPRs and this paper attempts to contribute by taking a qualitative approach which explores how an OPR is perceived by those participating in it. Whilst previous quantitative research has identified relational characteristics a rich understanding of what these characteristics actually mean for those involved in the relationship has been missing. The qualitative approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the actual relationship and the dynamics involved.

3. The case: Sundre Petroleum Operators Group

This research focused on an industry–community relationship that developed out of a serious crisis and resulted in a relatively structured organization that strives to resolve issues between the petroleum industry and the local community. Society’s changing expectations meant there was a demand that the petroleum industry behave responsibly, especially toward vulnerable groups. Milton Friedman’s stance that “there is one and only one social responsibility of business—to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits” (Friedman, 1993, p. 254, cited in Somerville, 2001, p. 112) no longer resonated with society’s expectations. This gap between business and society caused increased dissatisfaction and a crisis for the petroleum operators in the Sundre region of Alberta, Canada. The Sundre Petroleum Operators Group (SPOG) was set up in 1992 by a number of oil and gas operators and in late 1997 its membership changed to include community members. Shell Canada was partly responsible for driving the change for the inclusion of community members in SPOG as it had learned about the critical importance of including key publics in the decision-making process from previous crises (Nigeria and Brent Spar in particular) in other parts of the Shell group of companies.

Rebuilding trust requires transparency as publics need ‘evidence’ that the organization is doing what it claims to be. Fig. 1 illustrates that as trust decreases the need for transparency increases and along with the publics’ demand for engagement. Shell learned from its previous crises and shared its ‘engagement’ perspective across the Shell Group, including its operations in Alberta, and with other operators it collaborates with. SPOG is an example of how relationships could be developed within a community that has experienced a ‘litany of unhappiness’ connected with the oil and gas industry that spanned over 50 years.

4. Method

A qualitative case study approach utilizing in-depth interviews was adopted as the perspectives the industry and community members had of the actual relationship were the main interest. The qualitative orientation allowed the focus to be on the actual experiences of the relationship with the purpose of gaining a greater depth of information regarding the interviewees’ personal assessment of the relationship.

Eighteen in-depth interviews were conducted with a mix of industry \(N=6\) and community members \(N=12\). Interviews lasted between 45 min and 3 h depending upon the participant’s amount of experience and involvement with SPOG. Participants were asked a series of open-ended questions and were encouraged to focus on what they perceived to be important regarding the relationship between SPOG industry and community members. The main content of the interviews focused on what the participants perceived regarding critical relational characteristics such as trust, transparency, satisfaction, commitment, control mutuality and dialogue with regard to SPOG and the oil and gas industry members, and their relationship with the community. Limitations to the research included the number of interviews conducted (18) as not all interviewees were available during the data collection timeframe.
5. Results

Participants provided their personal perspectives regarding the OPR and provided many anecdotal examples that highlighted their experience of the relational elements as well as their version of SPOG’s background context in which the relationship was developed and currently exists. The interviews were analyzed for key themes relating to the relational characteristics as well as the background context that served as a catalyst for transforming SPOG into a vehicle for facilitating the relationship between the industry and community.

6. Findings and analysis

6.1. The background context for the industry–community relationship

The background context was important for the development of the SPOG industry–community relationship. Rural Alberta in the 1950s struggled to survive and had welcomed the oil industry as it ‘helped out’ by paying for land access to the jack pumps, pipelines, and other production equipment and facilities. The industry took advantage of the ‘difficult times’ farmers were experiencing and to a certain extent both parties benefited from the transaction relationship. Farmers needed the extra money just to keep afloat and industry needed access to extract the oil and gas and move it across private land. It was a typical example of industrialization and globalization interests versus agrarian communities. The ‘gold rush’ mentality saw the exploitation of natural resources:

“Basically when it started years ago there were no regulations, nobody knew what it [sour gas] did, how it affected people or er or anything about it, and it was such fast growing industry and there was so much money involved in it that the people involved in the industry really were there to make money you know, and the farmers then I believe were not educated a lot er and so anyway and so they could be bought off...” (Community Member).

