CHAPTER 4

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> AND ITS SETTING

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>
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> PERSPECTIVES

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CHAPTER 4

4. THE CONCEPTUALISATION OF CORPORATE COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

This chapter relates the systems theory and the general theory of effectiveness and excellence in public relations and communication management, as a theoretical framework, to the conceptualisation of corporate communication strategy. The researcher also enters the debate on paradigmatic issues in corporate communication (public relations) by suggesting the organisational/managerial effectiveness paradigm for evaluating the work of corporate communication practitioners. Corporate communication strategy plays an important role in this new paradigm by providing a richer, unifying perspective by means of which all the other existing paradigms can be reconciled.

Chapter 4 explores the meaning of the concept 'strategy' by investigating the body of knowledge on corporate strategy and strategic management. It analyses the public relations body of knowledge in order to provide a framework for the conceptualisation of, and possible approaches to, the concept of *corporate communication strategy*. In this process, the difference between 'strategy' and 'plan' in the context of corporate communication is highlighted. In conclusion, a conceptualisation and working definition of corporate communication strategy as a functional strategy is provided—being a derivative of an organisation's enterprise, corporate and business strategies.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 3, Research Objective 1 was achieved by conceptualising the role of the *PR strategist* -- a strategic role for the most senior corporate communication practitioner. Chapter 4 has as its aim to achieve Research Objective 2, namely to conceptualise corporate communication strategy as an important activity of a practitioner in the role of the *PR manager.* (It needs to be mentioned at this stage that the action research process described in Chapter 6, which resulted in a model for developing corporate communication strategy, preceded the writing of this chapter. Chapter 4 therefore draws on the knowledge and experience gained during the action research process.)

The concept of 'strategy' is well-known in management theory and practice. However, the concept of 'corporate communication strategy' has received little attention in corporate communication (public relations) theory. The few publications that refer to the topic deal mainly with communication campaigns and plans as illustrated by the many planning models, operational plans and checklists which is frequently seen in corporate communication text books and articles. Academic knowledge in the area of the strategic management of the organisation's communication is relatively limited (Van Riel 1995:142). It is therefore necessary to gain insight into strategic decision-making procedures and related management concepts, in order to conceptualise corporate communication strategy and describe its linkages to the organisation's strategies.

The following guiding hypothesis was set in Chapter 1 to lead this investigation.

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> **Guiding hypothesis 2**
>
> The chief executive (CEO) expects the corporate communication manager to develop a corporate communication strategy for the organisation.

4.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The four systems concepts of input, throughput, output and feedback were described in Chapter 2, providing a theoretical background for this study. In the following section, the relevance of these concepts in the conceptualisation of a corporate communication strategy for the organisation will be explicated.

4.2.1 SYSTEMS THEORY

As systems, organisations obtain information (*input*) from the environment in order to identify problems or issues that can create consequences for the organisation. During *throughput,* this information is analysed and solutions to problems are formulated by setting goals. In the *output* stage, practitioners behave by doing something, e.g. write a press release (Grunig & Hunt 1984).
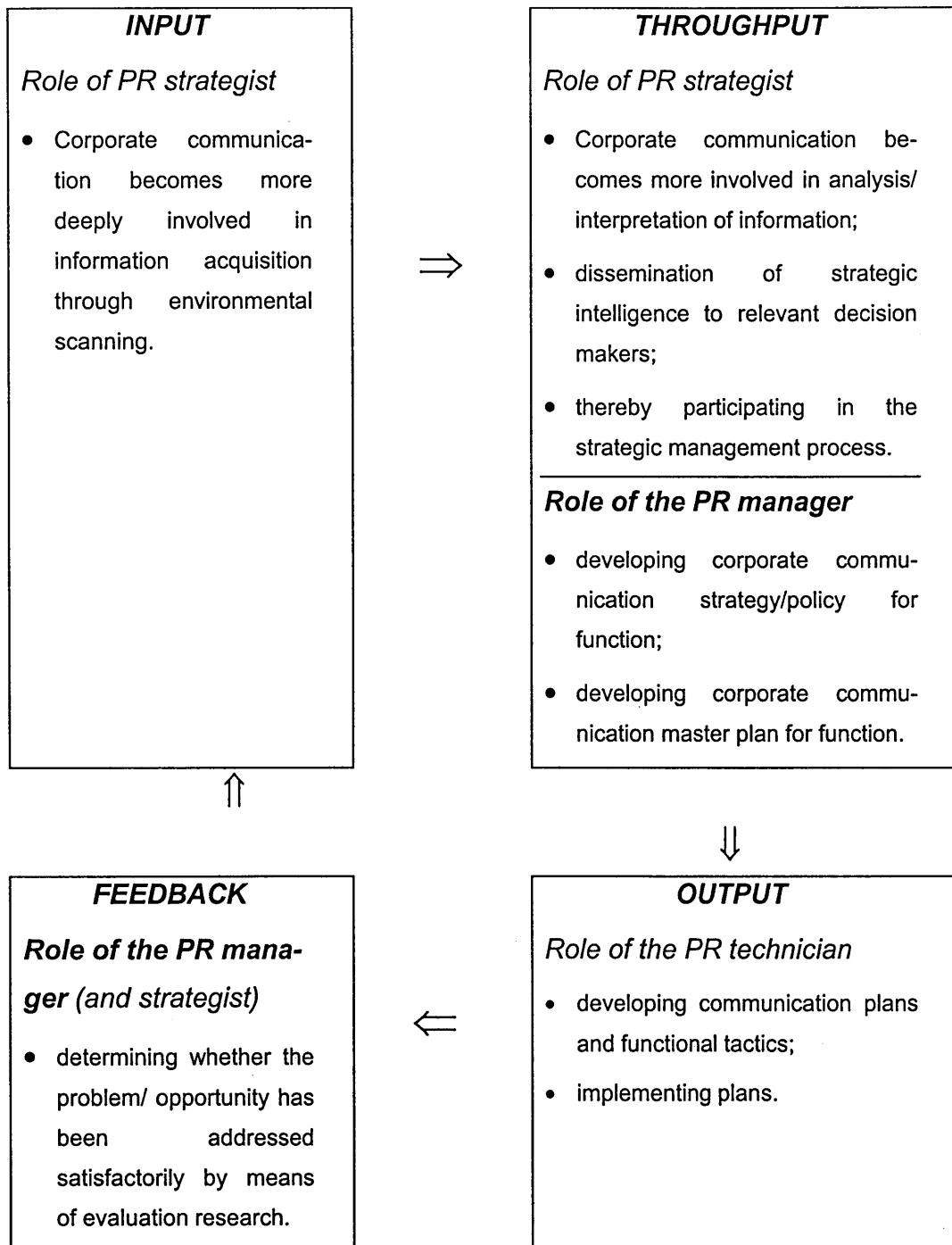
In conceptualising the role of the *PR strategist* in the previous chapter, it was suggested that the systems approach to corporate communication be broadened in order that corporate communication become more deeply involved in the organisation's information acquisition phase *(input)* through environmental scanning. Furthermore, that *throughput* also be extended to include analysis and interpretation of information, and dissemination of strategic intelligence to relevant decision makers. (This provides the justification for the *PR strategist*'s participation in the strategic management process).

