



Full Length Article

The change process to agile public relations

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Agility
Public relations
Consultants
Structuration theory
Corporate communications

ABSTRACT

Despite agility's increased importance for public relations, the change process from traditional, hierarchically structured public relations to a dynamic agile entity has not yet been comprehensively investigated. This article tackles the research desideratum by discussing this change process from a structuration-theoretical perspective. The subsequent empirical analyses via two qualitative studies from the field of corporate communications focus on the perspective of consultants. These experts support the communication management in this change process with their expertise and neutrality, which the public relations departments themselves lack. Thus, consultants are key contacts for an explorative analysis of the change process toward more agility. In the first study, 39 consultants were interviewed about the change processes that they have guided in order to transform public relations into an agile department. The subsequent case study focuses on an internationally active medical technology manufacturer and analyzes their experience with consulting throughout the agile change process in their public relations department. The results show that the concept of recursiveness is central to the successful implementation of agility in public relations. Expressed in the language of structuration theory, consultants aim to develop rules and resources as modalities that describe an agile structure and then translate them directly into actions. These modalities are continuously developed via sprints, a dynamic process that results in the constant adaptation of the agile structures until the desired result is achieved. The results illustrate the advantages of a neutral, outside authority for the implementation of such a change process.

1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to analyze the change process from traditional, hierarchically structured public relations to a dynamic, agile entity using a structuration-theoretical, integrative approach as outlined by Giddens (1984). The significance and relevance of such an analysis becomes clear when we consider agility's increasing importance for public relations in recent years, which has developed primarily as a response to our progressively more digitalized environment. Agility is the overall capability of an organization or organizational unit to respond to and take advantage of the changes initiated by drivers in the internal and external environments. It includes a) structures to identify relevant changes and respond proactively, efficiently and effectively. Agility comprises b) flexible processes suited to deploying resources for immediate tasks in the shortest possible time, with (c) the right personnel, employed based on competence rather than hierarchical status, with d) the appropriate methods and tools (Ganguly et al., 2009; van Ruler, 2015; Wiencierz et al., 2021; Zeffass et al., 2018). The process

of transforming public relations into an agile organizational unit has been largely unexplored.

The transformation to agile public relations, which is characterized by flat hierarchies, employee empowerment, and iterative working processes, is a fundamental change process. When embarking on such a change process, public relations departments often engage external consultants. This support is crucial for public relations professionals because they lack the expertise, ability and neutral perspective required to implement such a foundational change (Engwall & Kipping, 2013; Hoffjann, Hoffstedde, & Jaworek, 2021; Schöller, 2018). Although this need for support is well-established, it is still unclear how exactly consultants support public relations in this change process. This leads to the research question: How can organizations transform their public relations department into an agile unit with the support of consultants?

The analysis of the consulting process for an agile public relations department includes guideline-based interviews with consultants, as well as a case study of a medical device manufacturer that engaged consultants to aid their communications department in its quest for

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more agility. The analysis breaks new ground in two ways: On the one hand, the diffuse term agility, which is used ambiguously in practice, is substantiated in terms of structuration theory. On the other, the change process toward agile public relations is analyzed and the function and role of consultants in this process is presented.

2. Meeting the challenges of digitalization in public relations

Public relations is the management of an organization's strategic and operational communication with its stakeholders. Its goal is to create and maintain legitimacy by influencing the public (Hoffmann et al., 2007). An analysis of the ongoing discussion surrounding the evolutionary process of public relations and its response to digital transformation reveals a search for orientation with diverse, partly contradictory concepts as well as demands for a radical reinterpretation of the discipline.

The dominant view in the scientific discussion has long been that public relations must meet the challenges of digitalization with a dialog- and relationship-oriented approach (Grunig, 2009; Kent & Taylor, 2016; Winkler & Pleil, 2018). This approach describes new opportunities for low-threshold public networking through digitalization that goes beyond classic mass media arenas. Critically, this approach is discussed in the context that the fixation on users as *Homo Dialogicus* as an ideal image leads to normatively inflated and thus barely redeemable principles for public relations practitioners (Nothhaft et al., 2018). Moreover, academic expectations related to the dialog ideal ignore the structural and resource constraints that often exist for practitioners, as well as the fact that organizations and individual users on social networks are more interested in self-presentation and self-affirmation (Ihlen & Levenshus, 2017).

Reacting quickly and flexibly to stakeholders is not new for public relations; for example, it has always been part of crisis communication (Pang et al., 2013). In recent decades, public relations has imitated traditional management theories that focus on control, conformity and planning. However, linear planning and control are no longer possible due to increased user empowerment: newer digital communication channels allow for everyone to have the possibility to conduct low-threshold public communication (Grunig, 2009, van Ruler, 2015).

