

**MEDIA RELEASE**

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# Walking the tightrope New theory to help organisations balance people, planet and profit

Twenty first century organisations can be as large and powerful as countries, yet the communication and knowledge revolution has shrunk the planet and its people into a global village. These extremes of size and a shifting environment force organisations to walk a tightrope balancing people, planet and profit.

In her doctoral thesis, Dr Estelle de Beer of the Communication Management division at the University of Pretoria (UP) has conceptualised a new integrative strategic communication management theory, which she believes begins to address how organisations and society should operate optimally in this so-called “triple context” environment.

This unpredictable environment calls for new ways of managing the reputation of organisations and new ways of managing the strategic communication function.

“Decades ago our lives and our societies were held together by powerful institutions – the government, the law, the education system, the church, the family, the work organisation. However, these sources of authority have been eroded by new technologies and ideologies that have shifted power from the institution to the individual,” explains Dr de Beer. “Technology has amplified the voice of the once ‘mute’ public citizen.”

Her thesis explores how the conduct and governance of corporations are placing economic, political and social issues on the agenda of human well-being in this century, mainly because their economic capacity and consequent power create potential for benefit or for harm.

From this perspective, the way in which communication is managed in a triple context environment should be determined in order to maximise economic gains, while minimising the social and environmental losses derived from corporate activities. The conceptualisation of strategic communication management in this new balanced organisation must be clarified, for it to make a value-added contribution to the institution itself, as well as to society as a whole.

“The topic is relevant in the academic environment as well as in practice,” explains Dr de Beer, “Since the way in which communication should be managed strategically in the organisation, specifically in the contemporary triple context environment, is not clear. The theory should provide guidance on how the communication process can be managed in the organisation, and on how it manifests on a functional level.”

### Sustainability and governance

Dr de Beer’s supervisor and co-supervisor respectively were UP Communication Management doyen Professor Ronel Rensburg and corporate governance specialist Judge Mervyn King, convener of the ground-breaking King Report on Corporate Governance ( King III ).

The new framework developed in this study could guide communication managers and general managers in terms of the value-added contribution that communication can make to the organisation and to society. There is a need for professionals with comprehensive knowledge and skills of strategic management and strategic communication management to play a boundary spanning role between business and society.

The grounded theory developed in this research represents a new theory in the academic field of strategic communication management and will, as such, contribute to the body of knowledge in this field.

### Business as usual… or not

Dr de Beer’s 633-page thesis comprises literature reviews, empirical field studies and case studies. She gathered data from CEOs and former CEOs of six organisations that participated as entities that are influenced by a triple context environment and that manage communication on a strategic level. In addition, the concluding framework of the study has been validated by considering its application value in a case study of Nedbank.

Dr de Beer says that the application of her new theory in the strategic communication management domain could benefit organisations in different industries. The theory explains inter-relationships between identified functional and process capabilities that provide a strategic approach to communication management with an emphasis on addressing management and communication management principles.

“This understanding could assist organisations to enhance their potential for success in developing excellent communication functions and processes,” she concludes.

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