The compassionate organization: contesting the rhetoric of goodwill in public sector value statements

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper tests whether organisations in the public domain have embraced a corporate type of discourse, mirroring the private sector's preferred orientation towards expertise, or whether they maintain their traditional discourse of goodwill towards the publics they serve. At a critical time for the public sector with inadequate funding and dominance of New Public Management approaches, will it be more motivated to portray itself as expert and efficient rather than altruistic?

Design/methodology/approach – The paper applies a rhetorical framework to provide a detailed analysis of organisational value statements posted on the websites of public and private organisations. The research considers the value priorities of fifty organisations in the UK and Scandinavia in order to gauge the extent of convergence between the two sectors' preferred discourses.

Findings – The research shows that the public sector sticks to its guns in maintaining a web-transmitted values discourse which forefronts goodwill towards its clients. It also shows that the public and private sectors take different approaches to goodwill.

Originality/value – Strategists and communication specialists are encouraged to contemplate the extent to which their organisation´s projected Web image equate their desired image to avoid alienating important public audiences and reinforce levels of trust. The current framework brings attention to the complex nature of goodwill and may be employed to better balance a discourse of organisational expertise against a discourse of goodwill in planning authentic value statements.

Keywords Values, goodwill, trustworthiness, expertise, ethos, trust, self-presentation.

Paper type: Research paper

Introduction

Everywhere we look we see signs that public and private organisations are under pressure to protect or regain the trust of sceptical consumers, investors, government agencies and members of the general public. These audiences all appear to be expecting reassurance that public and private organisations have strong values, are benevolent, and hold good intentions. This affects not only our usual suspects such as the banking industry, tobacco manufacturers, or serious polluters in the oil industry, but also public hospitals, local councils, educational institutions and government agencies. Clearly, *competence* or *expertise* is a prerequisite of organisational trust as no one will want to be involved with businesses or authorities which consistently underperform. But claims to expertise cannot stand alone in a changing context where a premium is put on organisational accountability and responsiveness. The competence of expertise must be supported by solid ethical standards and a true concern for clients, customers and the environment.

In two previous studies (Authors, 2010a and 2008), we found that market leading PR agencies and banks are only slowly giving the interpersonal and trust-inducing values of care and collaboration preference over rational discourses of expertise. This is critical insofar as the building

of trust relies crucially on organisations' ability to elicit an emotionally grounded response from clients.

Private and public sector organisations have traditionally followed very different trajectories in the relationship with their audiences, but these trajectories have increasingly converged. This shift was arguably spurred by the predominant New Public Management paradigm's "grand aim … to make the state more dynamic and entrepreneurial", causing the public sector to try to demonstrate high levels of performance and efficiency to the extent that it "stands charged with having weakened accountability and public service ethics" (Bevir: 142-144). In the current study, we test whether organisations in the public sector are in fact portraying themselves through a discourse resembling the private sector's traditional focus on competence and efficiency. In doing so, they may be giving lower priority to the sector's expected discourse of *trustworthiness* and *goodwill* towards clients and citizens (Authors, 2008). Without such discourse, they risk alienating a general public suffering the effects of global economic crisis. In such times, the challenge for the public sector is to secure a safe balance between performance and caring in its self-presentations. To do so, organisational strategists and communication officers may benefit from rhetorical tools effective in coining and controlling their public identity.

The website is clearly a tremendously convenient way of reaching an organisation's many different stakeholders. Web-savvy audiences are apt to form strong opinions of how public providers verbalise their concern for the welfare of their clients or the community they serve. Typically, these goodwill concerns are articulated in the form of value statements, visions or missions, in some combination with expressions of expertise and trustworthiness. This supports Miller's general assertion (2004: 211) that expertise does not by itself generate trust but must be linked with an *ethos of sympathy*. Therefore, both public and private organisations should logically continue to cast themselves in a light of goodwill to satisfy modern demands for benevolence and thus build trust. A discourse of goodwill has been shown to link with business success (Williams 2008; Wæraas and Ihlen 2009), and such success is contingent on a detailed understanding of its rhetorical nature and execution. Goodwill is, in other words, key to understanding the richness and potential of organisational value statements.

