

PUTTING THE **CONTINGENCY THEORY OF ACCOMMODATION** IN CONTEXT

Using the movie "The Queen" in public relations pedagogy

Xiao Wang

hsiaowang@gmail.com

Rochester Institute of Technology

INTRODUCTION

The movie "The Queen" showcases Queen Elizabeth II's responses to the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, in 1997. This movie can be used in public relations pedagogy to illustrate the contingency theory of accommodation (Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997; Cancel, Mitrook, & Cameron, 1999), an important theory for understanding conflict management. The Queen's change of stances was well documented in newspapers and in the previous academic literature (Benoit & Brinson, 1999). However, it should be acknowledged that although the details in the movie have not been contested by historians, this movie is not a documentary. Thus, the purpose of this paper is not to use a movie to support the validity of the contingency theory. Instead, it argues that the details in the movie can be used to illustrate the propositions and principles in the contingency theory and can help student understand the theory better. In this teaching essay, I will first review the literature on the contingency theory and using case studies in teaching and then discuss how the movie can be used in public relations teaching. At the end, I will discuss possible learning outcomes.

Contingency Theory of Accommodation

The contingency theory (Cancel et al., 1997; Cancel et al., 1999) aims to explain why an organization takes certain approaches to manage conflicts between the organization and its publics. An organization's stance toward managing a conflict can range from pure advocacy to pure accommodation (Cancel et al., 1997). Pure advocacy means that the organization completely disagrees with its publics' arguments and does not change its action or policies to accommodate its publics. Pure accommodation means that the organization agrees with its publics and accepts all of its publics' requests to make restitution or to change its policies. Pure advocacy and pure accommodation represent two extreme positions that an organization can take, and are generally considered as rare in public relations practice. More likely, an organization's stance falls on the contingency continuum between pure advocacy and pure accommodation.

The theory posits two principles (Cancel et al., 1999). First, a total of 86 potential factors may determine an organization's stance toward solving a conflict (Shin, Cameron, & Cropp, 2006). Second, an organization's stance for dealing with its publics is dynamic; that is, as the event unfolds, its stance toward a conflict may change. Those contingency factors can be grouped as external factors and internal factors (Shin et al., 2006). External factors include external threats, external environment (e.g., situation and culture), external public's characteristics, and the issue under consideration. Internal factors include organizational characteristics, management style, personality of the involved personnel, internal threat, and relationship characteristics. For a given conflict, not all these factors apply. Generally, a combination of some of these factors can influence an organization's stance toward solving a conflict.

Using Case Studies in Teaching

Case-based teaching methods have been used in many fields, including education, medicine, business, and law (Kim, Phillips, Pinsky, Brock, Phillips, & Keary, 2006). Although the case approach has been widely used in public relations teaching, not too much theoretical analysis of case teaching in public relations has been conducted. Drawing on the case teaching literature from other disciplines, I conclude that combined with lectures, case-based teaching is considered as a more effective instructional method in promoting students' critical thinking than teaching based on lectures only. The case method can "allow the applications of theoretical concepts to be demonstrated, thus bridging the gap between theory and practice," "encourage active learning," provide opportunities for "group working and problem solving," and enhance enjoyment of a topic (Davis & Wilcock, nd). Menkel-Meadow (2000) stated that the case approach provides a "thick description" of the important contextual details and circumstances which inform students of participants' motivations, "their relationships

TPR submissions are accepted based upon editorial board evaluations of relevance to public relations education, importance to public relations teaching, quality of writing, manuscript organization, appropriateness of conclusions and teaching suggestions, and adequacy of the information, evidence or data presented. Papers selected for the PRD's top teaching session at AEJMC's national convention and meeting TPR's publication guidelines can be published without further review if edited to a maximum of 3,000 words (including tables and endnotes). Authors of teaching papers selected for other PRD sessions are also encouraged to submit their papers electronically for the regular review process. For mail submissions, four hard copies of each manuscript must be submitted. Names of authors should not be listed on the manuscript itself. A detachable title page should include the author's title, office address, telephone number, fax number and e-mail address. Final manuscript must be in a readable 9-point type or larger and total no more than 3,000 words, including tables and endnotes. Upon final acceptance of a manuscript, the author is expected to provide a plain text e-mail version to the *PR Update* editor. Back issues of TPR are available on the PRD website:

<http://aejmc.net/PR>

TPR
Teaching Public Relations

MONOGRAPH 89
SPRING 2014

Submissions
should be sent to:

TPR EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Chuck Lubbers

University of South Dakota
605/677.6400 • 677.4250 (fax)
clubbers@usd.edu

COMPOSITION EDITOR

Susan Gonders

Southeast Missouri State University
573/579-1564 (cell)
SGonders@gmail.com

with others,” and placement of the event in participants’ lives. That is, stories and cases (vs. lectures on theoretical principles) can better engage students and allow them to understand the many environmental, psychological, and moral factors that lead to a specific decision or outcome.

A number of principles have been forwarded regarding the case method. Kim et al. (2006) provided guidelines on how to use cases in teaching. The cases should be relevant, realistic, engaging, and instructional. Furthermore, cases should not include too much information or details (Meyers & Jones, 1993), especially when it is used as an in-class activity.

Why Use “The Queen” in Public Relations Instruction?

Relevant. “The Queen” showcases the conflict between Queen Elizabeth II and the British public and how the Queen’s stances changed over the course of a week after Princess Diana’s death.

One major advantage of using this movie is that it illustrates the Queen’s change of stances and how various environmental and personal factors contributed to her change, which nicely illustrates all major principles in the contingency theory.

Realistic and engaging. The use of movies can help illustrate the many concepts in textbooks and help enrich students’ learning experience. Indeed, Farré, Bosch, Roset, and Baños (2004) argued that the way movies are produced, the way the storyline is developed, and the way actors and actresses act can make movies believable and popular among students in the learning process. That is, the movie can appear more realistic and engaging to the students.

British historian Robert Lacey provided consultation to the production and stated that the many conversations and details in the movie were based on his extensive interviews of people in Balmoral Castle, where the Queen and the Royal Family stayed when the incident happened. Details related to Tony Blair’s reactions were obtained through Peter Morgan’s connection with those in Blair’s office (Harries, Langan, Seaward, Ivernel, & Frears, 2007).

How to Use “The Queen”?

How much of the movie should be shown to students depends on the length of the class period. If a class is 1 hour 15 minutes in length, the instructor may be able to show 40 minutes of the movie, followed with in-class discussion; if the class period is 50 minutes in length, the instructor may show 30 minutes of the movie and then lead in-class discussion, or the instructor shows 40 minutes of the movie and provides a take-home assignment.

The following discussion assumes that the class period is 1 hour and 15 minutes. In general, I focus the events before, during, and after the three telephone conversations between the Queen and Tony Blair on Sunday, August 31 (approximately 11:19 – 25:40 in the movie), Wednesday, September 3 (51:54 - 56:10, and several scenes before the conversation from 43:56 to 47:08), and Thursday, September 4, 1997 (1:02:03 - 1:10:10). I also show the Queen’s final response (1:20:55 - 1:30:12). Events before the conversations show various environmental factors (e.g., the public’s sentiments, the press, political parties’ responses, and the Royal Family’s reactions) that might

impact the Queen’s decisions. These telephone conversations show the Queen’s decisions. The footage after the conversations shows whether the Queen made a sound decision and how the event might further evolve.

Instruction: The instruction should be tailored to the level of the learners. The major goal is to teach students (a) two stances that a company/individual can take in responding to a conflict, (b) two major principles of the contingency theory, and (c) how some of the external and internal contingency factors evolve over the time and contribute to the company/individual’s responses.

The process of the instruction (Kim et al., 2006) can be broken down in a few steps.

1. Building on prior knowledge: Instructor may provide an overview of the theory and discuss some important definitions and brief examples before showing students the movie, as one way to get them prepared and to help them integrate the theory and the case.

2. Teaching aids: I usually provide students with a table of contingency factors that may influence one’s responses. Furthermore, I provide a worksheet and ask students to write down the important details related to the British public’s, the media’s, Prince Phillip’s, the Queen Mother’s responses, and the Queen’s and Tony Blair’s responses and actions before, during, and after the three telephone conversations. The worksheet can help students organize their thoughts and better understand how the event unfolded. Students are also asked how they can apply the theory to explain Queen Elizabeth II’s responses.