In the quest to overcome resource constraints and organize a stakeholder dialog in the fast-moving, digital public sphere, user-centered approaches with flexible analysis, planning, and implementation are essential (van Ruler, 2015). One such approach is agility, which offers a way for organizations to adapt and act in a communication environment that is digital, volatile and increasingly uncertain (Zerfass et al., 2018). In order to make communicative action more agile and thus continue to add and secure value for the organization, communication management needs to restructure their public relations, a task for which they usually engage external consultants.

3. Consulting in public relations

When analyzing the transition to agile public relations, it is vital to consider consulting service providers due to the frequency with which they are engaged by public relations departments to accompany the reorganization process (Pang et al., 2013; Schöller, 2018; Verčič et al., 2018). The goal is usually to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of the public relations department and trigger their creativity and innovation (Verčič et al., 2018; von Platen, 2018).

In the field of public relations, consultancy is a fee-based service provided by external providers for a limited period of time to optimize the management of the client's communication with its stakeholders (Schöller, 2018; von Platen, 2018). External communication consultants work in agencies or as individual consultants. System-theoretical approaches toward the client-consultant relationship emphasize the function of the consultant as an external, neutral observer (Hoffmann et al., 2021; Röttger & Preusse, 2013). Accordingly, consultants can

uncover blind spots and offer insights, which in turn can cause a reorganization of the client's established order and systems. From this neutral position, consultants can take on a moderating role in change processes and mediate in relationships with internal and external stakeholders (Fuhrberg, 2010; Schöller, 2018).

There must be a clear distinction between classical organizational consulting approaches and systemic consulting (Röttger & Preusse, 2013). The difference between these ideal-typical forms of consultancy is based on the fundamental distinction between advice and action. "[T]he function of consulting is very closely linked to concrete problem-solving, whereas the systemic conception assigns a reflexive function to consulting" (Röttger & Preusse, 2013, p. 113). Clients delegate their problems to these consultants and expect to be provided with specific solutions and concepts. Systemic consultants mainly act as coaches and follow the approach of helping clients to help themselves. They take their clients to task and work with them to develop solutions in a co-creative process. Clients have an active role in this relationship (Röttger & Preusse, 2013; von Platen, 2018).

The field of consulting—especially in the public relations sphere—is gaining in importance due to increasingly complex framework conditions for organizations (von Platen, 2018). In the USA, almost every company works with external service providers that specialize in public relations (Swering et al., 2014). The extent to which consultants have actually dedicated their services to the increasingly important concept of agility, especially in public relations, and whether they offer such services has not yet been researched. The potential shape of future consulting can be derived from general agility concepts aimed at entire organizations (Ganguly et al., 2009; Zhang & Sharifi, 2000). The question of how agile an organization must be depends on the organizational environment, i.e., the marketplace, competition, customer desire, technology, etc. Once the need for agility has been identified, the next step is to determine whether the current structures and processes are sufficient to meet this need. If they are found lacking, a change process toward more agility must be initiated (Hassan & Mouakket, 2016).

Since the outlined change process in public relations has not yet been analyzed, the question remains: *How can organizations transform their public relations into an agile unit with the support of consultants?*

4. A structuration-theoretical framework of agility

4.1. Agility through recursiveness

Giddens' theory of structuration (1984) is particularly suitable for investigating the agile change process in public relations because it dissolves the dualism of structure and agency that has been dominant in public relations theory development until now (Caldwell, 2012; Staber & Sydow, 2002). Since Giddens (1984) formulated his theory of structuration, conceived as a general social theory, it has been claimed that this theory is difficult to operationalize and is therefore irrelevant for empirical research (Gregson, 1989). However, other studies have shown the theory's suitability as an analytical frame of reference for research in management and organization studies (e.g., den Hond et al., 2012; Whittington, 2010) as well as for public relations research (e.g., Falckheimer, 2018; Sommerfeldt, 2012).

Structuration theory conceives structures of social systems in relation to the agency of the actors within these systems. The relationship between structure and agency is described in the concept of recursiveness as a reciprocal constitution: structure is simultaneously the input and output of every action. Structure is both the intended and unintended result of action (Fuchs, 2003; Staber & Sydow, 2002). In turn, agency is characterized by the fact that, in principle, alternatives are available. Actors choose alternative courses of action that relate to existing structures and each have significant consequences (Giddens, 1984).