Approach

Our approach is two-fold. First, we explain our framework of appeal types for producing goodwill content embedded in organisational discourse. Second, we employ the framework to account for the practice of goodwill in a broad corpus of organisational discourse. This examination demonstrates the effectiveness of the framework in distinguishing between three different types of goodwill discourse and, thus, in separating them from other appeal types. With a better understanding of the nuances of goodwill, this tool makes it possible to evaluate the current balance of expertise and goodwill and to contemplate a shift to something that is both more truly reflecting the organisational identity and holds potential for creating an emotionally energised trust.

Our approach to organisational credibility is based on the assumption that discourse about any organisation will reflect the three qualities of *expertise, trustworthiness* and *goodwill* (Authors, 2010a). Our view is that ethos discourse is an organisation's primary means of conveying information about its identity. Our focus is specifically on the discourse of value statements as they are the most expressive texts of identity on organisational websites and, thus, the most potent source of a rhetoric of expertise, trustworthiness and goodwill.

Goodwill expresses compassion and is therefore arguably the most difficult of the rhetorical options to handle in organisational texts. Goodwill is more expressive of the organisation's affectionate character than is a skills-driven, acquired competence or a morally-guided claim to trustworthiness. Its discourse is one of passion, and it is closely related to the Aristotelian notion of *pathos* (Author 2005) as it activates the emotions of human interaction. While it may be fairly risk-free to exaggerate one's expertise (*"Manufacturers of the best wines in the world"*) or to claim trustworthiness (*"Our honesty and integrity is world-class"*), similar overstatements about one's own goodwill towards others may be picked up as ingenuine or perhaps even silly (*"Our main concern is ensuring our customers are happy and that they have a positive and painless experience"*). To successfully portray an organisation as compassionate, it is important to know how goodwill may be textually instantiated. It is equally important to know when there is too much of one type of ethos or too little of another since a discourse overladen with uncensored self-glorification will likely be counter-productive.

The following example demonstrates how a public sector organisation nicely expresses its ethos through its value statements, incorporating expertise, trustworthiness and goodwill:

Our values are to:
- put the people who use services first, be informed by what they tell us and stand up for their rights and dignity (goodwill)
- be expert and authoritative … (expertise)
- be visible, open, transparent and accountable (trustworthiness).

The nature of goodwill

A rare but instructive example of a focused goodwill strategy was the pre-credit crunch brand communication campaign of UBS, the now tarnished Swiss bank, built around the inclusive catchline of "You & Us". This catchline was very powerful in communicating an equal partnership and real commitment. The campaign's extensive discourse of goodwill was revolving around these notions ("You & Us. An ability to listen, a commitment to understand") and was supported by an equally powerful visual rhetoric portraying consultants and clients engaging in thoughtful and constructive conversation. However, goodwill is complex and can be perceived from different theoretical perspectives. Here, we propose a tripartite configuration of the construct and demonstrate, by way of real-life examples from three different national contexts, how our model's three dimensions can be textually performed. The model may serve as a tool for both academics and practitioners in gauging how goodwill is manifested. We have identified three appeals (attention, devotion and concord) that serve to make goodwill operational.

FIGURE 1 HERE

(1) *Attention* brings the organisation to the fore in a self-reflexive expression of sympathy for the audience. Hoff-Clausen (2008: 228) argues that "ethos is about the gradual building of social authority" and, importantly, about the building of a sympathetic demeanour that may reach the audience. With *attention*, the organisation makes explicit that it has a special concern for others and recognizes and supports their needs. This is done through self-reflexive statements amplifying the organisation's undivided attention to and concern for the welfare of others, accentuating its

own positive intentions. In this way, the focus is squarely on the character of the message source and thus the text expresses a "me-attitude".

In our example from the Equality and Human Rights Commission (UK), the Commission forefronts its own helpful role in facilitating contact and understanding between two other parties:

> We see <u>our role</u> as helping people who might not otherwise meet to get to know and understand one another better.

