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for internal communication consulting within organizations***

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**Enabling, advising, supporting, executing:
A theoretical framework for internal communication consulting within organizations**

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This article analyzes the consulting and enabling function within the role set of communication managers and provides an initial theoretical framework for internal communication consulting in organizations. The idea of communication professionals as *consultants* and *enablers of communication* has already been introduced by a number of researchers. Nevertheless, the necessity of this task as well as the specific dimensions and practices of *internal communication consulting* and its various objectives, forms, and specifications have not been elaborated until now. This article takes an initial step towards closing this gap by developing a theoretical framework based on research in business consulting and existing public relations role models. After a short introduction (section I), the necessity of the consulting function will be emphasized by introducing the concept of the *communicative organization*, in which managing relationships by communication is part of every employee's job profile (section II). In order to fulfill this requirement, communicative competencies in a much broader sense than traditional business and interpersonal communication have to be developed on a broad scale. This leads to a new challenge for communication professionals: they are asked to advise organizational members regarding communicative topics and to enable them to resolve *communication-related issues* as well as *task-related issues* (section III). Based on a review of the relevant streams of research in different disciplines, a framework for internal communication consulting has been constructed by combining the dimensions of consulting

forms and objectives (section IV). Qualitative interviews with communication executives of major European organizations have been conducted to verify the breadth and plausibility of this framework (section V). The article closes by outlining implications for the research, education, and practice of public relations (section VI).

Introduction

Today's organizations are embedded in a broad set of stakeholder relationships as well as legal, economic, and cultural constraints. There are numerous organizational touchpoints and interactions with the environment located within almost all the parts of an organization. The traditional strategies of allocating and limiting access and interactions for specific stakeholders to dedicated units like marketing and sales, public relations, or customer services are no longer viable in networked societies. This development challenges the traditional understandings of strategic communication and public relations (Arthur W. Page Society, 2007). Obviously, a rising number of organizational touchpoints with the environment leads to increasing risks of inconsistent communication as well as a lack of orientation, identity, and common understanding of goals and values.

Traditionally, the communication function has been mandated to shape the image of the organization as well as to stimulate processes of identity building and cultural identification by communicating with external and internal stakeholders. Moreover, communication is necessary to facilitate operational processes, e.g. by influencing consumers' preferences, informing about strategic decisions, helping leaders to motivate team members, and attracting public attention to community activities. However, this is obviously not only performed by communication professionals, but by leaders in nearly every department as well as by every co-worker and employee who is in contact with other people within his or her job (Heide & Simonsson, 2011, pp. 201-202). That is exactly what today's complexity, speed, and changes require. Therefore, organizations and their members need to be able to integrate communicative implications into their decision-making processes. This may lead to a fundamental change within the role set and job profiles of communication managers in organizations: "To be able to meet this challenge requires that professional communicators move their professional focus from leading

communication processes to developing the organisation's communication skills on all levels" (Hamrefors, 2009, p. 19). The conceptual background for this development is outlined in relation to the concept of the communicative organization.

The communicative organization

Since organizational communication or public relations is understood as a function to support the top management by attaining the overall organizational goals, like the protection of "advantages in competitiveness" (Zerfass, 2008, p. 68) as well as the development and "preserving of social legitimacy" (Verhoeven, Zerfass, & Tench, 2011, p. 96), it impacts on economic and social dimensions as well as receiving impacts from them at the same time (van Ruler & Verčič, 2005, pp. 263-265; Zerfass, 2008, pp. 67-68). From this point of view, organizational communication does not only include the traditional "outbound" paradigm of communication, including a focus on speaking out, announcements, and trying to deliver messages to audiences, which are predominant in communication and public relations perspectives (Zerfass, Tench, Verhoeven, Verčič, & Moreno, 2010, pp. 26-28). Besides, there is empirical evidence that a more comprehensive understanding of the communication function, also including the "inbound" activities of listening and monitoring to inform overall strategic decision making (and not only communication campaigns), is gaining in importance (pp. 28).

Along this line, the *Stockholm Accords*, a collaborative effort of more than 1,000 leaders of the global public relations profession from 42 countries, proposed the vision of a *communicative organization* that "requires timely information, knowledge and understanding of economic, social, environmental and legal developments, as well as of its stakeholders' expectations. This [is] to promptly identify and deal with the opportunities and risks that can impact the organization's direction, action and communication" (Stockholm Accords, 2010).

