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Emotional Leadership as a Key Dimension of Public Relations Leadership: A National Survey of Public Relations Leaders

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Based on the emotional leadership theory, this study used a national survey of public relations leaders to examine the core emotional traits and skills for effective public relations leadership. Transformational leadership was preferred by public relations leaders, in which empathy played an essential role. Transformational leadership and empathy were found to be significant predictors of public relations leaders' competency in gaining employees' trust, managing employees' frustration and optimism, as well as taking stances toward employees and top management in decision-making conflicts. By identifying emotional leadership as an essential dimension of public relations leadership, the findings advance the understanding of how emotional skills can enhance public relations managers' employee and top management communications in decision-making conflicts.

How to have stronger public relations leadership is an essential agenda item for researchers and practitioners. Berger and Reber (2006) found that to "strengthen leadership skills in the profession" is one of the most important public relations issues, and "stronger PR leadership" emerged as the most needed public relations resources (p. 6). One of the most important leadership skills, yet the least studied one in public relations literature, is the role

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of emotion in public relations management and leadership. As Dasborough and Ashkanasy (2002) posited, leadership is intrinsically an emotional process, where leaders display emotion and attempt to evoke emotion in their members, which echoed the call from Moss and Green (2001) for "challenge to the rational model of management" (p. 124).

Humphrey (2002) called for more research on emotional leadership linking emotions to conflict and coping, as conflict has always been seen as an emotionally arousing process that can lead to feelings of hostility (Fox & Spector, 1999), and is a very stressful process for both leaders and followers (Humphrey, 2002). Gayle and Preiss (1998) found organizational conflict interactions have emotional consequences for supervisors, subordinates, and coworkers, the degree of which has the potential to damage organizational relationships and the productivity. Effective leaders must find constructive ways of reacting to the emotionality of organizational colleagues and understand the nature and process of conflict management styles and strategies, including identifying the emotional and cognitive antecedents of rational conflicts in the workplace (Gayle & Preiss, 1998).

Although the importance of emotions has attracted more and more spotlights in research and practitioners' discussions, "to date the PR professional has lacked a workable framework around which the importance of emotions can be understood and subsequently used to aid the planning and delivery of public relations programmes" (Read, 2007, p. 332). The function and contribution of emotions at public relations workplace remain largely unknown: Are emotions something to avoid? Or should practitioners strategically engage in emotion-laden communications so as to maximize the work effectiveness and efficiency? Should public relations managers demonstrate their humane side or should they remain largely *cool*? To answer these questions, I examined the role of emotion in public relations leadership via a mail survey of a random sample of public relations practitioners currently in leadership positions across the United States. The findings highlight the importance of empathy as the core emotional trait of public relations leadership and how it is associated with leadership competence in handling decision-making conflicts with employees and top management.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

PR Leadership Styles

As Bass (1997) pointed out, there have been hundreds of studies and many approaches and theories of leadership in the past half century, which is a

dynamic evolutionary progress over time as a result of changing culture, improved research methods, and other factors. Northouse (2007) broadly defined leadership as "a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (p. 3), which emphasizes the interactive and transactional nature of leadership and reflects the importance of influence. Northhouse (2007) also pointed out the paradigm shift in leadership research during the late 1970s and the early 1980s, which observed the advent of charismatic and transformational leadership approaches. The transformational leadership approach is concerned with emotions, values, ethics, and long-term relationships, as well as followers' motives, needs, and satisfaction (Bass, 1985), as Meng (2009) summarized.

Transformational and transactional leadership are the two main leadership styles identified and examined by public relations researchers. According to Aldoory and Toth (2004), transformational leadership recognizes the necessity to change self-interests into group need and key function of building good rapport with employees; it also emphasizes that an effective leader in public relations should enhance others' self-worth, create personal connections with employees and others, and share the decision-making power. Therefore, participative management is the preferred practice to transformational public relations leaders. In contrast, according to Aldoory and Toth (2004), transactional leaders believed that one cannot be emotionally involved and also be an effective leader; being in control at all times is the most important criterion for a good leader; and offering rewards for good work is the only way someone can be a good leader. Aldoory and Toth (2004) found a strong preference among public relations professionals for transformational leadership style over transactional leadership, as well as strong evidence for a preference for situational leadership. More recently, in a survey of Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) members, Werder and Holtzhausen (2007) found the presence of two primary leadership styles in public relations environments: (a) transformational leadership style, related to the use of facilitative and power strategies, and effectiveness of persuasive and cooperative problem solving strategies; and (b) inclusive leadership style, related to facilitative, cooperative problem solving and power strategies, and effectiveness of informative and facilitative strategies.

Further, Aldoory and Toth (2004) summarized that effective leaders change their style to fit the situation and, therefore, may sometimes choose an autocratic style and sometimes a participatory style, depending on the circumstances and the environments. J. Grunig et al. (1992) suggested a situational leadership style is most effective when leaders combine control with empowerment. Northouse (2007) also advocated that leadership is composed of "a directive and a supportive dimension, and each has to be applied appropriately in a given situation" (p. 91). Given the nature of

complexity in public relations practice and the fact that public relations practitioners usually serve not as the final decision maker but more as the top management consultancy, decision-making conflicts are ubiquitous in the daily work environment of public relations managers. As McWhinney (1997) advocated, transformational leadership is accepted and most appropriate during great upheaval or turmoil as in during crises when most people are confused and uncertain about what to do, where the leaders need to set challenging goals in midst of crisis as an imperative for them to convince the members that the goals are obtainable (Humphrey, 2002). Therefore,

H1: Transformational PR Leadership will be preferred by public relations leaders.