In conceptualising corporate communication strategy in this chapter, it is suggested that corporate communication's participation in the *throughput* phase be broadened even further to also include the development of a strategy as focus for the corporate communication function -- identifying the organisation's key strategic issues and their implications for the strategic stakeholders (determining *what* should be communicated to stakeholders).

Based on the corporate communication strategy, it will then be a natural progression to develop a master plan for the corporate communication function's activities, as well as a communication policy for the organisation to facilitate the implementation of the strategy.

The above is graphically demonstrated in Figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1: SYSTEMS APPROACH TO CORPORATE COMMUNICATION STRATEGY (THE ROLE OF THE PR MANAGER)

INPUT	THROUGHPUT
Role of PR strategist	*Role of PR strategist*
• Corporate communication becomes more deeply involved in information acquisition through environmental scanning.	• Corporate communication becomes more involved in analysis/ interpretation of information; • dissemination of strategic intelligence to relevant decision makers; • thereby participating in the strategic management process. **Role of the PR manager** • developing corporate communication strategy/policy for function; • developing corporate communication master plan for function.

FEEDBACK	OUTPUT
Role of the PR manager *(and strategist)*	*Role of the PR technician*
• determining whether the problem/ opportunity has been addressed satisfactorily by means of evaluation research.	• developing communication plans and functional tactics; • implementing plans.

Source: Own research

The corporate communication strategy will determine the focus of the organisation's communication with its stakeholders, i.e. determine *what* must be communicated to internal and external stakeholders. This is conceptualised as a strategic role for the corporate communication manager at the functional level (i.e. a middle manager playing a strategic role in the reengineered organisation). *How* the corporate communication strategy should be communicated (i.e. the implementation thereof by means of communication plans and functional tactics), is seen by the researcher as the role of the *PR technician* at the implementation or micro level.

This extension of the throughput phase will provide a new paradigm for the corporate communication function, i.e. an emphasis on *what* should be communicated (corporate communication *strategy*), rather than the current focus on *how* it should be communicated (communication tactics).

4.2.2 GENERAL THEORY OF EFFECTIVENESS AND EXCELLENCE IN PUBLIC RELATIONS AND COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT

The general theory of excellence in public relations and communication management and its contribution to organisational effectiveness begins at the level of world-view—the way that people and organisations think about and define corporate communication (Grunig & White, in Grunig 1992:31).

The dominant world-view for corporate communication is the asymmetrical view that corporate communication is a way of getting what an organisation wants without changing its behaviour or compromising with its stakeholders. This mindset guides organisations in directions that are ineffective and not in their long-term interests. Asymmetrical world-views steer practitioners toward actions that are unethical, socially irresponsible, and ineffective. Such practitioners

presuppose that the organisation knows best and that publics benefit from 'co-operating' with it (Grunig 1989).

Excellent organisations adopt the view that corporate communication is a symmetrical process of compromise and negotiation and not a 'war for power'-- they do not isolate themselves from their environment, but are open to interpenetrating systems and freely exchange information. Such organisations strive toward an equilibrium with other systems, people are given equal opportunity, new ideas flourish, conflict is resolved through negotiation, and managers co-ordinate rather than dictate (Grunig, *in* Grunig 1992:39, 43-44).

Developing a corporate communication strategy will make organisations with a symmetrical world-view even more excellent by managing stakeholders and issues pro-actively. In aligning communication goals to organisational goals by using corporate communication strategy as a link, the function will contribute towards organisational effectiveness.

A corporate communication strategy will also provide a guideline to organisations with asymmetrical worldviews on changing their corporate communication practice from persuasion to a focus on strategic stakeholders and their concerns—building mutually beneficial relationships through co-operation and shared decision making.

4.2.3 THE PARADIGM STRUGGLE AND PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE

In his classic work on scientific revolutions, Kuhn (1969) defined a paradigm as a *"model or pattern of thinking about and studying a problem"*. He suggested that major advances stem from defining a problem in a whole new way, often discarding previously standard beliefs and procedures and replacing those

components of the previous paradigm with others. This includes developing totally different methodologies to study the same problem. Langer (1957) said the way in which a question is formed *"limits and disposes the ways in which any answer to it—right or wrong—may be given"*.

According to Hallahan (1993), corporate communication lacks a common professional framework for evaluating its practice. Beyond the notion that corporate communication entails persuasion or communications, and in the absence of another *'richer, unifying perspective'*, Cutlip and Center's four-step process model has become the field's predominant paradigm by default. The time has come to seek a predominant paradigm for corporate communication.

Drawing on Kuhn (1969), Hallahan outlined seven alternative paradigms of corporate communication, focusing on the perspective of practitioners and how they should approach their work (i.e. the micro level). This is in contrast to the macro-level perspective followed by most academics and researchers, which has concentrated on how corporate communication as a whole impacts organisations, stakeholders or society. Each of these paradigms has a different focal question for assessing corporate communication efforts. Hallahan (1993:203-204) does not advocate any specific approach, but calls for an expanded debate on paradigmatic issues:

> *"Regrettably, none of these (paradigms) provides a fully satisfactory view of the field. If public relations practice is to advance, PR people need to engage in more discussion about these alternative perspectives. Educators can play a pivotal role in this process -- as researchers directly involved in theory development and testing, and as teachers...... Without a dominant paradigm, it is difficult to prepare prospective practitioners for careers and to provide them with a coherent framework to understand the field......PR text books are often bizarre collections of bits and pieces of all of these*

approaches, with few authors successfully integrating these diverse concepts".

Hallahan's (1993) paradigms are quoted below, since they are most relevant in indicating the need for the conceptualisation of a corporate communication strategy. Following his description of each paradigm, the researcher relates the concept of corporate communication strategy to the paradigm, indicating how it overcomes the inherent weakness in the specific paradigm.

1. Process Paradigm: *"One approach to the paradigm dilemma might be to preserve the dominant four-step process idea, i.e. defining the problem, planning and programming, communication in action and evaluation* (developed by Cutlip, Center & Broom 1985; Marston 1963; Chase 1984), *but to develop more perfect approaches, with fewer or more process steps"* (Hallahan 1993).