These communication activities take place at nearly every point in the organization – not only in the communication department (Belasen, 2008, pp. 4-5;). The employees of the financial department need to be aware of communicative effects and consequences when communicating with their stakeholders, just as members of the human resources, legal, or sales department need to be. Communicative consequences and effects need to be decoupled from the exclusive link to

explicit communication activities like targeted announcements, communication campaigns, and events. The focus needs to be broadened and consciously linked to everyday interactions with suppliers, business partners, public departments, potential employees, or other internal and external stakeholder groups within the individual job execution but also in their private lives (Heide & Simonsson 2011, p. 212). Furthermore, activities like the monitoring, interpretation, and inclusion of information in decision-making processes and organizational activities need to be integrated into communicative competencies: “Because teams operate close to the frontlines of the organization (upstream systems) and often communicate directly with customers, they need to be familiar with corporate communication goals and messages. Performing diverse organizational tasks and often faced with the need to handle boundary spanning activities, team members must be familiar with core communication activities and products and act in accordance with corporate communication goals” (Belasen, 2008, p. 164). Heide and Simonsson (2011) even go beyond the corporate communication goals by emphasizing that employees need “to be able to engage in dialogue, to give and take feedback and to share information in a meaningful way. In relation to the employer and the growing importance of branding, each employee is an important messenger. All employees must have a thorough understanding of their employer’s strategies and values, of how their own work fits into the bigger picture, and of how to communicate accordingly” (p. 205). In order to meet this challenge, the management of relationships by communication needs to be understood as not restricted to dedicated functions and departments, but as part of every employee’s job profile (Heide & Simonsson, 2011, p. 206). Therefore, everyone within the organization and thus the whole organization itself needs to be able to communicate effectively (van Ruler & Verčič, 2003, p. 23; Brønn, van Ruler, & Verčič, 2009, p. 78; Tench, Verhoeven, & Zerfass, 2009, p. 151).

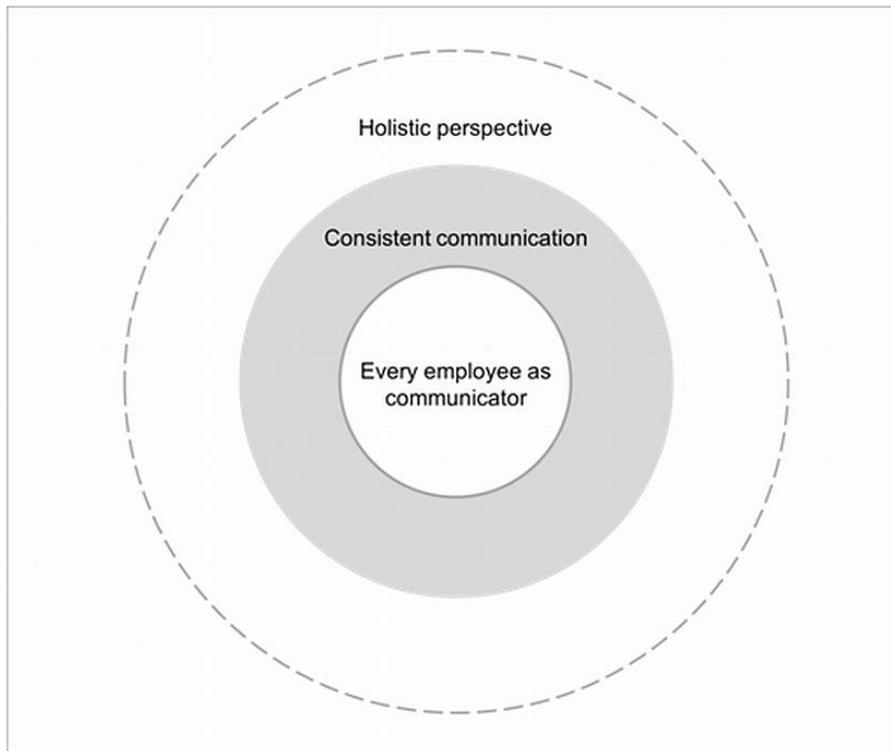


FIGURE 1: Core elements of the communicative organization

Based on these assumptions, the understanding of the communicative organization in the literature and in this article includes the following elements, also illustrated in figure 1:

- awareness of the *communicator role of every employee*
- *outbound* communication with a *consistent set of core principles* and visions
- *inbound* activities with a *holistic view* as well as integration and interpretation of information from neighboring areas.

To ensure the realization of this concept, every employee needs to have communicative competencies including active communication competencies (*outbound*) and perceptual and interpretative competencies (*inbound*), as well as cooperative competencies (*integrative*), which provide the knowledge and skills to combine active communication and perceptual competencies in order to build a common communication practice (Belasen, 2008, p. 164; Cornelissen, 2008, p. 72; Zerfass, 2010, pp. 189-192).

In order to ensure the communicative competencies of an organization and its employees, communication experts need to widen their professional focus “from leading communication processes to developing the organisation’s communication skills” (Hamrefors, 2009, p. 19) and thereby “building communicative capacity” (p. 10) within the whole organization. This, within a holistic perspective, requires a reconceptualization of the role set for communication managers within organizations by moving the focal point from communication execution to *communication consulting*: “Hence, communication practitioners will have to take a role as internal consultants, coaches and trainers to a much greater extent than before” (Heide & Simonsson, 2011, p. 206). Based on their professional knowledge and expertise, they have to advise members of the organization on communication issues as well as enabling the whole organization to communicate adequately (van Ruler & Verčič, 2005; Grove Ditlevsen, 2008, p. 21; Hamrefors, 2009, p. 22;).¹

Therefore, communication managers need to cover a spectrum of enabling others on the one hand as well as giving expert advice on the other hand. These consulting forms are well researched within the general consulting literature (for an overview see Engwall & Kipping, in this issue). For communication consulting this has not yet taken place in a detailed and comprehensive way. For that reason, this article will describe the forms of consulting that exist within the role set of communication managers in organizations and even go beyond that by zooming in on the specifics of communication consulting.