3. Group time: Students are given 10 minutes to discuss items on the worksheet.

4. Assessment/Feedback: Whether the students understand the theory can be based on the in-class discussion shortly after watching the movie and can also be based on the worksheet that they fill out (see discussion).

Discussion (Assessment)

The movie provides enough details regarding various parties’ reactions after the death of Diana, Princess of Wales. It also shows press coverage and public reactions toward the Queen’s lack of acknowledgement in this situation. This movie is also one rare case that shows the dynamic nature of conflicts—how conflicts may evolve over the time and why certain stances that may be an effective response at the beginning of a conflict may not work at a later stage.

All of these can help students understand how contingency factors changed and contributed to the Queen’s change in her stance from advocacy to accommodation. A number of ways can be used to measure students’ learning after viewing the movie and in-class discussion, for example, self-report (e.g., usefulness, amount of learning, case realism), instructor’s

assessment of learning (e.g., based on in-class discussion and analysis of the worksheets). In general, in-class discussion after viewing the movie showed that students understood the theory and the movie very well and also understood why she changed her stance at the end. The worksheets they handed in after the discussion confirmed such. The majority of the students scored 9 out of 10 points based on their notes and answers on the worksheets.

Because both my observation of the in-class discussion and my scoring of the worksheets showed that students grasped the concepts well, I did not further evaluate teaching effectiveness based on students' perceptions of their own learning. Interested instructors may conduct a short survey to assess students' own perceptions.

The rest of the discussion section provides readers with an account of what should be expected from the in-class discussion.

Queen Elizabeth II's stance after Diana's death

Queen Elizabeth II's initial stance can be termed as pure advocacy: to remain in Balmoral Castle in Scotland after Princess Diana's death and not to return to London to make any public statement to accommodate the British public's grief. This was evident in the first two telephone conversations with Blair. However, the Queen's stance changed to accommodation after the telephone conversation with Blair on September 4. Indeed, the final accommodation stance incorporated a few more ways to accommodate the public, for example, paying tribute before Diana's coffin and the flags flying at half-mast. The movie clearly shows that as the event unfolded, the initial accommodation stance (i.e., a public announcement and a public funeral) no longer sufficed at the later stage.

External contingency factors

A number of external factors can account for the Queen's change in her stances. First, the threat toward Queen and the Monarchy changed over the course of five days. Initially, the British people were grieving over Diana's death. However, after observing the Queen's lack of a public announcement and seeing that the flag pole on the Buckingham Palace was bare, the public grew visibly angry. On Thursday, a poll showed that 70% of the British public believed the Queen's action damaged the Monarchy and 25% believed that the Monarchy should be abolished.

Similarly, the media environment also became more critical, from initially stating that the Royal Family was detached, to showing footage of British people's anger, and to finally showing the public's strong disapproval of the Queen's lack of actions.

Internal contingency factors

The first internal factor was related to the Queen's personal character and initial lack of understanding of public opinion. As a grandmother, the Queen's priority was to protect her grandchildren from getting upset at their mother's death. Second, the Queen was termed as old-fashioned in the movie. There were ideological differences between the Queen and the British people. Further, the Queen was not comfortable with the change of certain royal standards (e.g., the

flag above Buckingham Palace at half mast) and wrongfully believed that the British people would calm down shortly afterwards. Finally, the Queen had personal issues with Princess Diana's overexposure to the media and her lifestyle.

The second group of factors was related to the organizational structure or the company the Queen kept at the time of the conflict. Both Prince Philip and the Queen Mother supported her decision to stay in Balmoral and not to return to London to make a public statement. Regarding the public's demand that the flag above Buckingham Palace fly at half mast, both Prince Philip and the Queen Mother stated that the flag pole being left bare at the Buckingham Palace was a royal tradition.