First, 1) rules and 2) resources must be considered as analytical dimensions for an investigation of agility in public relations because they

are the connecting elements between agile agency and agile structures (Whittington, 2010). These rules and resources limit and enable employees' agency in agile public relations. Because employees simultaneously produce, reproduce and modify the agile structures by acting routinely according to agile principles 3) routines and 4) employees are further analytical dimensions (Fuchs 2003; Giddens, 1984). To achieve a routine, employees must be trained to be competent in and capable of agile agency (Zerfass et al., 2018).

4.2. Rules

Rules are applied in the execution of social practices. They often have an informal character. Ideally, rules can be differentiated into rules of the constitution of meaning (constitutive rules) and rules of sanctioning social action (regulative rules) (Giddens, 1984).

Constitutive rules represent the interpretative schemata by which actors communicate and thus simultaneously establish and confirm a certain cognitive order. To enhance agility, guidelines must describe a flexibilization of public relations through quick decision making. Agility mission statements must emphasize the willingness to experiment in public relations and demonstrate a tolerance for error in the planning and implementation of innovative communication measures (De Meuse, 2017; Zhang & Sharifi, 2000). The establishment of a specific vocabulary to describe agile principles creates a common identity within the department and enables the application of these principles; like the term *sprints* which describes small-step work that encourages trial and error and repetition until the desired result is achieved (Conforto et al., 2014).

Rules of sanctioning influence the way in which existing social practices are carried out. They serve to evaluate one's own actions and the actions of third parties. The application of these regulative rules represents the process of (re-)producing certain normative orders of systems (Giddens, 1984; Röttger, 2005). An agile public relations department needs regulative rules that strive for flat hierarchies, a high degree of interconnectedness within the department, the organization and the environment as a whole, as well as a reduction of departmental silos (Cockburn & Highsmith, 2001; Zerfass et al., 2018). Communication management must implement role concepts so that public relations staff can come together to build a project team in which they organize themselves and act independently (Aghina et al., 2018). Agile methods usually specify such roles. The regulatory rules must also consider the norms and values of the public relations profession, such as the codes of ethics in public relations (Yang et al., 2016).

4.3. Resources

Giddens distinguishes between two types of resources, which are to be regarded as "levers" of social change" (1984, p. 260): Allocative resources refer to the ability to control the material properties of the environment (including raw materials, techniques and technologies), while authoritative resources include the ability to shape and transform the organization of relationships between people in society (Giddens, 1984; Röttger, 2005).

Agility in public relations requires communications management to distribute control over authoritative resources to its employees. Executives must share authority and control over their allocative resources such as budget and technology with their employees. Through consistent empowerment, employees can plan and execute communication measures in an agile manner (Aghina et al., 2018). By giving employees the skills and authority to supervise of other employees and to decide on resources, they can carry out projects in an independent, autonomous and self-organized manner (Conforto et al., 2014). Access to relevant information for all employees is central to empowerment (De Meuse, 2017; Sherehiy et al., 2007).

4.4. Routines

Routines are the predominant form of action and are constitutive for the continuous reproduction of structures and for the continuity of interactions in organizations (Giddens, 1984). For organizational actors to be able to act routinely, they need "knowability" (den Hond et al., 2012, p. 243), i.e., they must know the rules and resources, they have to understand and internalize them, then iteratively apply them in certain situations. To successfully implement agility, communication management must achieve a routinization of the application of rules and resources according to agile principles (Hassan & Mouakket, 2016).

For an analysis of agile structures and agency, a separation of the dimensions of structure and agency in terms of structuration theory is purposeful, but must be understood as purely analytical. Accordingly, rules and resources are so-called modalities that mediate between the dimensions of structure and agency (see Fig. 1). On the structural level, the rules of the constitution of meaning define the dimension of signification, while those rules of sanctioning social action constitute the dimension of legitimation. At the level of agency, they correspond to the dimensions of communication and sanctioning (Giddens, 1984; Whittington, 2010). The order of agile public relations is based on the structural dimension of signification. It is defined by the routinized communication of agile schemes of meaning and interpretation, such as the routinized application of agile guidelines. In turn, the establishment of the legitimacy dimension goes hand in hand with the routinized application of rights and duties according to the regulatory rules within the framework of a clearly defined, flexible role concept that is accepted by all employees (Aghina et al., 2018; Röttger, 2005).

Using allocative and authoritative resources, actors exercise power and thus reproduce domination at the structural level. In an agile context, the terms *domination* at the structural level and *power* at the agency level are replaced by the terms *democratization* and *empowerment*. In routinized agility, the relations of domination are renegotiated in every communication project. In an agile public relations department with a flat hierarchy and clear role concepts, employees work in different teams with different roles and authorities to exert power. On the agency level, agility leads to fluid power dynamics. If an actor in a team is the project manager, she or he has more power in this constellation than in another team in which she or he takes on an assistant role.