Researcher's suggestion: To preserve the 4-step process for communication *planning* purposes, but to add more steps to allow for developing a corporate communication strategy for the organisation, as the framework for the planning process. In this way, corporate communication strategy becomes the link in aligning communication plans with organisational strategies--the mechanism by which the corporate communication function contributes to the achievement of organisational goals and thereby to organisational effectiveness.

2. Plan or Program Paradigm: *"Since most public relations activities are executed as part of self-contained efforts such as programmes or campaigns, the plan or program paradigm focuses on strategies and tactics".*

Researcher's suggestion: Corporate communication strategy expands the current focus on 'self-contained' *operational* strategies and tactics developed in isolation from organisational issues. It refers to *strategy* (corporate communication strategy) and *tactics (*strategic communication plan) on a 'higher' organisational level, i.e. the <u>functional</u> level. In this way, corporate

communication strategy again provides a means of linking the corporate communication function to the organisation's strategy formulation process, leading towards effectiveness.

3. Communication Paradigm: *"Public relations practice might be examined from the perspective of the communications produced—without regard to either process or plan."*

Researcher's suggestion: The researcher agrees with Hallahan that this paradigm suffers from the same problems as the first two—the emphasis is not on results, but on practitioner efforts and the resulting products. Communication is not the means to an end, but regarded as an end in itself. Most of the criticism against the communication function expressed in the 'Statement of the Problem' to this study, was aimed at this paradigm. However, corporate communication strategy counters this inherent weakness by focusing on outcomes (stabilising relationships with strategic stakeholders), rather than on communication products (which are the outputs of corporate communication technicians).

4. Organisational/Managerial Effectiveness Paradigm: *"Success in public relations is a function of meeting organisational expectations and the development of effective working relationships with the organisation".*

Researcher's suggestion: Developing a corporate communication strategy will lead to the fulfilment of many of top management's expectations, because a definite contribution towards organisational effectiveness will be made when concentrating on the management of relationships with strategic stakeholders. In such a paradigm, communication will be regarded as the *means* to an end, and not as an end itself. The end is the satisfaction of stakeholders with their relationships with the organisation, as well as the satisfaction of the corporate communication function's most important stakeholders—the chief executive and other senior managers -- with relationships with stakeholders, and therefore also

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with communication practitioners. This will be seen as a definite contribution to the bottom line, which would establish communication as a core capability.

5. Behavioural Paradigm: *"The success of a program lies in getting target audiences to buy, invest, donate, work or vote in the intended way".*

Although this paradigm focuses on the impact achieved through communication on certain stakeholders (not on the process itself), this approach is nonetheless based on persuasion and an asymmetrical worldview. The emphasis of corporate communication strategy is rather on building symmetrical relationships with strategic stakeholders, where the organisation is prepared to change its views to accommodate stakeholders as much as stakeholders are prepared to consider the organisation's views and problems.

6. Social Problems Paradigm : *"The social problems paradigm suggests that PR work is to deal with power relationships in society as a whole, by concentrating on influencing organisations/institutions and not so much individuals. This paradigm recognises the pivotal role that special interest groups and the government play in attaining public relations objectives".*

Researcher's suggestion: The function of corporate communication is to manage relationships with *strategic* stakeholders, and not all or some stakeholders. Depending on key strategic issues and organisational strategies at the time, these strategic stakeholders might include employees, the government, media, publics, activists, communities, etc—they might be individuals or organisations/institutions. However, the management of relationships with special interest groups and the government are very important, and will be addressed in formulating corporate communication strategy.

7. Systems Paradigm: *"The systems perspective involves a series of inputs (both internal and external) and outputs (actions and communications), designed to reduce conflict and build consensus between an organisation and its publics."* *Hallahan (1993) considers this paradigm to be the most potent, but the most difficult to apply.*

> **Researcher's suggestion**: Corporate communication strategy is based on the systems approach to managerial effectiveness, using two-way symmetric communication to manage the organisation's communication strategically, thereby reducing conflict and building consensus with strategic stakeholders.

The researcher is of the opinion that the predominant paradigm at present is very much a process paradigm, focusing on communication activities, as well as a 'planning' paradigm. The emphasis should rather be on a *strategic thinking* process which should precede communication planning, of which the outcome is corporate communication strategy--providing direction and focus to the organisation's communication with its stakeholders, using communication as a solution to critical organisational problems.

The suggestions made by the researcher above have indicated how the concept of corporate communication strategy can solve many of the weaknesses inherent in the existing paradigms by providing a mechanism for making a contribution towards organisational effectiveness. Through the above analysis, it has become clear that corporate communication strategy points strongly towards a paradigm that evaluates corporate communication practice from an organisational/managerial effectiveness perspective. It also embraces the systems perspective, where the focal question for assessing corporate communication effort is whether equilibrium was maintained in the relationship between the organisation and its environment.

The researcher therefore enters the debate on paradigmatic issues, by advocating an organisational/managerial effectiveness and a systems paradigm for assessing corporate communication practice.

In summary, it can be said that

(i) taking part in the organisation's strategy formulation processes by performing the role of the *PR strategist*;

(ii) developing a corporate communication strategy for the organisation and aligning communication goals to the organisation's strategies by planning programmes for strategic stakeholders by performing the role of the *PR manager*; and

(iii) striving toward the achievement of organisational goals and thereby contributing towards organisational effectiveness

provides a 'richer, unifying perspective' for evaluating corporate communication practice. The organisational/managerial effectiveness paradigm reconciles the different paradigms suggested by Hallahan (1993) above, but overcomes most of their weaknesses. It provides a new predominant paradigm for corporate communication.

Bearing the above theoretical framework in mind, the body of knowledge on strategic management will be analysed in the next section. The concept of *strategy* (in the context of the organisation's strategic management process), will be investigated as the major construct in the conceptualisation of corporate communication strategy.

4.3 THE BODY OF KNOWLEDGE ON STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

4.3.1 STRATEGY—A DEFINITION

The whole field of strategy is relatively new. There was no serious research on strategy until the 1950's or 1960's. According to Porter (*in* Gibson 1997), the field of strategy remains an emerging discipline—there is a need to keep learning about it.

Virtually everyone writing on strategy agrees that no consensus on its definition exists (Chaffee 1985:89). Strategy is derived from the Greek word 'strategia' (office of the general). In its military context, it means "*the science or art of military command as applied to the overall planning and conduct of large scale combat operations*".

Strategy could be seen as the thinking, the logic behind the actions (Robert 1997:22). Drucker *(in* Kotler 1988:61), sees it as an indication of an organisation's positioning for the future, the *what* rather than the *how*. It means doing the right thing, rather than doing things right. According to Kotler (1988:61,33), strategy is an organisation's pro-active response to an ever-changing environment, the instrument which enables an organisation to find synthesis between its goals and resources in view of the risks and challenges of the ever-changing environment.