Theoretical approaches to internal consulting

The idea of communication professionals as *consultants* and *enablers of communication* has been introduced by a number of public relations researchers (Moss, Warnaby, & Newman, 2000, pp. 277-300; Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002, pp. 232-234; Moss, Newman, & DeSanto, 2005, p. 878; van Ruler & Verčič, 2005, pp. 263-265; Hamrefors, 2009, pp. 53-54). Usually these studies are linked to the general consulting role as one of many roles enacted by

¹ Since training and development traditionally lie within human resource departments (HR), it has to be noted that the approach of building communicative competencies by communication experts does not neglect the responsibilities and tasks of HR. While communication experts take the responsibility for focusing on communicative aspects within everybody’s roles, the execution of training and skill development can be conceptualized as a joint approach of HR and communication departments (Heide & Simonsson, 2011, p. 215).

communication professionals (Broom & Smith, 1978; Dozier, 1984; Moss et al., 2000; Grunig et al., 2002; van Ruler & Verčič, 2002; Moss et al., 2005; Hamrefors, 2009) or deal exclusively with external communication consulting executed by agencies or freelance consultants (see e.g. Kubr, 2002; Röttger & Zielmann, 2009b; Fuhrberg, 2010). In both cases, the specific dimensions and practices of *internal communication consulting* and its various objectives, forms, and specifications have not been researched comprehensively until now. To close this gap, this article reviews the existing literature on business consulting and existing public relations role models. The focus explicitly lies on internal communication professionals who consult departments and employees of the same organization.

Elements of internal consulting processes within consulting research

In general consulting research, the area of *internal consulting* has not been studied in the same way as the field of *external consulting*. Nevertheless, some literature and studies have been published and some ideas and concepts of external consulting can also be carefully adopted for internal consulting.

Internal consulting must be differentiated from *in-house consulting* which is a stand-alone function in organizations, focusing on consulting in various contexts. In contrast, *internal consulting* is provided by functional departments, such as communication departments, which are defined by a specific core activity that is complemented by consulting tasks concerning topics within the respective functional area. Obviously, internal consulting by employees of functional departments based on their specialized knowledge and experience has always been part of organizations. A new aspect is the increasing degree of institutionalization (Oefinger, 1986, p. 14; Klanke, 1992, p. 103). Institutionalization describes the official embedding of tasks in functional roles as well as the self-evidence, legitimacy, and acceptance of it (Brandl, 2005, pp. 22-25; Sandhu, 2009, pp. 82-83; Tench et al., 2009, p. 151). For consulting tasks, this means that they are a natural part of functional departments' role sets and are also perceived as such but always remain a secondary function beside the actual core function (Schlüter, 2009, 18f.).

Consulting can generally be differentiated into a *functional* and an *institutional* perspective, which again are constitutive of each other (Kubr, 2002, p. 3; Caroli, 2005, p. 4). The

latter perspective focuses on the role and characteristics of the consultant and the client as well as a so-called *consulting system* in which the two roles interact (Carqueville, 1991, p. 263; Kubr, 2002, p. 3; Fuhrberg, 2010, p. 39). This perspective will not be emphasized in this article since the function of consulting is in the interest of research and not its context and actors in the first place. The functional perspective is based on the institutional perspective and observes the consulting process, its structure, and its elements. Consulting includes “any form of providing help on the content, process or structure of a task or series of tasks, where the consultant is not actually responsible for doing the task itself but is helping those who are” (Steele, 1975, pp. 2-3), with emphasis on the fact that the consultant does not have direct control or decision power (Kubr, 2002, pp. 3, 76).

Consulting processes are mainly differentiated by their *form*: there are two core forms, which have evolved during the last decades. Traditionally, consulting started with the idea of an expert giving advice based on professional expert knowledge and experience. This form is therefore called *expert consulting* (also referred to as *content-related consulting*) within the general consulting literature. It is the most prevalent form of consulting today (Kubr, 2002, p. 70). It includes advising activities, direct information and knowledge transfer, as well as making suggestions for alternative actions. In contrast to external consultants, internal consultants from functional departments automatically gather the required specialized expertise through their original job profile (Weiss, 2003, p. 3). For communication managers, this means that the communication knowledge and expertise that they use and develop within their daily job build the basis for content-related input and advice. Beside the actual expertise, the recognition of their expert status is crucial to be perceived as an expert consultant. Therefore, communication managers need to prove their specific expertise and its relevance to the organization in order to be recognized as internal consultants.

While this kind of internal consulting questions *what* to change or to undertake, the second core consulting form is characterized by the provision of structures and processes addressing *how* to solve certain issues. This consulting form is called *process consulting* and supports the client’s decision-making ability (Kubr, 2002, p. 72). Its goal is to enable clients to

solve problems and take decisions independently by making underlying processes and structures transparent and by facilitating their reflections (Kubr, 2002, pp. 70-72).