According to Cameron and his colleagues' (Cameron, Pang, & Jin, 2007; Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997) contingency theory of strategic conflict management, individual characteristics, and organization's characteristics, as well as public relations department characteristics, are key internal factors that contribute to the stance movements of a public relations practitioner's dealing with publics, internally and externally. Moss and Green (2001) pointed out that leadership style is internally contingent upon function, level, organization (type, structure, and size), and environment such as the "expectations of the role of the PR function" (p. 130). Recent research reported the influence of different organizational settings and cultural contexts on public relations practitioners' managerial role. For example, Moss, Newman and DeSanto (2005) identified five key dimensions of the communication manager's role in the United Kingdom: monitor and evaluator, issue management expert, key policy and strategy advisor, trouble-shooter problem-solver, and communication technician. The researchers argued that the retention of the communication technician role might well reflect "the relatively small size of the communication departments found increasingly in organizations today" (p. 885). When it comes to the US context, DeSanto, Moss, and Newman (2007) found a very strong three-dimensional managerial role (i.e., key policy advice and strategic counsel, monitoring and evaluating, and issue management), which suggests that the practitioners in the United States tend to be more strategically oriented. Other influencing factors identified in previous research include gender of practitioners, length of professional experience, tenure with an employer, previous education, and the size of the public relations function/department (Moss & Green, 2001). Therefore,

RQ1: How is PR leadership style preference associated with public relations leaders' demographics and organizational characteristics?

Empathy as the Core Emotional Trait of PR Leadership

In the managerial leadership theories overview, Meng (2009) identified the trait approach as one of the predominant leadership frameworks. It focuses on identifying personal attributes or superior qualities that are essential to effective leadership (Meng, 2009). Research on leadership traits and skills has its roots in the first half of the 20th century, which identified significant correlations between traits of individual leaders and their success (Stogdill, 1948, 1974). Bass (1985) suggested the involvement of emotions and values in the leadership transforming processes. Yeomans (2007) highlighted the role of emotions in rational decision-making and the fact that "[e]motion and emotion management skills tacitly accompany the many activities performed by a public relations executive in delivering a personal service to journalist and clients" (p. 217). Leaders need different emotional leadership skills to guide the organizational members around obstacles and onto the path that leads to success (Humphrey, 2002). Among the five dimensions of leadership (i.e., self-dynamics, ethical orientation, relationship building, strategic decision making, and communication knowledge management) identified by Meng (2009), the emotional aspect of excellent public relations leadership is implied in the self-dynamics dimension, which is closely related to public relation leaders' self-insight, shared vision, and team collaboration (Meng, 2009).

Empathy has been identified as the most important emotion for transformational leadership (Salovey & Mayer, 1990), which is defined as the ability to comprehend another's feelings and to reexperience them oneself. The empathic bond allows leaders to guide emotional responses of their followers and enhance the emotional consistence between leaders and followers (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Mayer and Salovey (1997) and Salovey and Mayer (1990) suggested that a leader should have the basic ability to perceive one's own and others' emotions, and manage one's own and others' emotions. Thus, strong emotional self-management usually includes the ability to recognize emotion in others compared to just being better at creating and expressing emotions.

In developing an Emotional Competence Inventory, Boyatzis (2001) included seven items measuring empathy, such as identifying others' strengths and limitations, accurately reading people's moods, feelings or nonverbal cues, giving others opportunity to speak their mind, accurately assessing the underlying or root causes of a person's problems, paying attention and listening well, showing sensitivity and understanding, as well as asking questions to be sure he/she understands another person. As Humphrey (2002) advocated, transformational leadership demands strong emotional management skills to influence and manage the emotions of employees. Therefore,

RQ2.1: How is PR leaders' empathy associated with transformational PR leadership?

Effectiveness of Emotional Leadership

As an important trait for leaders who manage with emotion and excellent predictor of leadership emergence, empathy enables both task and relationship-oriented skills (Kellett, Humphrey, & Sleeth, 2002). In the context of the daily practice of public relations managers, this study examined the effectiveness of emotional leadership in managing both employee and top management communications.

Managing frustration and optimism. Zorn (2002) mentioned that organizational members express emotions to achieve personal and organizational goals, which may reflect and confirm organizational norms, convey dissent or dysfunction, and signal personal engagement or disengagement in tasks at work. Therefore, an effective public relations leader with higher emotional competence should be more competent and comfortable in dealing with emotionality in the workplace and impact on the overall affective tone of their employees. From emotional leadership's perspective, Humphrey (2002) suggested a leader with transformational leadership style had the ability to influence followers' emotional states (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Tichy & Devanna, 1986; Yammarino, Spangler, & Bass, 1993).