A strategy can also be seen as an approach, design, scheme or system that directs the course of action in a specific situation (Grunig & Repper, *in* Grunig

1992:123). Where there is no clear concept of strategy, decisions rest on either subjective or intuitive assessment and are made without regard to other decisions (Jain 1997:9). Although strategy is not reflected on the organisational chart, it is linked to operations in that its main purpose is to *"ensure that the organisation is capitalising on its comparative advantages and distinctive competencies—i.e. its strengths—to take advantage of any opportunities the environment may provide, creating a competitive advantage"* (Digman 1990:13). Most authors affirm that the heart of strategy-making is in the conceptual work done by leaders of the organisation (Chaffee 1985).

Various authors see strategy as a pattern, namely:

- a pattern in the organisation's *"important decisions and actions, consisting of a few key areas or things by which the firm seeks to distinguish itself"* (Kami 1984);

- a pattern *"in a stream of actions—this pattern being the result of strategic decisions made by the firm"* (Mintzberg 1987);

- a pattern of *"major objectives, purposes, or goals and essential policies and plans for achieving those goals, stated in such a way as to define what business the company is in or is to be in and the kind of company it is or is to be"* (Jain 1997:9).

The fundamental truth in strategy is that an organisation cannot be all things to all people. Strategy requires choices—deciding what particular kind of value an organisation wants to deliver to whom (Porter, *in* Gibson 1997).

Corporate communication strategy is seen as a pattern in important communication decisions regarding relationships with strategic stakeholders, stated in such a way that the attitude of the organisation towards its stakeholders is clear.

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Chaffee (1985:90) clusters strategy definitions in the literature into three groups:

- 'Linear' strategy, which *"focuses on planning, and consists of integrated decisions, actions, or plans that will set and achieve viable organisational goals"*.

- 'Adaptive' strategy, which is concerned with the *"development of a viable match between the opportunities and risks present in the external environment and the organisation's capabilities and resources for exploiting these opportunities"*. The environment is a major focus in determining organisational action and is seen to consist of trends, events, competitors and stakeholders, to which the organisation must adapt. Rather than assuming that the organisation must *deal* with the environment, the adaptive model assumes that the organisation must *change* with the environment.

- 'Interpretive' strategy, which views the organisation as a *"collection of co-operative agreements entered into by individuals with free will. The organisation's existence relies on its ability to attract enough individuals to co-operate in mutually beneficial exchange"*. Strategy in this model might be defined as frames of reference that allow the organisation and its environment to be understood by organisational stakeholders. The focus is on desired relationships, symbolic actions and communication. Interpretive strategy emphasises attitudinal and cognitive complexity among diverse stakeholders in the organisation.

> Corporate communication strategy is not linear strategy, focusing on planning. The latter is the predominant corporate communication paradigm of the moment. Rather, it is interpretive strategy—viewing the organisation 'as a collection of co-operative agreements entered into by stakeholders of their own free will'. The emphasis is on two-way symmetrical communication with strategic stakeholders, conveying meaning that is intended to motivate stakeholders to understand the

organisation and its policies, thereby reducing conflict and obtaining collaboration.

The strategy is the primary determinant of success or failure in fulfilling the mission and achieving the organisation's goals and objectives. It provides a framework for the effective and efficient tactics and operations necessary to implement the strategy (Digman 1990:13).

This chapter will provide a rationale for corporate communication strategy being the thinking behind the communication function's actions, determining *what* should be communicated before any decisions are taken on *how* it should be communicated.

4.3.2 THE STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT PROCESS

Greene, Adam & Ebert (1985:536) sees strategic management as "*a continuous process of thinking through the current mission of the organisation, thinking through the current environmental conditions, and then combining these elements by setting forth a guide for tomorrow's decisions and results*".

The first step in the strategic management process is *strategic thinking*, of which the outcome is strategic decisions—those decisions that deal with the determination of strategy, provide the definition of the business and the general relationship between the organisation and its environment. Strategic management also deals with the *strategic planning* required to put these decisions into practice as well as with *strategic control*, which ensures that the chosen strategy is being implemented properly and produces the desired results. The key concept in these definitions is *strategy*, the organisation's preselected

means or approach to achieving its goals and objectives while coping with current and future external conditions (Digman 1990).

> Corporate communication strategy will be the outcome of strategic decisions regarding the organisation's communication with strategic stakeholders. It will provide a framework for the strategic communication plan and the operational plans -- the means by which the strategy will be implemented.

4.3.2.1 Strategic thinking versus strategic planning

Strategic thinking is a fresh approach to the subject of strategy--it identifies the key factors that dictate the direction of an organisation. "*A strategist's job is to see the company not as it is...but as it can become*" (Teets, *in* David 1997:77). Strategic thinking is a process that extracts from the minds of people who run the business their best thinking about what is happening outside in the environment, and what the position of the organisation should be in view of highly *qualitative* variables (opinions, judgements, perceptions and even feelings of internal and external stakeholders)—not the quantitative ones (Robert 1997:30). It involves capturing what managers learn from all sources--both soft insights as well as the hard data (Mintzberg 1994). However, most organisations do not know how to synthesise the information on the values and expectations of their stakeholders with the hard issues of technology, politics and deregulation. They have vast amounts of data, but little gets interpreted.

Where most companies have sophisticated operational (and even strategic) planning processes, they do not have a formal process of strategic thinking (Robert 1997:54). The foundation of most corporate planning systems is internally generated data—highly quantitative and historical. They look back at

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five years of numbers and extrapolate for the next five years. This does nothing to change the 'look' or the composition of a business.

Most of what organisations have been doing during the last four or five years have had an internal focus. They assume that outside influences will remain the same—as such, management spend most of their time discussing operational issues, not strategic ones (Robert 1997:44). This is a reactive management mode where the corporate profile starts to be shaped by outside forces rather than by management. The environment then moulds the organisation's direction and strategy, instead of its management (Robert 1997:41). Re-engineering, benchmarking, continuous improvement, total quality management—these are all about doing things better, about improving operational effectiveness. While important for survival, for staying in the race, it is not enough to win the race. "*It is not just a matter of being better at what you do—it is a matter of being different at what you do*" (Hamel, *in* Gibson 1997).

Many organisations have atrophied in their ability to think and act strategically. They focus on short term results—e.g. cut staff or outsource to boost earnings (Porter, *in* Gibson 1997). These issues have more to do with "*competing for the present than competing for the future*" (Prahalad, *in* Gibson 1997). If an organisation is interested in understanding the future, most of what it needs to learn is going to be learnt outside of its own industry (Hamel, *in* Gibson 1997:82). Organisations that will be true leaders will be those that invent the world, not those who respond to it (Handy, *in* Gibson 1997:10). The new leaders will be "*looking forward, scanning the landscape, watching the competition, spotting emerging trends and new opportunities, avoiding impending crises*" (Gibson 1997:11).