The last group of factors was related to the relationship between the Queen and Tony Blair. Blair acted as both a public relations counsel to the Queen and as a Prime Minister. Blair initially made suggestions of the course of action for the Queen to take. Because the level of the external threat to the Monarchy and the Queen changed over the time, Blair became rather insisting in the third telephone conversation and stated that it was his constitutional responsibility to advise the Queen to return to London to appease the British people and the press. Students usually receive the concepts well and show a good understanding of the theory.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

To summarize, this case analysis and the movie illustrate nicely the principles in the contingency theory. First, the movie shows that the Queen could choose a stance ranging from advocacy to accommodation. Second, the Queen's stance was influenced by a number of contingency factors, including external threat (public grief to public's disapproval and call for the abolishment of the Monarchy, media reporting) and internal factors (the Queen's personal character, her company of Prince Philip and the Queen Mother, and Tony Blair's counsel). Thirdly, the many contingency factors changed over the course of a week and contributed to the Queen's change in her stance from advocacy to accommodation. Thus, the three major points in the theory can be discussed well using this movie.

However, the movie was not produced to illustrate all 86 contingency factors. Thus, in this analysis, and in the in-class discussion, only the general categories of the factors and some specific factors can be discussed. Indeed, some of the 86 factors are so detailed and specific such that many of them may not apply to many different conflict management situations. This case analysis and the example are not intended to criticize the theory. Interestingly, these detailed contingency factors have been removed from the latest version of the textbook (Wilcox & Cameron, 2011)—only the general categories are now presented (p. 249). Thus, it seems appropriate to discuss the movie and understand the theory based on more general categories instead of the more specific contingency factors listed in earlier research articles (e.g., Cancel et al., 1999). Furthermore, the most dominant contingency factors, based on surveys of public relations managers' perceptions, only provide information regarding what the managers think and perceive. These factors may not be the most important ones in a given situation.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The use of movies in teaching is not entirely new. This has been a particularly important practice for teaching in recent decades. Today's youth, or Millennials, live in a media-saturated world. Rideout, Roberts, and Foehr (2005) found that children and youth aged 8-18 spend 6.5 hours per day on various media. Although statistics are lacking regarding media behaviors among the college-age

youth, it is possible that those aged 8-18 in 2005 when the study was published may continue such media behavior nowadays. Because the youth have been continuously exposed to the media, their media behavior may be normalized and became habitual and thus are more likely to pay attention to movies—movies can be used as a storyteller and can make examples more interesting than lecture-based teaching.

REFERENCES

- Benoit, W. L., & Brinson, S. L. (1999). Queen Elizabeth's image repair discourse: Insensitive royal or compassionate queen. *Public Relations Review*, 25, 145-156.
- Cancel, A. E., Cameron, G. T., Sallot, L. M., & Mitrook, M. A. (1997). It depends: A contingency theory of accommodation in public relations. *Journal of Public Relations Review*, 9, 31-63.
- Cancel, A. E., Mitrook, M. A., & Cameron, G. T. (1999). Testing the contingency theory of accommodation in public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 25, 171-197.
- Davis, C., & Wilcock, E. (nd). Teaching materials using case studies. Retrieved from <http://www.materials.ac.uk/guides/casestudies.asp>
- Farré, M., Bosch, F., Roset, P. N., & Baños, J.-E. (2004). Putting clinical pharmacology in context: The use of popular movies. *The Journal of Clinical Pharmacology*, 24, 30-36.
- Harries, A., Langan, C., Seaward, T., & Ivernel, F. (Producers), & Frears, S. (Director). (2007). *The Queen* [DVD]. U.K.: Pathe Pictures.
- Kim, S. Phillips, W. R., Pinsky, L., Brock, D., Phillips, K., & Keary, J. (2006). A conceptual framework for developing cases: A review and synthesis of the disciplines. *Medical Education*, 40, 867-876.
- Menkel-Meadow, C. (2000). Using case studies and stories to teach legal ethics. *Fordham Law Review*, 69, 787-816.
- Meyers, C., & Jones, T. B. (1993). *Promoting active learning: Strategies for the college classroom*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Rideout, V., D. F. Roberts, and U. G. Foehr (2005). *Generation M: Media in the lives of 8-18-year-olds*. Executive summary. Menlo Park, CA: Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation.
- Shin, J.-H., Cameron, G. T., & Cropp, F. (2006). Occam's Razor in the contingency theory: A national survey of PR professional response to the 86 contingent variables. *Public Relations Review*, 32, 282-286.
- Wilcox, D. L., & Cameron, G. T. (2011). *Public relations: Strategies and tactics*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.