Kelly and Barsade (2001) suggested that leaders need to develop an interpretation of the emotional response that matches the group's needs and convey the response using appropriate emotions. Leaders also need to motivate group members by creating shared emotional experience (Kelly & Barsade, 2001). Optimism and frustration were identified as two key emotions leaders need to address among employees (Kelly & Barsade, 2001), the constructs of which are essential to the measurement of transformational leadership (McColl-Kennedy & Anderson, 2002). Clutterbuck and Hirst (2002) highlighted the importance of the management of meaning by communicating clearly about emotion, trust, hope and optimism. Therefore,

RQ2.2: How is PR leaders' empathy associated with their management of employees' frustration and optimism expressed in the workplace?

Trust in leaders. Ni (2007) posited trust as one of the key outcomes of employee–organization relationships; leadership trust was identified as one of the key transformational leadership consequences (McColl-Kennedy & Anderson, 2002; Podsakoff, Mackenzie, Moorman, & Fetter, 1990). Allert and Chatterjee (1997) argued that the building of trust "comes initially through the leaders' ability to communicate in such a manner that enhances

trust in interpersonal relationships, team building and organizational culture" (p. 14); however, "communication is often overlooked as an effective trust-builder at the leadership level because its application by many of these communicators is often poorly executed" (p. 15).

According to Clutterbuck and Hirst (2002), leaders must learn to encourage and manage constructive dissent via effective management of meaning and trust. White and Verčič (2001) posited public relations decision makers face uncertainty as to how to proceed to deal with multiple and possibly conflicting objectives among a number of respondents in the decision-making process. This dynamic and turbulent environment implies the imperative for public relations leaders to develop the emotional glue that binds followers and leaders together toward high "perceived leadership quality" among employees (Clutterbuck & Hirst, 2002, p. 354). Therefore,

RQ2.3: How is PR leaders' empathy associated with perceived employee trust in leader?

Stances in decision making conflicts. White and Verčič (2001) listed a few sources of conflicts in the workplace that challenge the leadership of public relations managers such as incomplete information, possibly conflicting objectives, and multiple participants in the decision-making process. According to Moss and Green (2001), making communication policy decisions, counseling managing, supervising the work of others, acting as a catalyst for management decisions were four of the 10 key aspects for public relations manager to demonstrate their manager's role and leadership. Although "[t]echnician's roles tend to prevail in non-threatening and static environments," managerial role is "more likely when organizations face more dynamic and threatening environments" (Moss & Green, 2001, p. 121). They further pointed out that classical management model suggested the image of managers as rational analytical planners, decision makers and issuers of commands, although they should learn how to "trade, bargain and compromise" (p. 126) when dealing with uncertainty and the multiplicity of "often conflicting interests and purposes that often constrain management behavior" (p. 126), which is a process of "incessant negotiating, guessing, manipulating and speculating" (p. 126).

One key measure of conflict management is stance, which is the central concept of the contingency theory of strategic conflict management. Cancel et al. (1997) posited stance as the willingness to make accommodation toward a given public at a given situation, along a continuum anchored with pure accommodation to pure advocacy. Jin and Cameron (2006) developed and tested a scale measuring practitioners' stances in conflicts as degree of accommodation, enacted by two clusters of stances: action-based

accommodation and qualified-rhetoric-mixed accommodation. The concept and measurement of stances can be applied to both external and internal communication management processes. For public relations managers, the daily management function tends to be two-fold: On one hand, they need to manage their staff and communicate with the employees about the group tasks and connect them with missions and rapport; on the other hand, public relations managers report to the top management, and make recommendations on decisions. Both demand appropriate handling of emotions, constant negotiation, and strategic positioning to accomplish tasks and improve relationships. Therefore,

> *RQ2.4*: How is PR leaders' empathy related to PR leaders' stances toward employees and top management in decision-making conflicts?

The Joint Role of Leadership Style and Empathy on Leadership Competence

Public relations manager demographics (Moss & Green, 2001) and organizational characteristics (DeSanto et al., 2007; Moss & Green, 2001; Moss et al., 2005) were found to have direct impact on public relations leadership. Focusing on the essential role of empathy, as well as the impact of leadership style on communication management competence, this study further examined how the effectiveness of public relations leadership as demonstrated by emotional skills, employee trust, conflict stances might be predicted based on the joint contribution of public relations leadership style and empathy, even after the direct impact of public relations leaders' demographics and organizational characteristics are taken into consideration. Therefore,

> *RQ3*: How will PR leadership style and empathy together predict PR leaders' frustration and optimism management and perceived employee trust in leader, as well as their conflict stances, after controlling out demographics and organizational characteristics?

METHOD

Survey

A total of 1,970 printed questionnaires were mailed to a systematic random sample of public relations professionals in leadership positions, as indicated by their titles, representing different types of organizations such as corporation, PR agency, nonprofit, education, advocacy groups, and government, listed on *The Press & Publications Handbook 2006*, published by *PRWeek*. A total of 124 usable questionnaires were returned, for a response rate of 6.3%.

Wimmer and Dominick (2006) indicated that, in more than 20 years of communication survey research, their response rate for mail surveys averaged 1% to 4%. Thus, the response rate is acceptable for a random-sample based mail survey with no reminders or follow-ups.

Measures

The survey consisted of questions measuring five sets of key variables, using 7-point Likert-type scales (see Table 1). Ten demographic and organizational characteristic questions were asked. One question asking the PR leaders' frequency of being involved in the organization's decision- and policy making process (1 = *never* and 7 = *always*) was included.