As agriculture became more established and property prices in the Sundre area increased the rural fabric changed and community expectations evolved. Farmers felt that the oil industry was not as helpful for their economic health and levels of discontent grew. The industry became viewed as being a hindrance as it got in the way of farming activities and was an inconvenience for the community. The backlog of complaints, frustration and general dissatisfaction with the oil and gas industry activity were ignored which created a level of distrust.

"...We didn’t listen very well to rural Alberta. We said ‘look, this industry is a big industry, look at the wealth we’re spinning off for Alberta’. Everybody should love us, it’s all about money. Well, bad assumption.” (Industry Member).

The region was transformed as farmers sold off pieces of their land in order to survive during the years of drought and hardship, which led to the rise of the ‘acreages’ which were bought up by professionals wanting the solitude of the countryside. However as the petroleum activity continued to grow and became increasingly more intrusive the community became unhappy with the relationship it had with the industry.

Over time the level of trust was eroded and activities that were once acceptable were no longer tolerated. The Sundre community was angry, sabotage incidents occurred, and an oilman, Patrick Kent, was shot dead in 1998 (Nikiforuk, 1999). An industry member reflected on this build up of discontent:

“...I think some organizations get so overwhelmed with complaints that they don’t necessarily have a way to deal with them, so they just get ignored and those little fires become bigger fires and become huge issues ... and you know there’s an example, out here we had a farmer kill a president of an oil company...” (Industry Member).

Change was forced upon the petroleum operators when Shell Canada had a public pre-hearing with the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board (EUB) regarding its proposal for an increase in the gas throughput at the Shell Caroline Gas Complex. The community expressed a ‘litany of unhappiness’ relating to Shell and a number of the other operators in the area. The EUB recommendation from the pre-hearing was for another hearing regarding the increase in gas throughput at the Shell Caroline Complex and that all the other issues were to be handled through an Interrogatory Process. A communication consultant, George Cuthbert, interviewed the community and produced a report that was a ‘difficult read’ for the industry who thought they had been communicating effectively with the community but clearly had not recognized the community’s need to have an input in the developments that had a direct
impact on their lives. A company representative reflected on her performance and lack of two-way symmetrical communication:

“I sat alone in my office dreaming up all sorts of wonderful communication techniques that obviously weren’t meeting the need of the community because it was all one way. . . . that report was really tough reading because it said things in there that like you know, Alice Murray does a really bad job. . . .” (Industry Member).

6.2. Building the industry–community relationship

After the Interrogatory Process the SPOG Chairman and Shell Manager, Keith Eslinger, was keen to improve the relationship between industry and the community. Keith had described that in the community’s eyes the petroleum industry was considered to be “lower than a snake’s belly” and that the situation had to improve. There was an awareness that whilst ‘the government grants permits . . . the community gives permission’. Dave Brown, an active community member, was forming a community issues group and at this point Keith and Dave met to discuss the future relationship and possible collaboration. Keith suggested that instead of an issues group forming that the community should instead join SPOG.

“. . . if we form two separate groups we’re going to live in the past . . . so why don’t we both go to the EUB, we’re prepared to change SPOG from just an industry group to one that brings the community in to help us forge the future. . . .” (Industry Member).

Dave Brown agreed with Keith’s point that if the community had its own separate issues group the relationship would continue to be an adversarial instead of a collaborative one, and the industry would continue to view the community as problematic opponents. By agreeing to collaborate together the petroleum operators and the local community could start cooperating and have a participative role in the decision-making and conflict resolution processes. This fundamental change was key to the development of this OPR and creating a collaborative environment.

Whilst SPOG’s membership changed to include community members the name was not changed and this decision caused problems concerning SPOG’s identity as some community members mentioned there was an external perception SPOG was an industry driven group instead of an industry–community group:

“. . . the biggest problem is that they continued to call it Sundre Petroleum Operators Group and that really creates a lot of problems. A lot of people [are] still saying it is industry run and er if you heard me at one of the meetings a month or so ago you’d have found out that it isn’t, I made damn sure! But we went in and the name remained the same and we continued that way and it probably one of the things that sparks off all the time.” (Community Member).