4.5. Employees as agents

Agile structure in itself has no real existence, it only exists in the actors' actions, memories and expectations. Giddens describes actors such as employees as competent and capable of agency; they have the ability to influence the course of events consciously, actively and with consequences (Giddens, 1984). Actors have fundamentally different alternatives for action at their disposal; they can choose to act in a myriad of ways (Cohen, 1989). To become agile, employees must consciously act according to agile principles.

Attitudes and self-understanding are consolidated by the "time-space constitution of social life" (Giddens, 1984, p. 286) and are constantly shaped by social changes. Within the change process toward more agility in public relations, changing established attitudes and thought patterns quickly can prove difficult and requires significant motivation among the employees. On the one hand, as the organization's tipping point for the implementation of agile public relations, employees must incorporate values, norms and logics from the public relations profession—and beyond—into their thought patterns, attitudes and self-image (Hoffmann et al., 2007; Röttger, 2005). On the other hand, they must internalize agile values and logics. They must not only recognize changes and innovations, but also initiate them themselves (De Meuse, 2017; Meredith & Francis, 2000). This involves making rapid decisions, something that can only be achieved when employees are empowered by management (Aghina et al., 2018).

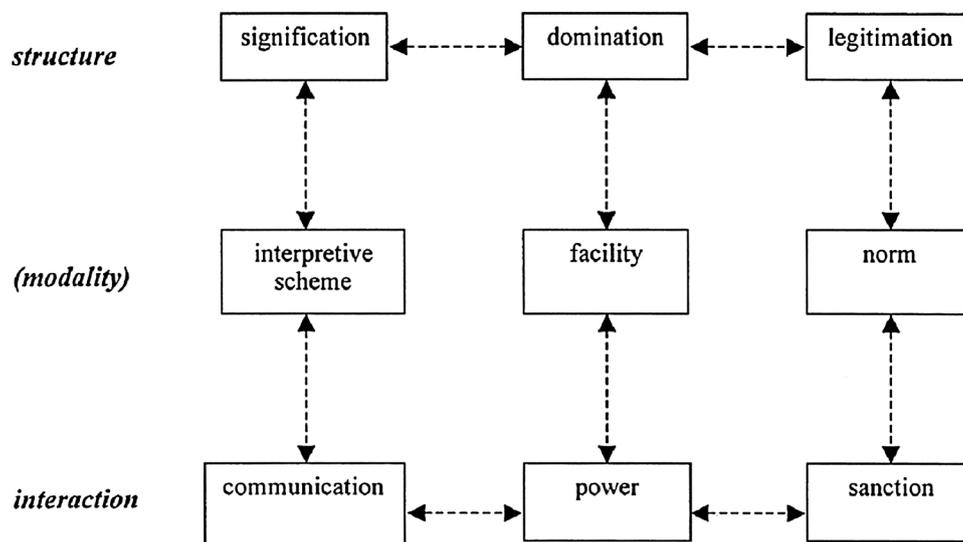


Fig. 1. Duality of structure (Giddens, 1984, p. 29).

5. Study 1: Consultants' services for agile public relations

5.1. Method

There is little empirical research on the consulting process for agile public relations. Therefore, the research question was exploratively investigated via a guideline-based expert interviews with the aim of inductively conceptualizing agility in public relations via structuration theory. The experts were required to have experience in the structured agile reorganization of departments such as public relations. Due to the diversity of public relations (public relations in NGOs, public authorities, private sector organizations, etc.), the focus of this first explorative analysis was set on the public relations change process in German companies.

We interviewed 1) classical communications consultants, who have expertise regarding the management of communication and can provide agility expertise and models. For comparison purposes, we recruited 2) systemic consultants who focus on agility and are familiar with systemic process consulting based on system theory and constructivism. We interviewed 27 classical consultants from September 4, 2019 to January 31, 2020 by telephone (18–51 min). In contrast, twelve interviews with coaches were conducted via telephone from March 12 to April 5, 2019 (43–55 min). This number of interviews was deemed sufficient given the homogenous nature of the statements, which meant that satiation was quickly apparent and no new insights could be expected.

We identified suitable communication experts by examining the membership lists of German associations of communication consultants, such as the *Gesamtverband Kommunikationsagenturen* (German Association of Communication Agencies, GWA), as well as the Pfeffer's PR Ranking 2017. We identified 207 agencies. We contacted managing directors and agency owners as well as employees with the titles 'consultant', 'senior associate', 'strategist' or 'business developer' in their job profiles who claimed to have expertise in the fields of 'agility in general', 'agile project management' and 'agile methods'.