Leadership style was measured using the 10 leadership style items from the Leadership Preference Index developed by Aldoory and Toth (2004), asking respondents to indicate their agreement with each leadership statement based on their own experience in public relations practice (1 = *strongly disagree* and 7 = *strongly agree*). Two leadership style indexes were created: transactional leadership (alpha = .50; $M = 3.01$, $SD = 1.15$) and transformational leadership (alpha = .76; $M = 5.53$, $SD = .82$). The other leadership statements (Aldoory & Toth, 2004), "Males or females can be equally capable leaders," "Women makes better leaders than men," and "I consider myself a leader in public relations," were also measured.

Empathy items from Boyatzis (2001)'s Emotional Competence Inventory was measured by asking respondents to indicate how characteristic each of the seven items (Boyatzis, 2001) is regarding their own leadership style, where 1 = *slightly characteristic* and 7 = *very characteristic* (alpha = .71; $M = 5.69$, $SD = .63$).

PR leaders' *employee emotion management*, demonstrated as their emotional competence in dealing with frustration and optimism among employees (McColl-Kennedy & Anderson, 2002) were adapted and measured by asking respondents how often they deal with three items of frustration construct (alpha = .90; $M = 4.14$, $SD = 1.41$) and three items of optimism construct (alpha = .91; $M = 5.47$, $SD = .98$) experienced by the employees, where 1 = *never* and 7 = *always*.

Trust in leader was measured by asking respondents to indicate the likelihood of their employees' feeling "quite confident that as a leader I will always try to treat them fairly" derived from the item used by Podsakoff et al. (1990) when asking employees to indicate whether "I feel quite confident that my leader will always try to treat me fairly" (Podsakoff et al., 1990, p. 115), where 1 = *very unlikely* and 7 = *very likely*.

PR leaders' stance in conflict situations with employees and the top management was measured by asking the respondents to indicate their

TABLE 1
Descriptive Statistics of Dependent Measures

Dependent measures	*M*	*SD*
Leadership Preference Index (Aldoory & Toth, 2004)		
1. You cannot be emotionally involved and also be an effective leader.	2.81	1.66
2. The most important criterion for a good leader is being in control at all times.	3.56	1.81
3. Offering rewards for good work is the only way someone can be a good leader today.	2.65	1.39
4. Good leaders need to change self-interests into group need.	4.73	1.45
5. Today's leaders in PR need to challenge traditional way of doing things.	5.60	1.29
6. Effective leaders know that good rapport with employees is key.	6.06	1.11
7. An effective leader in PR enhances others' self-worth.	5.37	1.39
8. Leadership is about creating personal connections with employees and others.	5.85	1.23
9. The best leaders are those that share the decision-making power.	5.55	1.30
10. I prefer leaders who practice participative management.	5.58	1.12
Empathy (Boyatzis, 2001)		
1. Identifies others' strengths and limitations.	5.64	1.09
2. Accurately reads people's moods, feelings or nonverbal cues.	5.44	1.04
3. Gives others opportunity to speak their mind.	6.05	1.05
4. Accurately assesses the underlying or root causes of a person's problems.	5.05	1.01
5. Pays attention and listens well.	5.85	1.03
6. Shows sensitivity and understanding.	5.81	1.05
7. Asks questions to be sure he/she understands another person.	5.93	1.08
Frustration and optimism management at workplace (McColl-Kennedy & Anderson, 2002)		
1. Frustration		
• Frustration experienced in the organization	4.36	1.48
• Tenseness experienced in the organization	4.14	1.59
• Irritation experienced in the organization	3.93	1.57
2. Optimism		
• Optimism experienced in the organization	5.41	1.07
• Enthusiasm experienced in the organization	5.52	1.05
• Excitement experienced in the organization	5.48	1.10
Trust in leader (derived from the item used by Podsakoff et al., 1990)		
My employees feel quite confident that as a leader I will always try to treat them fairly.	5.95	.99
Stance as degree of accommodation (Jin & Cameron, 2006)		
1. Action-based accommodation toward employees		
• To yield to the employees' demands	4.06	1.12
• To agree to follow what the employees proposed	4.32	.98
• To accept the employees' propositions	4.67	.95
• To agree with the employees on future action or procedure	4.64	.98
• To agree to try the solutions suggested by the employees	5.33	1.04

(*Continued*)

TABLE 1
Continued

Dependent measures	*M*	*SD*
2. Qualified-rhetoric-mixed accommodation toward employees		
• To express regret or apologize to the employees	4.61	1.54
• To collaborate with the employees in order to solve the problem at hand	6.22	.94
• To change my own position toward that of the employees	4.95	1.09
• To make concessions with the employees	4.77	1.24
• To admit wrongdoing	5.21	1.55
3. Action-based accommodation toward top management		
• To yield to the top management's demands	4.71	1.23
• To agree to follow what the top management proposed	4.79	1.28
• To accept the top management's propositions	4.82	1.25
• To agree with the top management on future action or procedure	4.57	1.37
• To agree to try the solutions suggested by the top management	5.46	1.56
4. Qualified-rhetoric-mixed accommodation toward top management		
• To express regret or apologize to the top management	4.03	1.67
• To collaborate with the top management in order to solve the problem at hand	6.50	.87
• To change my own position toward that of the top management	4.60	1.29
• To make concessions with the top management	4.88	1.3
• To admit wrongdoing	4.33	2.00