The industry members considered changing SPOG’s name, but at that point SPOG had already existed for 5 years and was a ‘known quantity with the EUB and industry’, however the lack of acknowledging the community in the name indicated a lack of accommodation and created an external perception that the community was not integral for the OPRs existence but was only an add-on.

The immediate communication deficit between the industry and the community was addressed by having communication and relationship building training for all industry and community members. Communication training sessions based on Stephen Covey’s work (2004) The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, which had inspired Shell’s Keith Eslinger, were organized and paid for by the industry. By ensuring all the industry–community members participated in the training it not only served to break down the division between the industry and community members by getting them to know each other more personally, it also enabled them to interact and collaborate by creating a new vision and jointly determining how the relationship would be managed.

“. . . it was a miracle . . . we had a facilitator and he took us through the process of creating a vision and talking about all of this stuff that happened over the last 50 years [that] there’s not a thing we can do about it but we can sure change how we can move forward . . . what can we do next? What would a perfect future look like? How would you like that to be?” (Industry Member).

Whilst developing the ‘vision of change’ the industry and community members created a shared system of meaning which used ‘Covey’ language and reinforced desirable attitudes (trust, honesty and respect), translating them into
behavior. It was evident that the SPOG industry–community members were proud of the vision they had developed as it encapsulated what they thought was important for the relationship to prosper: “A long-term relationship, based on mutual trust, honesty, and respect, by way of sharing pertinent information and resolving issues to benefit all stakeholders” (Sundre Petroleum Operators Group, 2007). SPOG’s vision was highly visible and appeared on most of its publications, website, on its office walls, name cards for meetings, and was considered central for everything connected to the OPR. The visibility of the vision was deliberate as it served to remind members of the OPR’s purpose as well as to reinforce how industry and community members should behave towards each other.

The Covey training appeared to help provide industry and community members with the tools to work together, engage in dialogue, share common values, and provided an approach for resolving conflict.

“The training I think has been crucial to er SPOG’s success. The er truth is that they don’t just talk about listening, they actually listen and they gather information and they will try to look for look er for ways that create, and I hate to use the cliché, ‘win–win’ situation. And er the business of NIMBY, the not in my backyard syndrome, is not really the driver of people that are in SPOG, it’s how do we accommodate, how do we make it a successful relationship.” (Community Member).

SPOG continued to provide Covey’s ‘Seven Habits’ workshops and communication training annually so that new community and industry members could develop relationship building skills and reinforce the OPR.

6.3. Relational elements

The interviewees reflected on the importance of trust, transparency, dialogue, commitment, satisfaction and control mutuality for maintaining the relationship. Trust was considered to be critical for the OPR’s existence and was developed in conjunction with transparency because of the crisis situation that led to the EUB Interrogatory Process. The community saw that the processes for conflict resolution, collaboration and the participative approach to decision-making worked, and developed confidence in the OPR:

“...the feeling of respect, reassurance and calmness and whatever so er that when a problem comes up people don’t go into explosive mode, they’re more willing to say ‘ok, we had better meet and address this’ ... people imitate other peoples’ behaviour and they see that when you have a problem with a company what you do is phone SPOG...” (Community Member).

The SPOG industry members believed that trust could only be built up over time by numerous small actions that showed industry was ‘keeping its word’ and it was explained that gaining trust was really to do with having an understanding of the minor industry related operational activities that upset the community and then trying to avoid either performing those activities or limiting them as much as possible.

For some community members simply having the SPOG community affairs and new development meetings helped to build trust as people were informed of the industry activity in their community and they were able to sit together and resolve potential issues:

“...90% [of the time spent in meetings] is building trust and I think it’s 10% having a process...” (Community Member).