To identify suitable systemic consultants with a focus on agility, we conducted a Google search with the search term combination "+agile* + consulting + communication", because these consultants do not organize themselves in any kind of association. From the list of 40 consultants, we contacted all those listed except for service providers with a focus on software development. Three of the experts were recommended to us and come from a self-organized network of systemic consultants.

We conducted the analysis of the interviews with MAXQDA 2018. Regarding the analysis of the rules, we formed the categories of mission

statements, guidelines and vocabulary to examine constitutive rules and, among others, the categories of role concepts, flat hierarchies and empowerment for regulative rules. Resources were examined via the categories of personnel, financial and technical resources. Categories for routines included, for example, knowledge of rules or agile methods and employee trust. For the dimension employees, we considered categories such as attitude toward the change process and the employees' self-conception. Furthermore, categories such as the importance of the consultant, success criteria or micro-political resistance were formulated in order to examine the guided change process.

5.2. Results

5.2.1. The guided change process

The results show that the interviewed systemic consultants in the sample have more experience with agility than the interviewed expert consultants. The latter, however, have recognized the importance of the phenomenon of agility for themselves and their clients and are developing agile consulting concepts. The distinction between expert consulting and systemic process consulting is ideal-typical. In practice, expert consultants, for example, incorporate principles of systemic consulting into their consulting when necessitated by the assignment and support their clients in a co-creative process in developing their own solutions to agility problems. With regard to the course of the change process toward more agility, no differences between the two types of consultants can be seen. Accordingly, the statements relating to the change process are summarized below.

Some consultants have developed formalized approaches for restructuring, while others design the process completely free form. From the analysis of the interviews, we can derive an ideal-typical approach consisting of an analysis phase, strategy formulation, implementation and ongoing evaluation. We can identify a chronology; during the strategy and implementation phases 1) rules are developed and at the same time 2) resources are reallocated with the aim of making their application 3) routine during the process. The focus of the change process is always 4) the employees.

5.2.2. Analysis phase

For the interviewed consultants, the joint definition of goals for the consulting process is crucial for success. "The question 'Why do we actually want to become agile?' is rarely asked. This falls at people's feet during the agile transition" (Interviewee 27). Accordingly, the consultants first support their clients in formulating objectives before

analyzing the department's current level of agility. For this analysis of agile maturity, some consultants have their own standardized analysis tools, in which they usually compare company characteristics with agility dimensions. In essence, they analyze which structures exist and who has which resources. They also analyze the current work processes and employees' attitudes toward the change process. The information for the agile maturity analysis is usually determined by the consultants through systematic interviews, particularly with the management but also with employees. They also analyze documents (e.g., guidelines for employees) and sometimes conduct quantitative employee surveys and participatory observations.

5.2.3. Strategy and implementation phase

Workshops are the consultants' central instrument. Through these workshops, the recursiveness of the structure and the action necessary for the agile change process are achieved. Clients hire the interviewed consultants for an agile public relations, or for the development of agile islands. The establishment of a digital hub in public relations is an example of an agile island, where agile principles are to be implemented while the rest of the department is not fundamentally reorganized.

Usually, the interviewed consultants start the change process with a kick-off event. In this larger workshop with all managers and employees, they announce, explain and discuss agility intentions. Based on the client's history, their culture, the specific composition of their staff, and their goal, in further regular workshops, the consultants present suitable modalities for agile public relations or develop them together with the employees. They introduce and discuss interpretation schemes in the form of agile guidelines (new rules of the constitution of meaning), as well as the role concepts described in the theory section (new rules of legitimation). The introduction of such role concepts automatically requires a redistribution of resources.

In these workshops, which usually last one or two days, consultants develop and discuss the modalities, for example how to coordinate and collaborate independently and how employees can implement and use the freedoms they have gained through empowerment. Through roleplays, case studies and intensive discussions, the workshops allow employees to practice getting together as a team, assigning roles and defining the rules of their cooperation in projects. The clients then test these modalities in their everyday work until the next workshop. "Guidelines should only be considered as an intermediate step. Agility must be practiced and reflected upon again and again" (Interviewee 32).

Part of the follow-up workshops is always an exchange of

experiences about the agile rules and guidelines that were tested out in the sprints between the workshops. The concepts of the modalities are constantly improved during this iterative process in which strategy and agility concepts are tried out and constantly adapted. "We collect information and form hypotheses from it. We define thrust directions, test them, learn from them and move on to the next loop" (Interviewee 29). The statements make clear that the recursiveness of structure and action is inherent in the consulting process from the beginning.