(2) As *Devotion* expresses affection and self-sacrifice, it is arguably goodwill in its purest form. According to Miller (2004: 212), *devotion* "continually deflects attention away from the agent and back to the audience". In this way, the organisation may create sympathy for itself by allowing its audience to take centre stage. In more concrete terms, *devotion* is an appeal which expresses the happiness or good fortune the organisation wishes for others and wants to contribute to. It also captures the confidence that the organisation invests in the target audience. This includes statements concerned with the organisation's strong dedication to the target audience and confidence in its intentions and behaviours. Such statements articulate a "you-attitude".

In the example below, the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (UK) adopts an instrumental or perhaps even subservient position:

> Child focus – engage with children and families so <u>what we do is determined by their needs</u>.

(3) *Concord* is how the organisation engages in a relationship of sharing or common effort with its target audience. This refers to statements concerned with the organisation's collaborative efforts or bond or partnership with its target audience. The focus is here on the organisation's inclusiveness achieved through a close alliance between message source and target audience, and the text consequently expresses a "we-attitude".

The example below, taken from the Independent Police Complaints Commission (UK), highlights the cooperative and inclusive approach taken by this body:

> We <u>work with stakeholders</u> to develop our policies.

As the three examples show, we are here concerned with the detailed rhetorical tactics of expressing goodwill. This is based on the premise that readers of public discourse are sensitive to and respond to very small variances in the content of a given message. By carefully selecting the appeal form that most accurately depicts the organisation's attitude and approach, the message should in principle be received as authentic by a broad spectrum of stakeholders and interest groups. An attention to these subtle differences is immanent in the literature on ethos and harks back to Aristotle and Cicero.

A shift in emphasis
Miller (2004: 212) has noted a possible shift "from an overemphasis on expertise to an overemphasis on interaction, from a logos-centric to a pathos-centric *ethos*". Miller's reflection concurs with our observation that online self-presentations have become more relationship-oriented, involved and perhaps also attentive and emotional. Both Hoff-Clausen (2008: 229) and Miller (2004: 210-211) suggest that a pathos-centric ethos of interaction guided by compassion and sympathy is better

suited to the rationale and realization of an online presence whose principal task is to demonstrate social respect and the building of relationships rather than to make assurance of organisational expertise.

The interactive challenge of achieving effective corporate self-presentation on the web lies in conveying attitudes towards participants in the discourse through the use of first-person pronouns ("me-" and "we-attitude). This "typically suggests that the author communicates beliefs rather than facts, which reduces the factuality of a text but helps to establish relationships with readers". Another challenge (Pollach 2005: 296) is in drawing diverse audiences into an online discourse universe. This calls for a shift in focus from self to audience ("you-attitude"). One objective of trying to reach out to audiences is to humanize the organisation.

This transformation from expertise to goodwill becomes particularly complex in relation to organisational value statements. In their research, Van der Wal *et al.* (2008: 476) find "a traditional and consistent value pattern for both the public and private sector", which contradicts the expectation that client-oriented public service values are being superseded by private sector performance-driven values. Their study shows the most important public sector values to be lawfulness, integrity, reliability, as well as expertise and accountability where the latter is ranked as "the number one value". They argue that accountability is "related to outwardly and responsive conduct" and to citizen- and customer-friendliness (van der Wal *et al.*, 2008: 476), suggesting a traditional goodwill-centric discourse. In our view, accountability is not a goodwill trait per se to be associated with how organisations treat and approach clients, but is more closely related to qualities of trustworthiness, such as a sense of responsibility and obligation towards all stakeholders.

A recent study of value statements in regulative public institutions (Wæraas 2010: 529) points at a change from a more traditional authoritative and bureaucratic approach to new value orientations focused on user and customer friendliness. This study suggests that the change is from institutions being rule-oriented and ineffective to being people-oriented, emphasizing good relations, closeness, and trust (Wæraas 2010: 535-536). These values, referred to as "people values", were found to be the most common. Wæraas confirms the general trend of a shift in orientation towards goodwill in the public sector. However, as the data in the Wæraas study is based on regulative institutions, it operates on a different assumption from our study regarding what constitutes traditional and new public sector values.