The meetings were essential for building trust as the face-to-face communication and interaction provided by interpersonal communication was considered important. By having industry and community members meet together there was the possibility that the actual problems could be identified and resolved instead of treating the surface ‘symptoms’.

Transparency helped to rebuild trust in the OPR as it enabled industry members to show the community that they were indeed ‘walking the talk’. Organizational transparency was also very important for industry employees in order for them to trust that their own company was being truthful and to have the ‘complete picture’ so that they had credibility when working with community members.

Industry members felt transparency was critical so it was clear that there were no secrets, no hidden agendas, and that all the SPOG processes including information sharing, complaints, new developments, and community affairs were transparent and easily accessible. The community was aware that if anyone wanted to know something they could find the pertinent information by requesting it or going to the SPOG website. Meetings were open to the public and were promoted well in advance to encourage community participation.
Dialogue was considered central for the OPR as a key part of the conflict resolution process. Through SPOG the industry, community and also the EUB were able to meet together at the same time and discuss issues, learn about new regulatory demands, and also share ‘best practice’ whilst also changing industry practice that was not meeting community expectations. Building the OPR relied heavily on interpersonal communication. Interviewees referred to the importance of ‘kitchen table talking’ and ‘kitchen table conversations’, implying that the relationship had to be physically close and that ‘face-to-face’ or ‘eyeball-to-eyeball’ communication was critical. By having this intimacy it was possible to break down the stereotypes by having industry and community members interact and relate at a personal level, instead of at the formal ‘role’ level which aided negotiation.

Whilst control mutuality was not a term the interviewees used it was indirectly referred to as the ability to influence decision-making, having a ‘real’ input into the SPOG processes and new developments. Dan Singleton, editor of the local newspaper The Sundre Round-Up mentioned community members were registered as SPOG ‘Associate Members’ which he perceived to be a key difference indicating an unequal partnership. However, on this point the community members were clear that they did not see this as an issue as they were able to participate fully in the decision-making and the only difference mentioned was that industry paid the bills, which was appreciated as being ‘fair’ as it was perceived that industry caused the problems in the first place. Externally though there was the perception that because industry financed the OPRs activities it was also in control which impacted the perceived power balance.

Industry members emphasized that whilst power was collaborative it was not necessarily equal and it was essential for both parties in the OPR to have the ability to influence each other. Industry members thought the community had a lot of influence on their operational developments and activities and that this was important otherwise it would be ‘debilitating’. However, whilst the community members agreed that they had a level of influence there was the perception that the industry members had more power regarding the outcome: “...industry is definitely in the driver’s seat” (Community Member). This could partly be explained by the community’s perception that the EUB approved developments that exploited resources and generated revenue ‘in the interest of all Albertans’ as long as the regulatory requirements were met.

The interviewees emphasized that there was a high level of commitment for maintaining the OPR in the long-term. Industry members recognized the benefits of having the relationship and mentioned it would be “business suicide” to terminate it. The only possibility of ending the relationship would be when the petroleum reserves were gone in approximately 50 years. Community members also described that having the OPR was the only way to conduct business. It was clear that industry members realized that in order to maintain their social license to operate they needed the support of the community. The community members also expressed a high level of commitment and a willingness to volunteer many hours by participating in the OPR processes and collaborative projects. Both industry and community members were keen not to relieve the hostility and the levels of conflict that pre-dated the development of SPOG as an industry–community group.

The SPOG community members indicated a high level of satisfaction for how the industry–community relationship had evolved and were relieved that the fighting had stopped:

“It has been really fantastic to change from fighting. I’ve been at meetings where I’ve seen great big grown ranchers come to meetings and cry because they think that sour gas well is going to kill their families and cattle, and we don’t really have that anymore.” (Community Member).

According to Dan Singleton, Editor Journalist for the Sundre Round-Up, the best evidence of community satisfaction with the SPOG industry–community relationship was simply that it was still ‘going strong’. Whereas for Keith Eslinger it was the personal satisfaction that he derived from the OPR: “…if you write anything on my tombstone this is what I’m most proud of. This is what is important in my life...” (Industry Member).