5.2.4. Regular evaluations

During the regular feedback loops in which each sprint is evaluated, the consultants interviewed check whether they have been successful in their goal of establishing agility as a routine in companies' public relations departments. In some cases, consultants and clients determine specific milestones for measuring success. These milestones are set within a certain period of time and include a certain number of agile project teams or employees trained in a specific method such as Scrum. If a milestone is reached, e.g., the employees feel confident with the iterative work processes, this work is introduced as a binding guideline. "The goal must be that this endurance test is integrated into their daily routine like brushing their teeth" (Interviewee 33). After agile collaboration has been established and milestones have been reached, the time intervals between workshops become longer (see Fig. 2).

The experts emphasize that agility must be understood and accepted as a constant process of learning and change. "The basic attitude toward agility is that the journey is never complete. Accordingly, it would be a wrong approach to define an end point for such a transformation process" (Interviewee 28). For the experts, agility is thus a permanent recursive reorganization. Accordingly, the experts interviewed empower their clients to learn and change independently without their support. Clients have to initiate their own sprints in which they improve their agile structures and actions. To test the sustainability of the agility efforts, consultants are occasionally hired for evaluation workshops.

5.2.5. Employees as the focus of consulting

According to the consultants interviewed, the governing principle for consulting with regard to the agile transformation process is: "People are the focus of attention" (Interviewee 37). Thus, the consultants can only develop the employees if they involve the employees right from the start. "You must not persuade employees; you must convince them. And you have to change them from employees to participants" (Interviewee 15). Often the consultants build a project team together with the

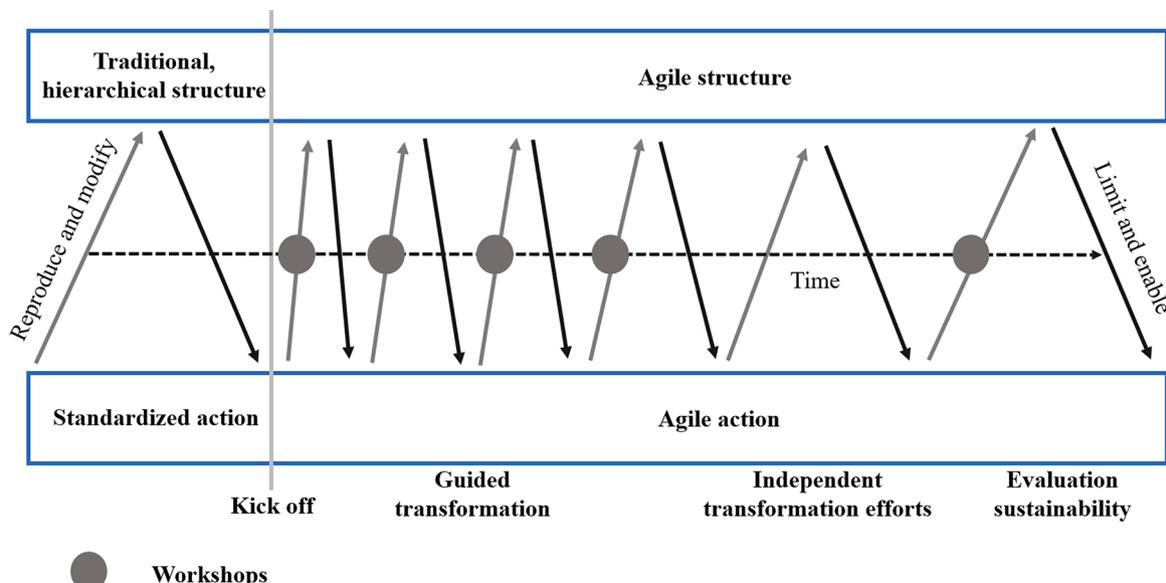


Fig. 2. Recursiveness of agile structure and agile action in the change process (own depiction).

employees, which guides the change process from within. This team is usually presented to the department at the kick-off event and is the contact partner for questions, uncertainties and conflicts that may occur further on in the process.

Above all, the focus on employees includes dealing with tensions, uncertainties and fears. The consultants make it clear to all employees that perseverance is a key success factor in the change process toward greater agility. “A change toward more agility requires patience and time. We usually accompany the process for one to three years and beyond in order to really change something” (Interviewee 30). Conflicts are unavoidable because managers and employees must be brought out of their comfort zones. The desired goal of empowerment with a democratization of allocative and authoritative resources often triggers uncertainty and concern among managers regarding a loss of power. A typical issue that employees often struggle with during the change process is the excessive demands placed on them by the increasing degrees of freedom and greater personal responsibility. The consultants openly discuss these conflicts and tensions—which, in their experience, arise in every consulting project—with all employees in the workshops but also in one-on-one meetings.