willingness to take each of the 10 stance items as degree of accommodation toward the employees/top management (Jin & Cameron, 2006; 1 = *completely unwilling* and 7 = *completely willing*), after imagining themselves in situations in which they were confronted by disagreeing employees and disagreeing top management, respectively. Two indexes were created for PR leaders' stance toward employees and another two created for their stance toward the top management, respectively: action-based accommodation toward employees (alpha = .86; $M = 4.60$, $SD = .81$), qualified-rhetoric-mixed accommodation toward employees (alpha = .79; $M = 5.15$, $SD = .95$), action-based accommodation toward top management (alpha = .83; $M = 4.88$, $SD = .97$), and qualified-rhetoric-mixed accommodation toward top management (alpha = .69; $M = 4.85$, $SD = .99$).

Data Analysis

Regressions, one-way ANOVAs, and hierarchical regressions were conducted to examine how public relations leaders' leadership style and empathy were associated with their emotional competency and stances toward employees and top management in decision-making conflicts, after controlling out the effects of demographics and organizational characteristics.

RESULTS

Respondent Characteristics

Of the 124 public relations leaders completing the survey, 60% were men and 40% were women. The majority of them (97%) were White, yet there were less than 3% African American and less than 1% from other ethnic groups. There were no Hispanic, Asian, or Native American respondents from the national random sample. The average age of the respondents was 52. The highest education received by most of the respondents was some college or a Bachelor's degree (66%), while 25% received a Master's degree, and about 3% received a Doctorate degree and 3% received a law or medical degree as their highest education.

About half (48%) of the respondents reported being affiliated with a PR agency or PR firm; 28% worked for nonprofit organization; 15% worked for corporation; and the rest of them worked for university or other higher education institute (3%), government (2%) and other (4%). More than half (57%) of their organizations had 50 or fewer employees, 22% had 51–500 employees, and 21% had the size of the employees ranging from more than 500 to 330,000. As PR leaders, most of the respondents managed 10 or fewer employees (76%) and the average staff size was 23. The average public relations experience of those leaders was 22, and their average years of working for the current employers were 15 years. Most of them (87%) reported that they were either *always* (54%) or *very often* (33%) involved in decision-making process of their organizations.

The respondents considered themselves as public relations leaders ($M = 5.26$, $SD = 1.55$). They tended to disagree that women made better leader ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 1.37$), though ANOVA showed that male respondents significantly disagreed with it more ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 1.31$) than female respondents did ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 1.36$), $F(1,122) = 8.20$, $p < .01$. They tended to agree that men or women can be equally capable leaders ($M = 6.36$, $SD = 1.1.16$), but ANOVA showed that male respondents significantly agreed with it more ($M = 6.51$, $SD = 1.04$) than female respondents did ($M = 6.14$, $SD = 1.29$), $F(1,122) = 3.16$, $p < .10$.

Leadership Style Preference

H1 hypothesized that transformational PR leadership will be preferred by public relations leaders. Paired-sample *t*-tests revealed PR leaders significantly preferred transformational leadership ($M = 5.53$, $SD = .82$) to

transactional leadership ($M = 3.01$; $t = 20.23$, df $= 122$, $p < .001$). Thus, H1 was supported.

RQ1 asked how PR leadership style preference was associated with demographics and organizational characteristics. The only significant finding was that public relations leaders working for bigger (more than 50 employees) organizations demonstrated more transactional preference ($M = 3.09$, $SD = 1.07$) than those in smaller (50 employees or less) organizations ($M = 2.72$, $SD = 1.10$), $F(1,114) = 3.34$, $p < .10$.

Empathy as the Key Emotional Trait of PR Leadership

RQ2.1 asked how PR leaders' empathy was associated with transformational PR leadership. Hierarchical regression, after controlling out the effects of gender, age, and years of PR experience, indicated that empathy (beta $= .38$, $t = 4.50$, $p < .001$) was a significant predicting variable of transformational leadership ($F(4,114) = 6.60$, $p < .001$, adjusted $R^2 = .16$). The more empathetic the leaders were, the more likely they were to demonstrate transformational leadership style. Therefore, empathy seemed a key contributor of transformational PR leadership, preferred by public relations leaders.

RQ2.2 asked how PR leaders' empathy was associated with their management of employees' frustration and optimism expressed in the workplace. Regression analyses showed transformational leadership alone was a predictor of employee optimism management (beta $= .26$, $t = 2.87$, $p < .01$) ($F(2,118) = 4.26$, $p < .05$, adjusted $R^2 = .05$).

RQ2.3 asked how PR leaders' empathy was associated with perceived employee trust in leader. Regression analysis showed both leadership styles contributed in predicting perceived employee trust in leader ($F(2,119) = 6.63$, $p < .01$, adjusted $R^2 = .09$): transformational leadership was a more important predictor (beta $= .28$, $t = 3.17$, $p < .01$) than transactional leadership (beta $= .15$, $t = 1.67$, $p < .10$).