According to Mintzberg (1994) and Robert (1997), strategic thinking is different from both strategic and operational planning--it is the framework for the strategic

and operational plans. It attempts to determine *what* the organisation should look like, i.e. the strategy. Strategic and operational planning is the type of thinking that helps to choose *how* to get there (Robert 1997:26).

Once the strategic decisions have been taken (i.e. the strategy has been decided upon), strategic plans are developed for putting the strategy into practice. The selected strategy is created for each division or business unit and specific time-phased actions are required to support the strategy. The result is the strategic, long-range master plan for each division (Digman 1990:54).

Planning is about analysis—breaking down a set of intentions into steps, formalising those steps so that they can be implemented almost automatically, and articulating the anticipated consequences or results. Strategic planning, or strategic programming as Mintzberg (1994) calls it, is the intermediate step between direction setting (strategy formulation), and budgeting or resource allocation (operational planning). Strategic planning involves three steps:

- expressing the strategies in terms sufficiently clear to render them formally operational, so that their consequences can be worked out in detail;

- breaking down the strategies into sub-strategies and *ad hoc* programs as well as overall action plans specifying what must be done to realise each strategy; and

- considering the effects of the changes on the organisation's operations.

> In applying the above to the corporate communication function, it would seem that senior communication managers are also spending most of their time discussing operational issues -- whereas they should be looking outside their function to identify key strategic issues and stakeholders of the organisation, with whom communication should take place in order to solve problems or capitalise on opportunities presented.

Once the corporate communication strategy has been developed by means of a strategic thinking process, indicating what should be communicated to whom, a strategic communication plan should be developed for the corporate communication function and its divisions— expressing the strategy in terms sufficiently clear to render it formally operational, breaking it down into sub-strategies and plans (e.g. media plans, employee relations plans, financial communication plans) specifying how the strategy will be implemented.

4.3.2.2 Operational or tactical planning

Operational planning deals with the implementation and support of strategic plans--specific actions are devised which allow the organisation to realise its targeted priorities (Nutt 1984). Action plans incorporate four elements (Pearce & Robinson 1997:304):

- specific functional tactics*/actions/activities, to be undertaken in the next week, month or quarter (*each business function e.g. marketing, finance, human resources needs to identify and undertake key, routine, but unique activities--called functional tactics--that help to build a sustainable competitive advantage);

- each tactic/action/activity has one or more specific, immediate (short-term) objectives or targets, that are identified as outcomes;

- a clear time frame for completion;

- accountability, by identifying persons responsible for each action in the plan.

In applying the above to corporate communication, it is clear that the steps in developing and executing the communication plan is part and parcel of operational or tactical planning. The situation analysis, which is the research phase of the communication plan, seems to deal either with the support of strategic plans, or are part of *ad hoc* plans.

In referring to the 'Statement of the Problem' in Chapter 1, it can be said that top management's perceptions of the corporate communication function are that most effort is expended at the operational or tactical level-- where communication plans/programmes/campaigns and their supporting tactics are developed, focusing on activities such as media releases, writing articles for publications, events management, producing audio-visuals, etc.

In the next section, the levels of strategic management will be explicated in an effort to more clearly demonstrate the above differentiation between the corporate communication 'strategy' and the communication 'plan'.

4.3.3 LEVELS OF STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

Separating strategy into stages or levels is more conceptual than real (Bower 1982). However, it is useful in understanding that different people participate in strategy development at different organisational levels (Digman 1990). This is especially important to corporate communication practitioners, who are criticised by top management for focusing on implementation strategy and tactics, rather than addressing key strategic issues

4.3.3.1 Enterprise strategy

Each organisation, regardless of size or sector of the economy, has a societal-role strategy. This strategy may not be implicitly or formally stated, but it exists nevertheless. Called 'enterprise' strategy by Ansoff (1977) and Schendel & Hofer (1979), it concerns the organisation's mission, purpose, and role in society. It addresses questions such as *why* the organisation exists; *what* it attempts to provide to society; *which* sectors of the economy it forms part of; and *how* it functions in society (e.g. as a not-for-profit or as a profit-making firm).

The enterprise strategy has to do with the achievement of *non-financial* goals, such as enhancing the organisation's image and fulfilling its social responsibilities. It influences the organisation's relationships with its environment, particularly the relationships with those who have an interest in what the organisation does and how it conducts its business (its stakeholders). It rests on an understanding of how the stakeholders of the organisation can affect each business area. In part, enterprise strategy represents the social and moral/ethical component to strategic management, which has largely been ignored (Freeman 1984:90). Enterprise strategy should address questions such as '*how* is the organisation perceived by its stakeholders', '*what* are their values and expectations' (Dill 1979:49) and '*what* does the organisation stand for'.

The enterprise strategy acts as a framework to guide the formation of corporate policies and strategies in other areas (Digman 1990:37). Enterprise level strategy is important because corporate survival depends in part on there being some 'fit' between the values of the organisation and its managers, the expectations of its stakeholders, and the societal issues which will determine the ability of the organisation to sell its products (Freeman 1984:197).

The researcher is of the opinion that strategies at the enterprise level should be *STAKEHOLDER ORIENTED*.
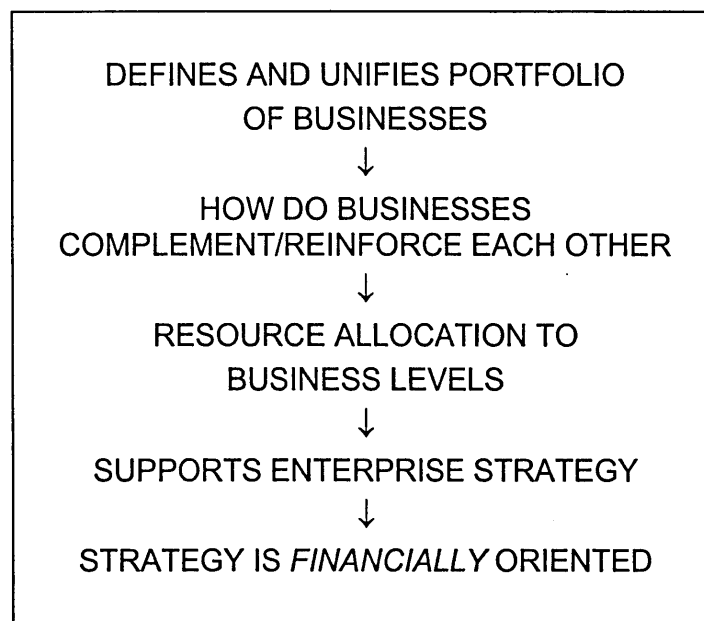
Figure 4.2: ENTERPRISE STRATEGY