Together, these studies motivate continued theory building and further empirical studies on how values translate into competing discourses of expertise and goodwill where the latter is increasingly perceived to be "more attractive". More concise modellings will help address a compelling need to further disambiguate goodwill rhetoric so that value statements can be managed with greater accuracy to project authentic organisational identities.

Methods and data

Through content analysis, we analysed the webpages of 25 public and 25 private organisations' value statements for their content of the three different types of goodwill appeals, and the two remaining types of ethos appeals. This allowed us to compare the value priorities of 50 organisations and, thus, to determine the extent of a possible convergence of discourse across the two sectors. The value statements were selected from the websites of British and Nordic public and private organisations. The analysis of organisational discourse was both qualitative and quantitative in order to expose not only the complex nature of the communication but also to show the different distributions of goodwill in the two sectors. By analysing the data corpus for the three ethos

dimension of competence, trustworthiness and goodwill, we were able to separate the value statements imbued with goodwill and, subsequently, to break those statements down into attention, devotion and concord.

The data were analysed for the different appeal types by both authors in two separate processes. This was done on the basis of a coding manual containing detailed definitions and examples of each appeal type. Subsequently, the two sets of coding were compared and re-analysed in order to obtain a uniform and agreed coding result. Since a qualitative discourse analysis conducted on a sentence basis is inevitably interpretative, a carefully laid-out coding scheme like the one used here is a necessary compass to guide the analyst towards achieving a result that can subsequently be accounted for in quantitative terms. The units of analysis vary in length and textual expression as complete sentences were treated on a par with statements consisting of just a sub-clause, key words or other text fragments.

The public organisations in our corpus include councils, commissions, agencies, public transportation providers, museums and libraries, while the private organisations include pharmaceutical companies, banks, educational institutions and media companies. Although the organisations are from different countries and some are pan-Nordic, the purpose was not to provide a comparative study. Instead, we take the UK and the Scandinavian countries to be culturally, historically and politically connected to an extent where they share a general set of values supporting a Northern European approach to social democracy and collective social responsibility.

Findings

In the ALL VALUES column of Table 1, we have accumulated the scores for the value appeals against each sector. The appeals were identified in the data by the analysts and tagged as expertise, trustworthiness or goodwill. In the GOODWILL VALUES column, we have extracted the goodwill appeals, showing how they distribute into appeals of attention, devotion and concord. The table shows their percentage of occurrence. The bottom of the table shows the difference in values strategies between the two sectors.

TABLE 1 HERE

Significantly, and contrary to our hypothesis, we obtain a clear indication that the public sector prioritizes goodwill (34.7%) over expertise (20.5%), while the private sector demonstrates almost the reverse weighting of value statements (34.5% expertise against 24.9% goodwill). The data thus show the traditional trajectories of the two sectors to be clearly maintained irrespective of shifting management philosophies.

In examining the weighting of goodwill values, we obtain significant differences. The public sector gives high priority to the collaboration that can be expressed through statements of concord (40.2%) and thus sends a strong signal that cooperation and identification of common solutions are valued. Oppositely, in communicating goodwill, the private sector organisations are strongly concerned with their own particular contribution to the target audience's welfare (51.6% attention), and have little focus on the shared contribution to reaching a desired outcome (16.1% concord). Again, this would confirm the more traditional perception that the two sectors' approaches are differently defined, namely by a public service relationship and by a commercial relationship, respectively.

A third important observation to be made from the data is that both sectors are very concerned to highlight their trustworthiness (44.8% against 40.6%), i.e. they are focused on explaining that

they have high integrity, are righteous, honest and committed to what they do. The result obtained in relation to trustworthiness was a "by-product" of the research insofar as this dimension of ethos was not central to our agenda of observing the balance between the competence of expertise and goodwill across the two sectors.

While this was not a cross-cultural study of public and private sector discourse, the analysis did all the same generate some unexpected but interesting discrepancies particularly in relation to the public sector. First and foremost, we see a marked difference in the UK and the Nordic approaches to goodwill with a notable preference for showing unreserved devotion to clients in the UK and a more pronounced preference for concord by inviting collaboration and common effort in the Nordic countries. Again in relation to communicating devotion, the public and private sectors in the UK are clearly more unlike one another than are the two sectors in the Nordic countries.