RQ2.4 asked how PR leaders' empathy was related to PR leaders' stances toward employees and top management in decision-making conflicts. Regression analyses showed transformational leadership contributed in predicting leaders' action-based accommodation toward employees ($F(2,117) = 8.59$, $p < .001$, adjusted $R^2 = .11$); qualified-rhetoric-mixed accommodation toward employees ($F(2,118) = 10.23$, $p < .001$, adjusted $R^2 = .13$); and rhetoric-mixed accommodation toward top management, ($F(2,107) = 2.95$, $p < .10$, adjusted $R^2 = .04$); Transformational leadership alone was a predictor of the three stances (beta $= .36$, $t = 4.11$, $p < .001$; beta $= .38$, $t = 4.48$, $p < .001$; and beta $= .20$, $t = 2.07$, $p < .05$), respectively.

TABLE 2
Hierarchical Regressions Predicting Employee Communication (Management of Frustration and Optimism, Employee Trust in Leader, and Stances Toward Employees in Conflicts) via Demographics, Leadership Styles, and Empathy

	Employee communication dependent variables (Mean, SD)				
	Frustration (4.14, 1.41)	*Optimism (5.47, .98)*	*Trust (5.95, .99)*	*Action-based stances (4.60, .81)*	*Qualified–rhetoric–mixed stances (5.15, .95)*
Predictors	*Beta*	*Beta*	*Beta*	*Beta*	*Beta*
Block 1					
Gender	−.008	−.095	.027	−.191*	−.265**
Age	.182	.215	.156	.152	.238+
Years of PR experience	−.195	−.203	.025	−.198	−.165
R-square	.021	.029	.032	.048	.080
Block 2: Emotional Leadership (Mean, SD)					
Transactional leadership (3.01, 1.15)	.130	−.114	.038	.072	.029
Transformational leadership (5.53, .82)	.002	.160	.176+	.327**	.347**
Empathy (5.69, .63)	.080	.212*	.378**	−.027	.081
R-square	.049	.124	.262	.152	.147
Total R-square	.070	.153	.294	.200	.307
R-square change	.028	.095*	.230**	.104**	.147**

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$. +$p < .10$.

Emotional Leadership and Conflict Stances

RQ3 asked how PR leadership style and empathy together might predict PR leaders' frustration and optimism management and perceived employee trust in the leader, as well as their conflict stances toward employees and top management, after controlling out demographics and organizational characteristics. A series of hierarchical regressions were used, with demographics controlled:

First, in terms of employee communications (see Table 2), empathy (beta = .21, $t = 2.10$, $p < .05$) alone was significant predictor of PR leaders' frequency of dealing with optimism ($F(6,110) = 2.59$, $p < .05$, adjusted $R^2 = .08$). In terms of the perceived employee trust in leader, empathy (beta = .38, $t = 4.12$, $p < .001$) and transformational leadership (beta = .18, t = 1.95, $p < .10$) were significant predictors ($F(6,111) = 6.57$, $p < .001$, adjusted $R^2 = .22$). As far as PR leaders' conflict stances toward employees were concerned, transformational and gender played important roles: Their action-based accommodation toward employees ($F(6,109) = 3.25$, $p < .01$, adjusted $R^2 = .11$) could be predicted by transformational leadership (beta = .33, $t = 3.34$, $p < .01$) and slightly by gender (beta = − .17, $t = -1.83$,

TABLE 3
Hierarchical Regressions Predicting Top Management Communication (Stances toward Top Management in Conflicts and Uses of Extreme Influence Tactics) via Demographics, Leadership styles, and Empathy

	Top management communication dependent variables (Mean, SD)	
	Action-based stances (4.88, .97)	*Qualified-rhetoric-mixed stances (4.85, .99)*
Predictors	*Beta*	*Beta*
Block 1		
Gender	−.139	−.198*
Age	−.035	.162
Years of PR Experience	−.312*	−.259+
R-square	.134	.066
Block 2: Emotional leadership (Mean, SD)		
Transactional Leadership (3.01, 1.15)	.128	.133
Transformational Leadership (5.53, .82)	.036	.144
Empathy (5.69, .63)	−.223*	.035
R-square	.181	.113
Total R-square	.315	.179
R-square change	.047	.048

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$. +$p < .10$.

$p < .10$). Similarly, their qualified-rhetoric-mixed accommodation toward employees ($F(6,110) = 5.37$, $p < .001$, adjusted $R^2 = .18$) could be predicted by transformational leadership (beta = .35, $t = 3.73$, $p < .001$) and gender (beta = −.23, $t = -2.66$, $p < .001$). It suggested that female transformational leaders tended to take more accommodative stances toward employees in decision-making conflicts.

Second, in terms of top management communications (see Table 3), both empathy (beta = −.22, $t = -2.18$, $p < .05$) and years of PR experience (beta = −.31, $t = -2.42$, $p < .05$) contributed negatively to public relations leaders' action-based accommodation toward top management in decision-making conflicts ($F(6,100) = 3.69$, $p < .01$, adjusted $R^2 = .13$). It suggested that PR leaders with more experience and more empathic were likely to take less accommodative action-based stances toward top management. Gender (beta = − .20, $t = -1.98$, $p < .10$) was the only predictor of PR leaders' qualified-rhetoric-mixed accommodation toward top management ($F(6,99) = 2.10$, $p < .10$, adjusted $R^2 = .06$), which suggested that female leaders were more likely to express accommodative stances in front of top management.