STRATEGIC THINKING
↓
VISION, MISSION & ROLE IN SOCIETY
↓
RELATIONSHIP WITH THE ENVIRONMENT
↓
ACHIEVEMENT OF NON-FINANCIAL GOALS
↓
IMAGE, SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY,
MORAL/ETHICAL ISSUES
↓
STRATEGY IS *STAKEHOLDER* ORIENTED

Source: Own research

4.3.3.2 Corporate strategy

At the corporate level, strategy is mainly concerned with defining the set of businesses that should form the organisation's overall profile, and unify and point them toward an overall goal (Jain 1997:9). Corporate strategy can be described as the responsibility of the board and top management for the organisation's *financial performance*. It addresses questions such as: 'which set of businesses should the firm compete in'; and 'how should they be integrated'. While this type of strategy is most applicable to organisations competing in more than one market, i.e. the multi-business firm, in a sense it applies to all organisations. The single-business firm is pursuing a corporate-level strategy by choosing to compete in only one business, rather than several.

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Some authors such as Pearce & Robinson (1997:5) do not distinguish between enterprise and corporate level strategy, but combine both under the term corporate strategy. However, the researcher considers it useful to make this differentiation in order to understand the role of corporate communication in the organisation's strategy formulation process, which focuses on the identification and management of stakeholders—largely determined by the enterprise strategy.

At the corporate level, strategies tend to be *financially* oriented (Digman 1990:38).

Figure 4.3: CORPORATE STRATEGY

DEFINES AND UNIFIES PORTFOLIO
OF BUSINESSES
↓
HOW DO BUSINESSES
COMPLEMENT/REINFORCE EACH OTHER
↓
RESOURCE ALLOCATION TO
BUSINESS LEVELS
↓
SUPPORTS ENTERPRISE STRATEGY
↓
STRATEGY IS *FINANCIALLY* ORIENTED

Source: Own research

4.3.3.3 Business unit strategy

Business strategy is the responsibility of the general manager of a business unit, who must translate the statements of direction and intent generated at the

corporate level into concrete objectives and strategies for individual business divisions (Jain 1997:19). A business strategy usually covers a single product or a group of related products (Pearce & Robinson 1997:6; Jain 1997) and focuses on how to compete in the product or market or industry segment--it looks at the niche it should seek.

The success of the individual business strategy depends not only on how well the organisation positions itself and competes in the given market segment, but also on how well it co-ordinates the various functions (and operations) required to design, manufacture, market, deliver, and support the product or service (Digman 1990:38).

At the business-unit level, strategies are often *marketing* oriented (Digman 1990:38).

Figure 4.4: BUSINESS-UNIT STRATEGY

HOW TO COMPETE IN PRODUCT/MARKET/
INDUSTRY SEGMENT
↓
IDENTIFY NICHE
↓
INTEGRATE FUNCTIONAL LEVELS TO
PRODUCE COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE
↓
SUPPORTS ENTERPRISE/
CORPORATE STRATEGY
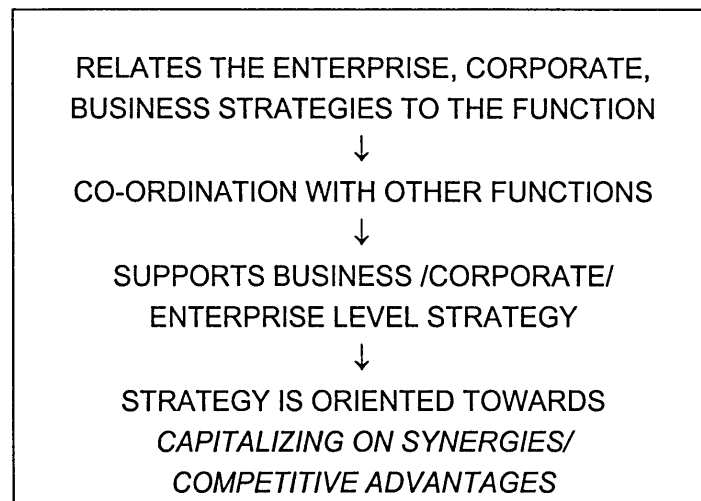↓
STRATEGY IS *MARKETING* ORIENTED
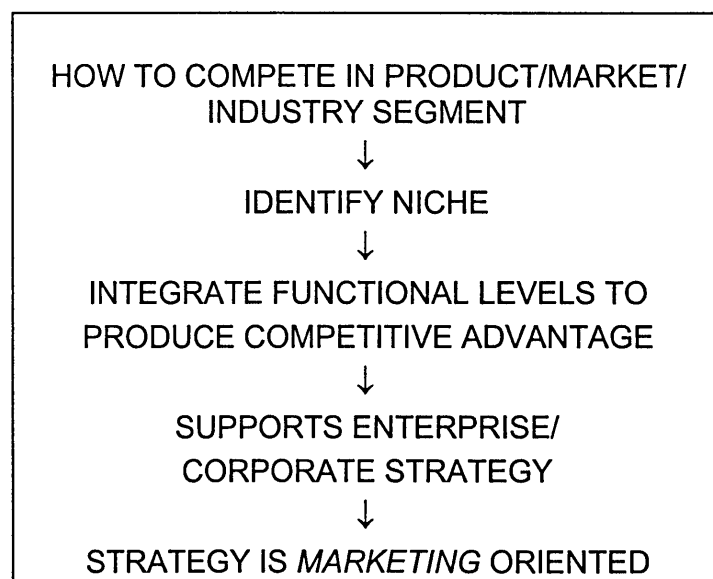
Source: Own research

4.3.3.4 Functional strategy

The principal responsibility at the functional level is to implement the strategic plans (Pearce & Robinson 1997:6). At both the functional and operating levels, the major emphasis is on maximising resource productivity by capitalising on any possible synergies and distinctive competencies that the organisation may possess (Digman 1990:38).

Each functional area of an organisation (e.g. marketing or corporate communication) makes its own unique contribution to strategy formulation at different levels. In many organisations, according to Jain (1997:9), the marketing (and corporate communication) functions represent the greatest degree of contact with the external environment -- the environment least controllable by the organisation. In such cases, marketing and corporate communication play a pivotal role in strategy development. Functional strategy thus involves what should be done in each of the key functional areas, given the relative emphasis placed on them and the resources allocated to them (Digman 1990:38).

Functional strategy should be oriented towards *supporting the enterprise, corporate and business strategies*.