Along this line, the range of consulting provided by communication professionals may include the *advice* of fellow members of the organization on how to communicate appropriately (expert consulting) as well as the *enablement* of others to master communicative challenges by themselves (process consulting) (see figure 2). This latter consulting form emphasizes that “[s]upporting the communication of others does not necessarily mean that communication professionals need to be directly involved in all communication processes, but rather be a director who stages and provides preconditions for fruitful communication” (Heide & Simonsson, 2011, p. 214).

Both forms of consulting belong to the consulting role within the role set of communication managers. In some situations, one or the other might be more effective, sometimes they need to be combined, and sometimes one provides a starting point and needs to be taken over by the other (Kubr, 2002, p. 72). Most crucial is the awareness of both forms and their strengths and weaknesses as well as the ability to utilize them appropriately.

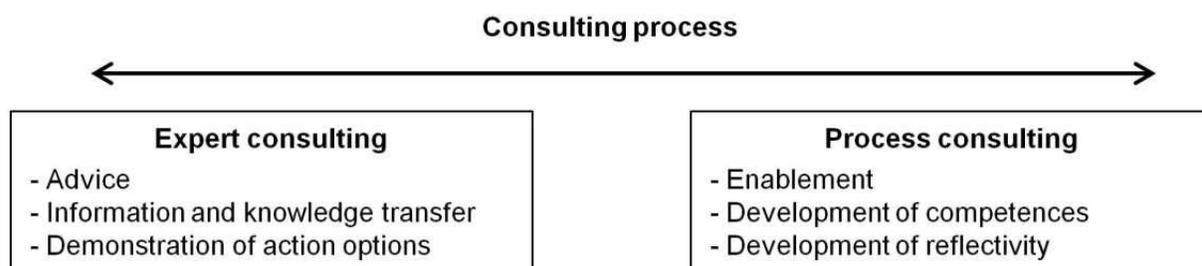


FIGURE 2: Different consulting forms within the process of internal communication consulting

Another characteristic element of the consulting process is the *objective* of consulting, i.e. the kind of issue or problem for which the consultant supports the client in finding a solution or making a decision. Generally, internal consulting by organizational departments addresses issues that are closely linked to the core functionality and expertise of the respective department. For example, the HR department usually advises on personnel topics, the legal department helps to

solve legal issues, and the finance department supports questions of accounting. Following this logic, *internal communication consulting* should address the contents, structures, and processes of communication within organizational activities.

While business and consulting research helps to identify these basic dimensions, it does not elaborate the specific tasks and roles of internal communication consulting. It is necessary to review role concepts from PR and communication research in this respect. The distinction of consulting forms and objectives will help in reading these role models anew.

Consulting within role concepts in PR and communication research

Research on roles is a popular area within PR and communication research (Moss et al., 2000, p. 279; Grunig et al., 2002, p. 202). The starting point for this discipline was laid by the *role models by Broom and Smith* (1978), in which they identified four (originally five) roles for communication experts: Expert Prescriber, Communication Facilitator, Problem-solving Process Facilitator, and Communication Technician (Broom & Smith, 1978; Grunig et al., 2002, p. 198). Two of these roles contain consulting elements.

The *Expert Prescriber* is described as a kind of doctor with a huge amount of knowledge in the area of communication prescribing suitable treatment for a patient regarding communication-related issues (Broom & Smith, 1978, p. 6). This understanding is shaped by the study's time of origin, but includes the idea of the knowledgeable expert giving direct, issue-related advice to the client. In contrast, the main task of the *Problem-solving Process Facilitator* is the support and enablement of a client regarding communication-related issues by facilitating information exchange and decision-making processes (Broom & Smith, 1978, p. 10). These elements match the other core form of consulting, process consulting, the target of which is to support and enable the client to solve issues independently.

The two remaining roles, the *Communication Facilitator* and the *Communication Technician*, are not consulting but execution roles, as they do not give advice or enable the client but rather support him actively in the execution of communication tasks (*Communication Facilitator*) or even execute the communication in his stead (*Communication Technician*). As the distinction between consulting and execution is quite narrow, the tasks are often mixed. To describe the concept of communication consulting properly and derive requirements for the

communication expert's role and status in the organization, it is essential to differentiate between these activities as two separate parts of the role without neglecting their close linkage.

Another study dealing with consulting elements within communication managers' roles is the *excellence study* by Grunig et al. (2002). This line of research has also identified four roles (*Managers, Senior Advisors, Media Relations Specialists, and Technicians*), but only one role, the *Senior Advisor* role, contains consulting elements. In this case, the role is explicitly allocated to team and department leaders and the client is predefined as the dominant coalition in the organization. Nevertheless, the execution of the role implicates on the one hand the contribution of information regarding solutions and decisions without having decision-making power as well as on the other hand providing structures and processes to enable the dominant coalition to involve stakeholder interests (ibid., p. 234).