DISCUSSION

Public relations leaders who were randomly sampled and responded to this survey primarily reported transformational leadership. They strongly agreed that good rapport with employees and creating personal connections are crucial for a good leader. They agreed with the importance of participative management, in which decision-making power is shared and thus enhances others' self-worth. They also tended to challenge traditional ways of doing things, and realized the necessity to change self-interests into group needs in certain situations. The findings reflect the trend of participative management and the balance between task and relationship skills of public relations managers. It is very important for public relations educators and professional associations to integrate transformational leadership elements, such as empathy, compassion, sensitivity, relationship building, and innovation, in classrooms and workshops to help prepare leadership for the future.

Transformational Leadership as the Preferred PR Leadership

Public relations leaders in this survey demonstrated strong transformational leadership in general. However, public relations leaders working for bigger (more than 50 employees) organizations seemed to demonstrate

relatively more transactional leadership features than those in smaller (50 employees or less) organizations. The need for more control and emotional detachment might be due to the bigger size and more complex organizational infrastructure, as well as less flexible management style. It seems that public relations leaders working for bigger organizations are dealing with a leadership challenge: On one hand, they realize the need for controlling, detachment, and reward-only tactics; on the other hand, they also feel the necessity to show the human side of their leadership by observing emotions in the workplace and expressing feelings to others to establish mutual understanding and build rapport, which is the hallmark of transformational leadership.

Although optimism and frustration were identified by researchers as the prominent emotions employees experienced at work, transformational leadership is the only predictor of public relations leaders' optimism management identified in this study. Public relations leaders with stronger transformational leadership tend to have more experience dealing with positive emotions such as optimism, enthusiasm, and excitement at workplace. Questions remain in terms of the leaders' experience in handling negative emotions such as frustration, tenseness, and irritation. Public relations leaders should not only be good at motivating and sharing positive emotions but also should be skillful in comforting employee under stress and channeling the negativity out of the workplace.

The Essential Role of Empathy in PR Leadership

Empathy, as the most important emotion for the leaders, is a key contributor of public relations leadership across different styles, especially for transformational leadership. Stronger transformational leadership is more likely to emerge among more empathetic leaders. This finding suggests that public relations leaders, in general, should have the ability to comprehend others' feelings, as well as to reexperience those feelings themselves so as to communicate mutual understanding and compassion in the workplace. Walking in the shoes of other people and choosing the most acceptable communication strategies is a challenge to any public relations leader.

Empathy not only contributes to transformational leadership directly, but also works together with transformational leadership as related to perceived employees' leadership confidence and trust. Stronger and more empathetic transformational leaders bring more confidence among employees. They know the importance of being flexible and strategic in using different degrees of accommodation to manage the decision-making conflicts with employees. When confronted by employees who disagree with the public relations leader' decisions, strong and empathetic transformational leaders tend to be more

willing to take both action-based accommodation and qualified-rhetoric-mixed accommodation, welcoming authentic participative management based on both actions and verbal expressions: On one hand, they embrace the possibilities of agreeing with the employees on future action or procedure if it makes sense and is beneficial to the organization, and are open to trying the solutions suggested by the employees if they seem to work out better than the original solutions. On the other hand, they are sincere in expressing regret or even apologizing to the disagreeing employees when necessary, and are willing to take the position to collaborate with the employees in order to solve the problem at hand.

Strong and empathetic public relations leaders are also good at managing communications between themselves and top management. As Berger and Reber (2006, p. 6) mentioned, to "strengthen leadership skills in the profession" is one of the most important public relations issues when it comes to gaining influence on the dominant coalition and at the decision-making table. Public relations leaders with stronger transformational leadership are more likely to take qualified-rhetoric-mixed accommodation toward top management who disagree with their decisions: They are willing to express regret or apologize to the top management, aiming to collaborate with the top management to solve the problem at hand. They are also flexible in terms of changing their own position and make concessions with the top management. Notably, the rhetoric expressions based on the accommodative stance does not necessary mean the public relations leaders are willing to take the actual actions to change their stance, but it serves as effective way to deal with disagreeing top management and paves ways for next-stage negations in a more positive and issue-focused atmosphere. Therefore, the relationship-and-task-balanced leadership style and the strategic use of empathy can equip public relations leaders to better deal with confrontational top management. Leaders with this type of style and mindset demonstrate more familiarity of conflict resolution, higher sensitivity of top management's feelings, and more problem-solving effectiveness.

Given the importance of integrating empathy, as the essential core of transformational leadership style, into future public practitioners training and preparation, several steps can be taken by public relations educators in the classrooms: First, empathy training and development should be integrated into any leadership and management course, with specific discussions, assignments and in-class activities on how to be more sensitive in detecting others' feelings and expressing one's feelings appropriately so as to solve the problems in the most sensible and effective way. Second, to apply the understanding and practice of at-work empathy to real-client setting, a simulation-team approach should be taken in hands-on courses such as public relations campaigns. Student teams will be well structured

internally, with a public relations manager and team members with different assigned roles. In the meantime, the team leaders will report to the client, as well as to the instructor, which will help them practice management skills and communicating with empathy among employees and with the top management (the client and the instructor). Third, empathy skills and effectiveness should be incorporated and evaluated as an item on the team evaluation sheet, so that each student team's demonstration of compassion and sensitivity can be observed and assessed from the management's perspective. In the meantime, the same empathy measures will be used in team member peer evaluations to assess the within-group employee communication quality and leadership effectiveness.