6. Study 2: Case study on how to implement agile public relations

6.1. Method

Following the expert interviews, we conducted a case study to verify the results of the first study by using a concrete example and taking into account the perspective of company representatives. To qualify for the case study, the company had to have its own wide-ranging public relations department covering various areas of traditional and digital communications and have recently gone through a change process toward more agility with the support of consultants. The company selected is a medical technology manufacturer that operates internationally and has successfully implemented agile structures and processes in their HR and public relations departments with the support of systemic consultants. We interviewed five of its members on April 4, 2019. Among the respondents were the head of HR and corporate communications, two employees who were responsible for planning and guiding the transformation process, and two employees who experienced the entire process. In addition, we interviewed two consultants from the enlisted service provider. They initiated the transformation process and guided the important workshops at the company. Thus, we can present both perspectives on a guided agile transformation process; that of the company and that of the service provider. To analyze the interviews, we used the same category system as the first study and MAXQDA 2018. The results show that the change process toward more agility consisted of three phases, which are presented below.

6.2. Results

6.2.1. Phase 1 – Reorganization of public relations

The change process began with a very short analysis phase in 2017, in which the consultants talked to a few employees from the middle management level and to the head of corporate communications. The development of the agility strategy as well as its simultaneous implementation began with six workshops taking place that year. In the first workshops, which were scheduled at short intervals, the consultants conveyed basic concepts in order to develop a common language. This means that the first measure aimed to establish common rules of the constitution of meaning. This also included teaching the basics of self-organization, e.g., the meaning and purpose of a Kanban board, a tool for visualizing the workflow, or the establishment of project teams. Although the experts were systemic consultants, they initially conveyed the rules of the constitution of meaning with elements of expert advice as a basis for the further change process.

In the last three workshops of the first phase, which were held at approximately four-week intervals, the consultants introduced additional aspects of the agility concept and formulated rules of legitimacy with the employees in the form of role concepts. The elaboration of decision principles described the use of allocative and authoritative resources. The half-day and full-day workshops were designed very loosely, so that sometimes the consultants themselves did not know what was going to happen. “There have been periods of frustration where employees have quickly fallen back into their old ways. We admonished them to adhere strictly to our guidelines. Then there were experiences that could be described as a breakthrough.” (Interviewee Consultant 2). The result of the first phase, which was described as extremely challenging by the employees interviewed, was a kind of constitution that outlined the basic agile rules and processes.

6.2.2. Phase 2 – Readjustment

The second phase began with a comprehensive evaluation of the progress made so far. The employees were to decide what further advice they needed for a routine application of the agile rules and resources developed thus far: “Self-organization meant that the employees themselves took responsibility and had to decide” (Interviewee Consultant 2). The evaluation showed that the employees needed colleagues who could support them in their self-organized daily work. Therefore, eight employees were trained as meeting pilots and process controllers. Meeting pilots moderate meetings with different methods and tools. They set the framework for the meeting, help to define goals for tasks and moderate the meeting according to tight schedules. In addition to their training as meeting pilots, process controllers completed further training to support employees in their self-organization. The process controllers were then responsible for the ongoing implementation of the change process. They conducted employee surveys on satisfaction with the change process and any urgent issues related to it. These further qualifications are mentioned as a decisive component for the future, as they enable the public relations department to make its own sprints and adapt the agile structures and actions as necessary.

6.2.3. Phase 3 – Dissolving the last hybrid structures

The third phase began in April 2019 with another major evaluation of the change process. This took the form of a two-day review workshop involving all participants with tandem moderation provided by the trained process controllers and the consultants. It became clear that there were still remnants of traditional leadership and leadership roles that were still linked to specific people. The middle management level had not yet made the rules of the constitution of meaning part of their routine, which is why hierarchical structures with control over authoritative resources in the background still existed. Nevertheless, the company had advanced in terms of their agile maturity. Improvement measures could be further workshops, especially for managers to better reflect leadership-related topics: “Managers should recognize what potential employees have, what they need and support them as coaches” (Interviewee Company 1). Likewise, issues regarding employees’ development, career opportunities and salary increases still need to be clarified. Questions of career advancement are usually closely linked to the distribution of allocative and authoritative resources and responsibilities. The question now arises as to what standards can be set for career advancement when all employees in flat hierarchies have been given more responsibility.

6.2.4. The Importance of consultants for employee development

According to the company representatives interviewed, the employees questioned the relevance of the consultants because they were reticent. From the very beginning, they positioned the employees as the creators and architects of their own change process. They introduced five so-called meta-circles. Each circle dealt with one aspect of the change process. For example, the *coordination* circle developed a transparent form of task coordination and process execution. The

transformation circle dealt with the employees' mood and served as a contact point for employees with questions about the process.