Beside these studies from the United States, considerable research on the topic has been conducted in Europe. *Moss et al.* (2000) assigned the consulting role to *Public Relations Practitioners* at the middle and upper management level. Instead of distinct roles, they described a task cluster for these managers, in which consulting takes one part. In contrast to the studies described previously, they integrated consulting activities regarding organization processes and therefore aimed for other functions' task-related issues. They had to admit that only a minority of communication managers addresses these objectives: "However it was acknowledged that public relation counsel was mainly sought where problems were seen to have a strong communications-related dimension. Relatively few practitioners appeared to contribute regularly to broader operational problem solving at the corporate and business levels. The exclusion of many practitioners from participation in broader operational decision-making activity was attributed to a lack of understanding and experience of operational or business matters and, in particular, the limited appreciation of financial management issues among practitioners" (Moss et al., 2000, p. 300).

The lack of knowledge about the context and the organization is stated as one main reason for not being involved in task-related decisions. The authors point out that besides other elements like the branch, organizational structure and culture, role expectations, and expert knowledge, especially organizational as well as contextual knowledge are absolutely crucial for

communication managers to be recognized as serious consultants (Moss et al., 2000, pp. 277, 296). The consulting activities described can again be categorized as expert advice but for communication-related as well as for task-related topics.

Another study by Moss et al. (2005) describes various areas of responsibility for communication. One of them is called *Key Policy and Strategy Advisor* (p. 878). This area includes on the one hand the integration of information based on observation of the environment into the decision-making processes of the top management. Communication consultants also illustrate potential critical communicative consequences as well as providing the communicative perspective in functional discussions. Furthermore, they build awareness of the communicative implications of strategic decisions and with that enable other employees to integrate the communicative dimension into their professional activities and decisions themselves. On the other hand, they give advice regarding concrete communication activities and how to communicate decisions properly. With these distinctions the study categorizes two kinds of consulting objectives – communication-related and task-related objectives – as well as two consulting forms – advising and enabling – as distinctive of internal communication consulting.

These two main forms of consulting are also described by *van Ruler and Verčič* in their concept of *Reflective Communication Management* (van Ruler & Verčič, 2002a; van Ruler & Verčič, 2003; van Ruler & Verčič, 2005). Based on four dimensions, which have been identified in various studies (e.g. van Ruler, Verčič, Bütschi & Flodin, 2000; van Ruler & Verčič, 2002b; van Ruler & Verčič, 2004), they derived several core tasks and roles of communication managers. One of the main responsibilities is the establishment of communication management as a core function for organizations (van Ruler & Verčič, 2005, p. 264): “Communication management as a specialty helps organizations by counseling the deliberations on legitimacy, by coaching its members in the development of their communicative competencies, by conceptualizing communication plans, and by executing communication means, using informational, persuasive, relational, and discursive interventions” (van Ruler & Verčič, 2005, p. 265).

The tasks of *counseling* and *coaching* include the concepts of advising and enabling and therefore consulting elements, whereas *conceptualizing* and *executing* clearly contain execution tasks.

Counseling describes the task of observing the environment regarding communication-related topics, interpreting the results and information, and integrating them into task-related, organizational decision-making processes, as well as creating awareness of the necessity of this integration by giving advice from a communicational expert perspective. At the same time, it accomplishes a basis on which organizational members can reflect and adapt their own actions. Counseling therefore addresses task-related issues by giving advice as well as enabling organizational members (van Ruler & Verčič, 2005, p. 265). In contrast, *coaching* aims to support communication-related issues by supporting organizational members in their communication competence as it is required in today's world. Both tasks are clearly allocated to communication managers' roles: "The role of the communication management specialist, however, is to advise and coach [the members of] the organization in this process" (van Ruler & Verčič, 2005, p. 263).

One of the latest studies focusing on communication experts' roles within organizations and stressing their consulting function is the research project *Business Effective Communication* supported by the Swedish Public Relations Association (Sveriges Informationsförening) (Hamrefors, 2009). The aim of this study is not to describe the status quo but rather to provide an outlook regarding essential tasks and skills for communication managers in the future (Hamrefors, 2009, p. 10). It differentiates between two forms of leadership, *ideological leadership* and *contextual leadership*; ideological leadership is supported by contextual leadership, in which communication management can be classed (Hamrefors, 2009, p. 33). This form of leadership is characterized by taking a holistic and wider perspective, "contributing awareness of both the risks and opportunities inherent in various possible actions" (Hamrefors, 2009, p. 33) and offering guidance for possible solutions. Furthermore, it develops and supports the relationship building with various internal and external stakeholder groups and can "develop the employees' ability to judge what they should absorb from the outside world and provide support in these processes" (Hamrefors, 2009, pp. 33, 49). Taking up these aspects, they contain

elements of the concept of the communicative organization as it has been described earlier in this article. Hamrefors further specifies the contextual leadership by deriving four different roles from it: *System Builder*, *Mediator*, *Coach*, and *Influencer*. Except for the first role, all of them include consulting elements, which is a consequence of contextual leadership having been conceptualized as a supporting and enabling function.

Within the role of the *Mediator*, communication experts facilitate the communication between different parties, discover potential risks, and integrate this information and suggested solutions into the respective processes. With these activities they mainly cover the part of giving advice regarding task-related issues (Hamrefors, 2009, p. 53). Additionally, they take over the task of enabling and promoting the communication competence of others within the role of the *Coach*: “The contextual leader also has the task of assisting others in developing their communications. The task comprises both helping others to improve in conveying the organisation’s ideology and their own contextual communication” (Hamrefors, 2009, p. 54). Both roles are combined in the role of the *Influencers*, which supports especially the holistic view as well as a reflection and change of perspectives (Hamrefors, 2009, p. 54). Overall, both communication-related and task-related issues are covered by different consulting roles within the role set of communication managers.