Figure 4.5: FUNCTIONAL STRATEGY

RELATES THE ENTERPRISE, CORPORATE,
BUSINESS STRATEGIES TO THE FUNCTION
↓
CO-ORDINATION WITH OTHER FUNCTIONS
↓
SUPPORTS BUSINESS /CORPORATE/
ENTERPRISE LEVEL STRATEGY
↓
STRATEGY IS ORIENTED TOWARDS
CAPITALIZING ON SYNERGIES/
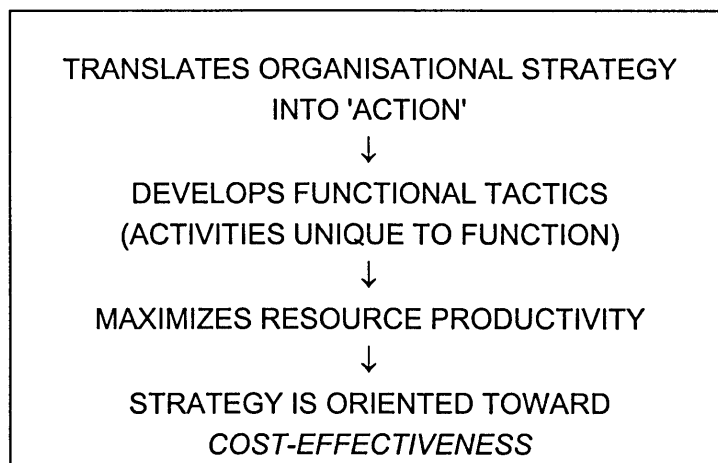*COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGES*

Source: Own research

The focus of corporate communication strategy as a functional strategy is to establish a match between the organisation, and the values and expectations of its strategic stakeholders. This is achieved by identifying strategic stakeholders, and managing relationships with them; identifying the organisation's key strategic issues and the publics/activists that emerge round them; and reducing conflict and uncertainty by bringing these groups into the organisation's decision making processes.

Traditionally, middle managers were involved with implementation and control—they did not play strategic roles. However, in the reengineered organisation, the *PR manager* will play a strategic role at the functional level, being a boundary spanner—developing the corporate communication strategy as a link between communication plans and organisational goals, and strategically *managing* the planning, implementation and evaluation of communication plans/programmes/campaigns at the micro level -- thereby contributing towards organisational effectiveness.

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4.3.3.5 Operations strategy

At the operational level, strategies are translated into action (Digman 1990:38; Pearce & Robinson 1997:304). Key operating managers must establish short-term objectives and operating strategies that contribute to business and corporate-level goals (Pearce & Robinson 1997:311). Operations strategies are needed to manage operating units and line areas in a *cost-effective* manner (Digman 1990:38).

Figure 4.6: OPERATIONS OR IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY

TRANSLATES ORGANISATIONAL STRATEGY
INTO 'ACTION'
↓
DEVELOPS FUNCTIONAL TACTICS
(ACTIVITIES UNIQUE TO FUNCTION)
↓
MAXIMIZES RESOURCE PRODUCTIVITY
↓
STRATEGY IS ORIENTED TOWARD
COST-EFFECTIVENESS

Source: Own research

In understanding the difference between enterprise, corporate, business, functional and operational strategies, corporate communication practitioners will realise that operational strategy, as applied in the communication plan, is not the same as the proposed corporate communication strategy. The latter is strategy at the functional level, involving *strategic* decisions—providing focus and direction to the corporate communication function, producing a profile that can be used to determine which stakeholders should receive more or less emphasis. Operational strategy, as part of the communication plan, provides a framework for functional tactics—it involves *tactical* decisions e.g. whether a print or

electronic media campaign or folk media should be used to communicate the message to identified stakeholders/publics. This is the domain of the *PR technician,* an implementation role at the micro or programme level.

4.3.4 MIDDLE MANAGEMENT'S INVOLVEMENT IN STRATEGY FORMULATION

4.3.4.1 The traditional view

The traditional view of the strategic process is that strategy is the province of top management (Ansoff 1965; Schendel & Hofer 1979). According to Porter (*in* Gibson 1997:55), this is no longer true—strategy should not only be the province of the leader. Participation in the strategic process is not limited to a few individuals who are located at the very top of the organisation (Fredrickson 1984:459; Porter, *in* Gibson 1997). Burgelman (1983) describes strategy as the product of autonomous behaviour initiated outside top management. Mintzberg & Waters (1985) see strategy as a combination of deliberate strategies (decided upon by top management) and emergent strategies (that develop in the process of management and implementation).

Middle managers have traditionally been seen as being responsible for implementing strategy. {In the discussion on functional strategy under point 4.3.3.4 in this chapter, Pearce & Robinson's (1997:6) viewpoint was that the principal responsibility at the functional level was to implement the strategic plans}. In cases where middle managers have been involved in strategy formulation, it was because their involvement enhances implementation, and firsthand exposure to the strategies of top management improves understanding, consensus and commitment. However, in discussing the role of middle managers in strategy, Bower (1970) said that *"middle managers are the only men in the organisation who are in a position to judge whether (strategic) issues are being*

considered in the proper context". Burgelman (1983) points to the crucial role of middle managers in conceptualising new strategies—not only do they improve the quality of strategic decisions, but they are often the first to *recognise* strategic problems and opportunities (Floyd & Wooldridge 1994).

It is therefore becoming increasingly important that top management develop organisational structures and reward systems that encourage middle managers and other organisational members to think strategically. This view challenges the traditional division of work in strategy and suggests new roles in the strategic process.

4.3.4.2 Middle management and reengineering

In their typical role of implementation, middle management has been part of an organisation's control system—translating strategies defined at higher levels into actions at operating levels. This involves:

- defining tactics and developing budgets for achieving objectives;
- monitoring the performance of individuals and sub-units;
- taking corrective action when behaviour falls outside expectations (Floyd & Wooldridge 1994).

In the reengineered organisation, however, top management rely less and less on middle managers—information and communications technologies make it easier for those at the top to monitor and control activities directly. Empowerment and cross-functional teams allow operators to take responsibility for defining their own roles. Reengineering has therefore automated and obliterated middle management (Floyd & Wooldridge 1994).

The withering of middle management's operating responsibilities justifies reductions—however, certain middle management behaviour is crucial to developing organisational capability. In seeing all middle managers from an operational viewpoint, top managers often fail to make distinctions about the variety of contributions made by middle managers, and overlook the possibility that some middle managers play strategic roles (Floyd & Wooldridge 1994).

One such a role is issue selling. As were seen in Chapter 3, 'strategic issues' are defined as *"developments, events and trends viewed by decision makers as consequential because of the potential to impact an organisation's strategy"* (Ansoff 1980; King 1982; Dutton & Ottensmeyer 1987). However, no issue is inherently strategic—rather, an issue becomes strategic when top management believes that it has relevance for organisational performance. If not, they will have little interest in the issue (Pfeffer & Salancik 1978). 'Issue selling' refers to *"individuals' behaviours that are directed toward affecting others' attention to and understanding of issues"* (Dutton & Ashford 1993).