Discussion

Our research shows where the public and private sectors converge and diverge in explaining organisational identity to their primary interest groups. The picture we obtain is one of a public sector seeking to establish a relationship driven by goodwill, and a private sector focussed on offering reassurance of its expertise. This suggests that the public sector has maintained a discourse of compassion which may be a reflection of the sector's commitment to traditional welfare state values of service provision. This can be perceived as a prudent choice at a time when both practitioners and academics are pointing to the need for a compassionate organisational discourse irrespective of sector.

Our model in Figure 1 shows that goodwill may be instantiated through any of the three dimensions of Attention, Devotion and Concord. These dimensions allow the writer of values discourse to adopt an I-attitude, a you-attitude, or a we-attitude, respectively (Authors, 2010a). Our research shows that the public sector has a slight preference for communicating Concord, stressing the cooperative spirit and shared responsibility between public sector representatives and their audiences. While we see that Attention and Devotion are prominent across our data set, but seldom used in combination, we suggest that the professional writer may benefit from our theoretical model in building an awareness of the potential of incorporating all three goodwill dimensions in a given piece of discourse. This allows for a more nuanced representation of the organisation's values and demonstrates organisational richness of identity.

In addition, we see that both sectors give primary attention to establishing their trustworthiness through statements about integrity, honesty and lawfulness. This further sharpens our awareness of the rhetorical resources and alternatives that organisational strategists have at their fingertips in consciously framing the organisation's identity with precision and efficiency around a set of core values.

In contemplating goodwill, any organisation will need to decide how self-focused it wants to appear and the extent to which trust levels are contingent on expressions of sympathy and responsiveness. For providers of public services the challenge appears to be one of striking a sensible balance between traditional virtues of serving civil society and of demonstrating that the sector is capable and delivers results quickly and efficiently. In seeking this balance, organisational self-presentations should be careful to also explain that the organisation is passionate about what it does, dynamic and determined, law-abiding and protective of its integrity. It is in the balancing of these three building blocks of identity that organisations may not only create trust but also stand out as unique, innovative and complete.

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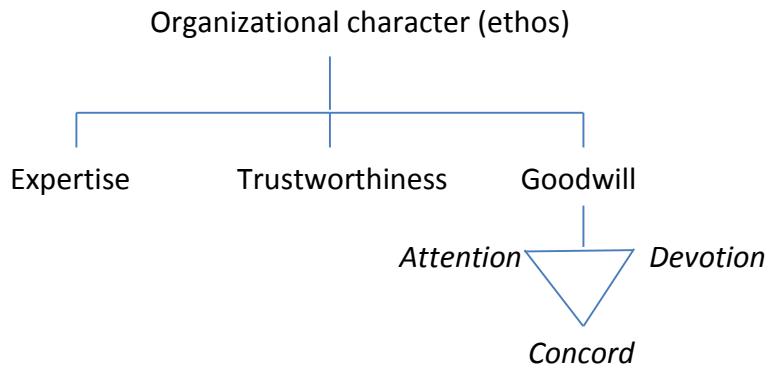
Organizational character (ethos)

Expertise   Trustworthiness   Goodwill

Attention   *Devotion*

Concord

Figure 1: Organizational character with modelling of goodwill aspects

PUBLIC & PRIVATE SECTORS		ALL VALUES					GOODWILL VALUES			
ETHOS APPEALS		Expertise	Trust-worthiness	Goodwill	Total scores		Attention	Devotion	Concord	Total Scores
%	Public	*20.5*	*44.8*	*34.7*	*100.0*		*25.2*	*34.6*	*40.2*	*100.0*
%	Private	*34.5*	*40.6*	*24.9*	*100.0*		*51.6*	*32.3*	*16.1*	*100*
% diff.	Public		*+4.2*	*+9.8*				*+2.3*	*+24.1*	
% diff.	Private	*+14.0*					*+26.4*			

Table 1: Values comparison across public and private sectors (UK and Nordic combined)