Figure 3 summarizes the analysis of role concepts in public relations and communication research and links those models to the dimensions identified in the business and consulting literature.

Internal communication consulting		
Consulting objective / Consulting form	Communication-related issues	Task-related issues
Enabling (Process consulting)	Problem-solving Process Facilitator Broom & Smith (1978) Senior Advisor Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier (2002) Coaching van Ruler & Verčič (2005) Coach Hamrefors (2009)	Key Policy and Strategy Advisor Moss, Newman, & DeSanto (2005) Counseling van Ruler & Verčič (2005) Influencer Hamrefors (2009)
Advising (Expert consulting)	Expert Prescriber Broom & Smith (1978) Senior Advisor Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier (2002) Public Relations Practitioner Moss, Warnaby, & Newman (2000) Key Policy and Strategy Advisor Moss, Newman, & DeSanto (2005)	Public Relations Practitioner Moss, Warnaby, & Newman (2000) Key Policy and Strategy Advisor Moss, Newman, & DeSanto (2005) Counseling van Ruler & Verčič (2005) Mediator Hamrefors (2009)

FIGURE 3: Overview of the internal communication consulting forms and objectives within the role concepts in public relations and communication research

The literature review shows that the main consulting *forms* of expert consulting and process consulting are also applicable to internal communication consulting.

Regarding the *objectives*, communication professionals – unlike experts working in other departments – have to include the task-related issues of their clients in their consulting activities since other functional activities can also have an impact on or be impacted by the organization's environment. As outlined before, nearly every employee has touchpoints with some internal or external stakeholders within his job. Therefore, many decisions and activities that do not appear communication-related in the first place may have communicative consequences. There might be

positive impacts, for example in customer relationships or innovation management, but also worse outcomes like a decrease in credibility, loss of trust, and therefore limitation of the “license to operate.” This is not only true for decisions and activities that impact on external stakeholder groups. Internal stakeholders are quite sensitive to activities that contradict their values or corporate culture. Therefore, internal communication consulting needs to address communication-related as well as task-related (functional) issues. This dimension is also mentioned by Nothhaft (2010, pp. 131-134) as second-order management, describing the core function of communication management as interfering in the management of others by including the communicative dimension in their decision-making process (Heide & Simonsson, 2011, p. 213). Heide and Simonsson (2011) state that “[w]hen the board of directors is about to make an important decision, the members always discuss its economic consequences. Since communication is fundamental for an organization, the communication perspective should be as natural as the economic aspects when making decisions. And because communication professionals are an organization’s communication expert, they must make clear that ‘you cannot not communicate’” (p. 213).

A framework for internal communication consulting

The theoretical discussion has identified the main objectives and predominant forms of internal communication consulting. Consulting aiming at *communication-related issues* like agenda setting for a new technology or initiating dialogues with stakeholders on the social web has to be differentiated from consulting focusing on *task-related issues*, e.g. integrating knowledge on public opinion making and agenda building into strategic decision making as well as realizing the impact of operational activities on the communicative environment (like the closing down and relocation of a production line to another country or the changing of an internal incentive system). Both objectives can be addressed via either *expert consulting* or *process consulting* as well as via consulting activities in between this spectrum.

Combining these dimensions makes it possible to construct a framework that covers all the elements of the internal communication consulting process and puts them in relation to each other. The framework illustrated in figure 4 shows *four different specifications of the internal*

consultancy role: a) recommending communication activities and techniques, b) providing and supporting communication competencies, structures, and processes, c) integrating communicative insights into task-related decision making, d) building and encouraging awareness of the communicative dimension of any management activities or task-related decisions.

Internal communication consulting		
Consulting objective Consulting Form	Communication-related issues	Task-related issues
Enabling (Process consulting)	Providing communication competencies, processes, and structures	Building and encouraging awareness of the communicative dimension of task-related decisions
Advising (Expert consulting)	Recommending communication activities	Integrating communicative insights into task-related decision making
Subsequent activities:		
Supporting	Supporting the execution of communication activities	(Not within the communication manager's area of responsibility)
Executing	Executing communication activities	(Not within the communication manager's area of responsibility)

FIGURE 4: Specifications of consulting forms and consulting objectives of internal communication consulting

Since consulting is often closely linked to the execution of proposed actions, these *subsequent activities* are captured in the framework as well. Communication professionals can support and execute core communication activities on behalf of the whole organization, specific departments, or specific members (e.g. preparing CEO communication activities, running an employer branding campaign for human resources). However, they will usually not support or execute task-related activities for other functions (like defining corporate strategies, developing a remuneration system, conducting personnel searches).