The industry financially benefited from the reduction in the number of EUB hearings in the SPOG area which created savings in legal fees and production delays. SPOG industry members were positively distinguished from petroleum operators that were not SPOG members by the community, which was considered a competitive advantage.

7. Conclusion

SPOG was considered to be a success by those involved in the OPR as well as by the EUB and has supported the development of other community groups throughout Alberta. SPOG was viewed as being a ‘real’ synergy group because
it included both industry and community members, whereas some other groups only had community membership and were more akin to activist groups.

With the increase in population growth in the Sundre area the pressures continue and there is a need for new residents to be informed regarding SPOG’s role in developing and maintaining the industry–community relationship. SPOG will need to keep developing and educating new community members in order to keep the momentum going, especially as some of the community members start to ‘retire’ from their active roles, such as chairing committees, participating in the decision-making process and volunteering. On-going work with petroleum operators new to the SPOG region will also be required in order to ‘educate’ them regarding the community expectations otherwise the reputation of the SPOG industry members could be damaged by non-SPOG industry members and strain the relationship.

The approach adopted by the oil and gas industry and the community in the Sundre region has developed a long-term relationship. SPOG’s vision and goals were developed collaboratively and were heavily influenced by the work of Stephen Covey, meaning the approach to conflict resolution was ‘win–win’ where possible. A direct outcome and benefit of this relational approach has been the reduction in EUB hearings which provided industry with significant savings and improved community relations as families were no longer ‘torn apart’ during the hearing process which previously was acrimonious. This long-term approach to relationship building supported Ledingham’s (2003, p. 190) theory of relationship management which emphasized that by managing relationships around “common interests and shared goals” the relational parties benefited.

Transparency was identified as a critical condition for developing trust as community members could readily see that industry responded to their concerns with seriousness and commitment. Transparency enabled both collaboration and cooperation between the industry and the community which supported previous research (Parks and Hilbert, 1995, cited in De Cremer & Dewitte, 2002). It was because information was readily available for the community to access and opportunities for a dialogue with the industry existed that levels of trust, commitment and satisfaction increased whilst there was a decrease in the community’s level of frustration. This supported Frombrun and Rindova’s proposal that as information availability increased there was also an increase in trust and credibility and a decrease in the alienation of strategic publics (2000, cited in Christensen, 2002, p. 265). Other relational elements were considered important but it was clear that trust was of critical importance and thus transparency was viewed as an enabler for developing trust and the OPR.

The OPR researched was an example of an exchange relationship which degraded into an exploitative relationship and led to a crisis. In rebuilding the relationship it developed into a covenantal/win–win relationship as the industry and community members realized that they needed to engage with each other in order for both to benefit with win–win outcomes. Both the SPOG industry and community members realized that they needed to engage with each other in order for both to benefit with win–win outcomes. Both the SPOG industry and community members are interdependent within the OPR and the participative approach ensured the community felt it could influence the decision-making process. SPOG industry members thought the community’s concerns were not motivated by the ‘not in my backyard’ (NIMBY) syndrome but rather their motives were concerned more with environmental preservation for future generations.

An interesting and unexpected finding in the research was the impact and enduring influence of Covey’s (2004) *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. Covey’s language was integrated into SPOG and both industry and community members referenced it. By integrating Covey’s language SPOG’s industry and community members created a shared system of meaning which supported their collaborative approach to finding ‘win–win’ outcomes. The Covey training also provided a framework for both industry and community members to use when resolving conflict, which aligns with having a covenantal relationship instead of an exchange or exploitative one. Whilst there is research on management gurus (Jackson, 2001) there has been little research into how management fashions such as Covey’s effectiveness approach are actually consumed and implemented in practice. Further research exploring the influence of management gurus and management fashions adopted or promoted by senior management involved in OPRs could illuminate how these approaches translate into practice and impact an organization’s external relationships.

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