During the course of the transformation, the employees recognized the importance of consultants as a reflective, neutral authority. The consultants countered the idea among some managers that agility can be introduced top down and mediated between managers and employees. They ensured transparency and provided orientation, identified hurdles and at the same time focused on the application of what has been learned. The consultants are also still needed for future development. "They will remain companions, because we want to develop further. This supervision and sparring partner role [...] is important" (Interviewee Company 1).

7. Discussion

The results of the two studies are strong indicators that the move toward more agility in public relations is taking place as an intentional reflexive restructuring, in which rules of agile principles are successively applied by employees in the specific, interrelated, solidified social practices and interaction patterns of public relations. Through these agile actions, public relations structures are increasingly reproduced according to agile principles. Consultants should be located in the organizational environment and, as agility experts, bring targeted impetus for change into the public relations system. They support public relations professionals in designing and directly applying the modalities, i.e., the rules of the constitution of meaning and legitimation as well as allocative and authoritative resources according to agile principles. The testing of the further developed modalities is done iteratively in many sprints. In the beginning, these sprints are shorter, while the time spans between evaluations increase during the change process. The aim of public relations, with its agile structures and interaction patterns, is to act as a flexible interface to absorb information from the organization, process it in an agile manner, and act as a communications agent in the public sphere on behalf of the organization to achieve set goals.

The interviews with the consultants as well as the case study show that the structuring theory and the analysis dimensions derived from it are suitable for the analysis of agile transformation processes. The results emphasize that the analysis dimension of employees is the cornerstone of this restructuring. The focus must be on the employees, since agility is a predominantly cognitive process in which actions and structures change only through the people involved. All changes for more agility have to tie in with the existing structures, processes and culture of the public relations department in order to develop the employees. The aim of consulting during the transformation process must be to achieve a change in the way employees act by making the agile practices become routine. Only when the employees' actions are rooted in agile structures and become routine can we speak of agile public relations. Central to this is the application of resources according to agile principles, i.e., in a flat hierarchy with clear areas of responsibility and defined roles.

Interviewing consultants for the explorative analysis of the agile change process in public relations has proven to be expedient. In particular, the systemic consultants interviewed have many years of experience in supporting companies throughout this process. That said, the results show that a clear distinction between classical and systemic consultants is not possible. Even though the case study included the perspective of company representatives, a central limitation of these studies is the focus on consultants. It is not surprising that a survey of consultants shows that consultants in a moderator role with their neutral outside perspective are important for the change process. They help to identify the client's own strengths and weaknesses, potential and risks, things that often elude the client's own perception. The company representatives interviewed in the case study confirm that as members of the organization they are too caught up in their organizational cosmos to recognize fears, uncertainties and excessive demands that are part of such a change process. However, for a more critical examination the

focus on the client perspective is necessary. Although the subject of the case study is a corporation that operates internationally, no conclusions can be drawn about the extent to which the change process toward agile public relations differs in other countries. This requires further research. Likewise, the concept of agility must be questioned even more critically in the next step; that is, we must pose the question to what extent agility is actually necessary in which areas of public relations. The consultants emphasize that agility is not an end in itself and is not suitable for every organization and department.

8. Implications

From the analyses of the two studies conducted, indications can be drawn concerning what the communication management department should demand of consultants and what they themselves must contribute in order to successfully carry out the agile change process. If communication management engages consultants in order to become more agile in their public relations, they should demand a solution and goal orientation. The interviewed consultants unanimously report that agility must be implemented in a targeted manner. Communication management should engage confident consultants who create transparency surrounding interrelationships, insights and all steps of the consulting process—even if this transparency produces uncomfortable results and reveals hidden conflicts. Communication management must demand that consultants link the change process to existing structures and processes and that they consider the goals of the public relations department and the organization as a whole. In turn, communication management must provide the information necessary to provide effective advice to consultants. Every member of the public relations department, from management to employees, must be open to other structures, approaches, and new ideas. They must be self-critical and question themselves throughout the process. Every member must also show interest and commitment. In order to involve every employee in the process, each idea, attitude and fear must be heard. Above all, the public relations department must demonstrate resilience, because the change process is long-term and involves many potential setbacks before the new structures and processes prove themselves to be efficient and effective.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgement

This research has been funded by the Academic Society for Management & Communication, a joint initiative of four universities and almost 40 companies in the German-speaking part of Europe. The non-profit has been active since 2010 with the aim of actively shaping the future of corporate communications through joint research and knowledge sharing (www.academic-society.net).

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