The quadrants illustrate the four ideal dimensions of internal communication consulting, knowing that this is a conceptual differentiation. In reality consulting takes place in between these spectrums, and different types will be used depending on the situations and contexts. It seems to be more important to integrate these dimensions into every communication professional's role set than to differentiate them clearly empirically. Moreover, consulting needs to be understood as a common task for every communication professional and therefore not only for managers, but for everyone regardless of his or her hierarchical position. While the amount and relevance of internal consulting will differ depending on the particular position, the task itself should be part of every communication professional's role. This is necessary to support the claim that communication professionals are experts on the communication dimension within the organization (Tench et al., 2009, p. 155; Heide & Simonsson, 2011, p. 214), just like corporate attorneys are experts on any kind of juridical issues (and not only for writing contracts or filing suits), and like human resource managers are experts on personnel in a broad sense (and not only for hiring and firing people). The specifications of internal communication consulting can be described in more detail in the following way:

a) *Expert consulting for communication-related issues* advises organizational members how to communicate in specific situations by *recommending communication activities and techniques*. Communication professionals may support the decision-making process in other departments that need to address specific stakeholders, interact with the media, or improve their informal or formal communication processes. This includes, for example, advice on which messages should be communicated to different publics, at what time, and through which channel. These recommendations can refer to official or informal external communication situations as

well as internal communication processes like team communication or management communication. The final decision on whether and how communication actually takes place remains the responsibility of the client. This type of consulting might also address more complex processes of communication management. An example is internal consulting on a communication challenge for the HR department, which wants to address potential employees. The consulting process may lead to the development of a public relations campaign. The decision about its execution and the execution itself are the responsibility of the HR department. However, the execution can be supported by or delegated to the communication department. This type of consulting is based on professional knowledge about the principles and effects of communication as well as on information about current developments within the media. Furthermore, observations from the organizational environment are gathered, evaluated, and interpreted for the organization itself and used as input for this advice (Hamrefors, 2009, p. 50).

b) *Process consulting for communication-related issues* enables clients to master communicative challenges themselves by *providing and supporting communicative structures, processes, and competencies ranging from active communication competencies (outbound) and perceptual and interpretative competencies (inbound) to cooperative competencies (integrative)*. This form of consulting seems suitable if the communicative challenge at hand can be characterized as generic and long-term oriented, thus asking for a thorough enablement of the client. Process consulting provides orientation and reflectivity for clients and increases their capacities for problem solving. Hence, communication professionals initiate a formal and informal learning process, in which the client develops communicative competencies as well as the awareness of the communicative dimensions of his activities. Traditional methods of enablement are media training, business communication seminars, and coaching processes for single persons, teams, or groups of co-workers. Furthermore, process consulting might enable a whole department to communicate with its stakeholders through tailor-made messages and suitable channels. This requires detailed knowledge about communication processes, but also a broad awareness of the need for consistency, inbound and outbound communication, and its effects. Process consulting does not only focus on communication itself, but also helps to develop the basic structures, processes, and resources that enable organizational members to

expand their communication abilities. Accordingly, process consulting develops authoritative resources (communicative competencies) as well as allocative resources (communication tools, patterns, guidelines, sign-off processes, etc.) (for a discussion of these resources see Giddens, 1984, p. 33; Zerfass, 2010, pp. 189-192).

c) *Expert consulting for task-related issues* integrates communicative insights for decision-making processes within organizational functions. Along this line, communication professionals may not only be asked to announce decisions taken in other departments, but they can also *provide communicative insights, information, knowledge, and experience prior to those decisions*. While they will not be able to suggest an overall solution to specific challenges in other functions, they can help clients to decide more comprehensively by including knowledge about public opinion building as well as the communicative consequences of alternative actions. This helps organizations to understand stakeholders, their requirements, and their expectations better and act accordingly (Moss et al., 2000, p. 283;).

d) *Process consulting for task-related issues* enables co-workers to understand and meet stakeholders' expectations by *building and encouraging the awareness of the communicative dimension of any management or other task-related decision* throughout the organization (Hamrefors, 2009, p. 33; van Ruler & Verčič, 2005, pp. 263-264). Communication professionals may support the reflective capacity of co-workers by stimulating an external view and helping them to see other perspectives. Examples are the early reflection on the consequences for employer reputation when developing outsourcing strategies or the impacts on corporate culture when conceptualizing internal incentive programs. Obviously, the expertise and responsibility for the communicative dimension of organizational activities cannot be handed over from communications to other departments. However, every co-worker should be enabled to integrate this dimension into his or her daily routines. This again emphasizes the need for a shift of mindsets of communication professionals. Within the communicative organization, they are no longer responsible for all the communication activities, but for building the overall communicative capacity of the organization. This denotes new links between corporate and communication strategy and strengthens the importance of the communication function (Moss et

al., 2005, p. 880; Cornelissen, 2008, p. 100; Zerfass, 2008, p. 91; Tench et al., 2009, pp. 157-158).

These four specifications build the overall concept of internal communication consulting. Every communication professional or at least every communication department should be able to cover all of these dimensions. However, not only personal abilities but also self-perception as well as acceptance by others are highly crucial for fulfilling the role of an internal communication consultant (Carqueville, 1991, p. 255; Röttger & Zielmann, 2009a, p. 44).