Limitations and Future Directions

Given the small number of completed surveys and low response rate, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to all the public relations leaders in the United States. A national survey with larger scale and high response rate with follow-ups should be further conducted. The responding public relations leaders were White-dominant. It would be interesting for future study to examine how minority leaders from Black, Hispanic, Asian and other ethic backgrounds perceive public relations leadership and the role of emotion in their management communication. There were also a disproportionate number of respondents from agencies, which might skew the picture of more general leadership practice due to the differences between in-house and agency practitioners: Although in-house public relations leaders report to the dominant coalition and often deal with conflicts and competitions with other departments and manage diverse internal audiences within the same organization, agency public relations leaders' priority is to optimize the agency's services provided to different clients and manage employees to perform different functions. This could cause differences in public relations leaders' strategic use of emotional skills and their conflict stances toward top management and employees, which was not tested specifically in this study. Future research should address this issue by comparing in-house and agency public relations leadership styles as a function of different work environments, organizational characteristics and the power of public relations. In addition, noticing that about half of the respondents in this study were from PR agencies or firms, and the other half from nonprofit organizations and corporations, and only a few from other organizations, it will be interesting for future studies to focus on corporation, nonprofit organizations, or other organizations, respectively. This study did not detect any difference of leadership preference based on organizational type, which might need to be further explored.

Gender has been a very important factor in public relations leadership study (Aldoory & Toth, 2004). Leaders participated in this study did not report any difference in how they perceive female and male leadership. This study did not detect any gender difference in terms of empathy and the management of employee emotions, although female leaders are more likely to take an accommodative stance in dealing with confronting employees and top management in decision-making conflicts. Future study could delve into the perception and effectiveness of emotional leadership based on gender difference.

This study tested for transformational and transactional leadership styles as mutually exclusive and dichotomous. However, some researchers have suggested that transformational leadership is actually an extension of transactional leadership (Bass, 1985, 1997). For example, Bass (1997) suggested that leaders can exhibit both kinds of styles depending on the existing situation or environment, which corresponds to the argument for a situational leadership (Northouse, 2007). Future research should test the associations between different leadership styles and further identifying factors that influence the situational decisions leaders make in order to achieve the optimal managerial leadership in public relations contexts.

There are also measurements issues that need to be addressed in future research. This study used a single-item self-report scale to measure the extent to which respondents were involved in decision-making process of their organizations. Multiple-item scale and more decision-making involvement measures other than self-report might be utilized so as to prevent bias and increase the measurement validity and reliability. For example, questions such as where and what part of the process, as well as what kinds of decisions should be added. In addition, the alpha for transactional leadership measures is low, which needs future discussion on how to improve the conceptualization and operationalization of leadership styles. As a matter of fact, despite extensive theorizing and research about transformational leadership, the dimensionalities, attributes, and associated behaviors are still too broad to be consistently measured, which presents conceptual limitations in leadership research (Northouse, 2007). Meng (2009)'s recent framework embarks on studying the interconnection of multiple dimensions of public relations leadership and examining different leadership styles in a more integrated approach.

In-depth interviews and focus groups should be used in the future to triangulate the findings of this study to provide more insights of the role of emotion in ethical and effective public relations leadership. Another survey using a PR leader–employee–management three-way coorientational approach might be able to capture different views and opinions on how employees and top management perceive the role of PR leadership in an organization. It will also be interesting to conduct a cross-cultural study

to compare how public relations leadership and the role of empathy may vary in different countries and regions, given the different levels of public relations development and different interpretations of emotions.

Conclusion

The findings of this study provide a picture of how the survey respondents perceive their public relations leadership style and their use of empathy in enhancing communication effectiveness with employees and top management. Common indicators of communication competency are evidenced from those leaders' experience, such as:

- Empathy is the core emotional trait of PR leaders, which drives PR leaders' accurate assessment of employees' emotions and helps PR leaders to address those emotions with sensitivity and understanding;
- PR leaders should be flexible in decision-making power sharing and be strategic in the power-sharing negotiation process at the same time;
- PR leaders should be very experienced in motivating and maintaining optimism at workplace by creating experience of enthusiasm and excitement among employees;
- PR leaders should know how to take accommodative actions and express their accommodation when confronted by disagreeing employees, if resolving the disagreement will lead to task efficiency; and
- PR leaders should enhance their skills of negotiation and influence gaining when communicating their disagreements with top management in decision-making conflicts.

By examining the emotional dimension of public relations leadership, it is my hope that the findings of this research will advance the body of knowledge of public relations leadership and help coach public relations practitioners to communicate more effectively, with empathy, in decision-making conflicts. As Gayle and Preiss (1998) emphasized, public relations leaders must "learn how to link their imagination and emotions to the ambitions they have for their team, department or organization, so they can express ideas in ways that will capture the imagination and emotion of others" (p. 353). An empathetic transformational public relations leader has a higher chance of making the best catch.

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