The choice of specific consulting forms will depend on the objectives, the situations, and the client's needs. In practice, the top management and heads of departments are the primary target group for internal communication consulting. Nevertheless, the potential of the communicative organization can only be exploited if every employee is recognized as a potential client (Belasen, 2008, p. 164; Heide & Simonsson, 2011, p. 214).

Validation of the concept

Testing a theoretical framework that identifies dimensions and activities that are obvious, but not commonly known and unequally distributed in public relations practice causes several problems. A number of surveys focusing on the role and self-perception of communication professionals have already shown an increasing importance of the consultant role (Bentele, Großkurth, & Seidenglanz, 2009, pp. 88-89; Zerfass et al., 2010: 74). A more detailed quantitative study would have to explain the specifications in detail and rely on the commemoration of various types of internal consulting among respondents. It was not possible to conduct such a survey in the course of this research project. Instead, a qualitative approach has been used to verify the practical comprehensiveness and plausibility of the theoretical framework. Ten in-depth interviews (Gubrium, Holstein, Marvasti, & McKinney, 2012) with male and female communication managers of major European organizations (Boehringer, Bosch, BP, Daimler, Henkel, Merck, etc.) were conducted in 2011 by one of the authors. The interviewees were either the head of communications/public relations or leading the communication strategy unit.

The empirical study confirmed internal consulting to be a relevant part of the communication manager's role. By focusing on and differentiating between the different dimensions it became clear that all the dimensions outlined above are part of the role set of today's communication professionals in large organizations. However, the actual application differs quite widely.

All the respondents rated communication-related issues highest. They think it is their natural responsibility to help organizational members to communicate. However, they restricted this to corporate communication activities in a traditional sense and did not mention communication within teams or leadership relations. Typical examples mentioned in the interviews were the development of Q&A material and presentations as well as summaries and interpretations of social events. These services and products can be interpreted as support for the execution of communication activities as well as the development of communicative competencies.

While every respondent declared *communication-related expert consulting* (advising on how to communicate) as part of the daily work in his or her department, the self-conception concerning the three other dimensions in the framework was not consistent.

Communication-related process consulting was rated highly important by only two of the ten experts. The supporters of this specification emphasized the growing complexity of their organizations, which has led to increasing challenges for communication professionals. The interviewees claimed that they can no longer handle corporate communications on their own but they need to rely on an organization in which everybody is able to communicate in a proper way. This is necessary to meet stakeholders' expectations and include relevant information in organizational decision making. In contrast to this, the majority of respondents stressed the importance of consistency and control by the communication department. In their view, enabling others to communicate would undermine these goals. Obviously, the fear of losing power and responsibility is prevalent. Both the framework of internal communication consulting explained above and the overarching theories of corporate communications (Christensen, Morsing, & Cheney, 2008) challenge this traditional idea of the communication department as the exclusive locus of professional communication within the organization.

The participation within other department's decisions is also viewed quite diversely. Half of the experts interviewed stated that *task-related expert consulting* participation is part of their role, sometimes even their very own capability. The other respondents said that communication departments are only integrated into those processes in crisis situations. They rated this specification of internal communication consulting as interference in other realms of the organization.

The last quadrant of the framework, *task-related process consulting*, which aims to develop overall communicative awareness, was rated as absolutely necessary by all the respondents. According to the experts from global corporations, this needs to be developed through training but also through the daily collaboration between line managers and communication professionals.

Overall, the dimensions of the framework were validated as existent forms and objectives of internal communication consulting. The actual execution of each specification differs according to personal experience and organizational settings. As mentioned before, quantitative research would be necessary to shed more light on these aspects.

Outlook and practical implications

This study lays the ground for quantitative research identifying the utilization of the four specifications of internal communication consulting. The different forms of process consulting as well as task-related issues as objectives of communication consulting need more detailed investigation. Further research may also focus on individual, departmental, and organizational prerequisites and conditions for the different specifications. Moving further, it could be interesting to identify the links and correlations between consulting tasks on the one hand and organizational structures, environmental conditions, and acceptance of the communication function within the organization on the other hand. The results might serve as indicators of the institutionalization of the internal consultant role.

Thinking of public relations education, the framework of internal communication consulting opens new dimensions for students by providing a broader picture of their prospective profession. It might also encourage them to prepare for these requirements. The framework also

challenges the idea of the communicative organization proposed by academics and professional bodies. This concept will remain a pipe dream until communication professionals develop differentiated role models and day-to-day routines that make the enabling function and task-related communication consulting come true.

This leads directly to the article's implications for the practice of public relations and communication management. The framework outlined above stresses the need for differentiated role models including the consulting role and for a variety of consulting dimensions within the latter. The self-perception of communication professionals as experts who are able to give valuable advice and enable others and therewith the whole organization is crucial for building a strong identity as communication experts. The consultant role is not meant to relieve other core roles. It should complement the overall role set of communication managers. This might advance ongoing efforts to position communication management as a well-respected profession within organizations and in societies at large. Obviously, both competences and assertiveness are necessary to enact such an advanced role set (Larson, 1997). This will be a major challenge for many working in the field nowadays. But it shows how communication professionals can accept the broad challenge of leading communication within communicative organizations in a very practical sense.

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