'Middle managers' are managers *"who operate at the intermediate level of the corporate hierarchy, operating two or three levels below the CEO e.g. functional managers such as a vice president of marketing"* (Wooldridge & Floyd 1990). Middle managers can direct top management's attention by providing or concealing important information about issues, by framing issues in particular ways, or by mobilising resources and routines that direct top managers' attention to some issues and not to others.

Middle managers play a pivotal role in the successful generation and mobilisation of resources around new ideas (Burgelman 1983). They have their fingers on the pulse of operations, and therefore conceive, suggest and set in motion new ideas that top management may not have thought of (Kanter 1982). A focus on issue

selling is consistent with research that points to middle-level managers playing significant roles in strategy making (Burgelman 1983).

Since issue selling is a mechanism that prompts top management to attend to issues they might not otherwise do, it is an important way in which the perspectives of middle managers are used to set an organisation's strategic agenda (Dutton & Duncan 1987), and to initiate organisational action. Choosing which issues should receive attention in organisations and understanding how they should be interpreted, remain critical yet difficult processes for top management to do alone or to control explicitly. An organisation's adaptation success may, in part, depend upon the capacity to discover an issue-selling process that enables individuals outside of top management to be effectively involved in the identification and communication of important issues.

Research indicates that middle management's strategic contributions directly affect the bottom line. This includes sustaining an adaptive balance between industry forces and organisational resources. Capabilities develop as the organisation learns how to deliver what customers and other stakeholders want, and how to create new combinations of assets and skills. These capabilities develop through the brains and nervous systems of middle managers. When these capabilities effectively differentiate an organisation from its competitors, they are called 'core capabilities' (Floyd & Wooldridge 1994).

Middle managers are likely to differ widely in their ability and willingness to assume a strategic role at a particular point in time. Research support the proposition that middle managers are potential reservoirs of core capability. However, conversations with top and middle level managers reveal that middle management's strategic roles are *"misunderstood, considered secondary, almost always non-sanctioned and often discouraged"*. Yet re-engineering's emphasis on responsiveness, flexibility and speed puts a premium on the middle manager

behaviour associated with development of new capabilities (Floyd & Wooldridge 1994:53).

As organisations move away from hierarchical toward more horizontal business structures, the importance of middle managers in achieving competitive advantage is likely to increase. Top managers interested in using these human assets should recognise the link between middle management, core capability and competitive advantage. They should identify middle managers with the appropriate skills, experiences, and potential to thrive within the organisation. The importance of boundary spanning experience is one criterion for discriminating among middle managers (Floyd & Wooldridge 1994).

Sometimes, top management expect middle managers to take charge of a process but give them very little real authority. This results in middle managers quickly becoming frustrated and cynical (Floyd & Wooldridge 1994). Top managers should redesign the organisation to leverage the knowledge and skills of a selected set of middle managers and encourage their influence on strategic priorities. In order to open up the organisation to environmental influence, boundary-spanning middle managers should become the owners of key business processes. There will be fewer layers and fewer managers overall, but the strategic roles of middle managers are likely to become more, rather than less, important in the organisations of tomorrow. Delayering can enlist middle managers in new strategic roles, but this requires a vision, organisational redesign, and new power relationships.

"More like the Phoenix bird than the dinosaur, a new breed of middle managers—whose roles are more strategic than operational—should be rising from the ashes of the delayered corporation" (Floyd & Wooldridge 1994:48).

A corporate communication practitioner in the role of the *PR manager* will be one of the middle managers in the reengineered organisation to play a strategic role. One of the first to recognise strategic problems and opportunities because of close relationships with strategic stakeholders, he/she will direct decision makers' attention to, and create understanding of, stakeholder concerns and emerging issues. This will necessitate a close working relationship with the practitioner performing the role of the *PR strategist*—if it is another person—as well as with other managers under whose jurisdiction the specific stakeholder or emerging issue falls. The practitioner in the role of the *PR manager* will have an invaluable ally in the *PR strategist*, who will create understanding amongst members of top management of the importance of the *PR manager's* role (as well as the *PR strategist's* role) in developing issues management and stakeholder management as one of the organisation's core capabilities.

4.3.5 STAKEHOLDER MANAGEMENT – THE STRATEGIC APPROACH

As discussed in Chapter 3, the stakeholder approach to strategic management (Freeman 1984:vi) is concerned with the identification of and managerial response to, groups and individuals who can affect and are affected by, the organisation's decisions and behaviour.

In a survey of 23 multinationals, Askew (1997) found consensus amongst them that society's expectations have changed in recent years—in a more demanding environment corporates are carefully scrutinised targets rather than free entrepreneurs. A general cynicism exists towards most institutions. This has given rise to sophisticated pressure groups, who understand the importance of emotion as well as logic. In such a challenging environment, issues can quickly become crises (Askew 1997).

Three quarters of the sample felt that their traditional methods of corporate and issues management were no longer adequate to face the changing world and issues as they arise. Up to now, it has been accepted that different stakeholders may have different requirements, but for the most part, the management and monitoring of the stakeholders' expectations has been fragmented with little co-ordination (Askew 1997).

In advancing the integration of corporate social performance (CSP) and stakeholder theories, Waddock & Graves (1997) argue that CSP is fundamentally about the relationships between an organisation and its primary stakeholders, and possibly its secondary stakeholders. CSP is not simply a set of discretionary activities undertaken when there are sufficient slack resources, but rather a situation where organisations communicate on a routine basis with and through their primary (and perhaps, secondary) stakeholders to effect their strategies. Clarkson (1995:103) maintains that it is in effect not social issues to which organisations respond, but rather stakeholder issues. Any issue without a stakeholder group, is really no issue at all. This point of view might indicate a major shift in the way that managers should think about key decisions.

A first step in the strategic management process is therefore to identify the strategic stakeholders, then engage in a dialogue to discover what it is they value (Askew 1997). Their key issues and willingness to expend resources helping or hurting the organisation on these issues, must be understood and managed (Wheeler & Sillanpää 1998). By paying attention to particular stakeholder profiles, managers can undertake a process of reasonably sophisticated analysis to understand where (from a behaviour view) value is created; where there is potential for more co-operation; and where there is the need to sustain the value that has been created (Freeman & Lifdtka 1997).

Another important concept in the management of stakeholders, is that an organisation must of its own volition undertake to satisfy its key stakeholders. If it does not, a solution will be imposed upon it from the outside, by means of regulations and laws. It will be much cheaper to implement regular communication processes with multiple stakeholders, to negotiate with them on critical issues and to seek voluntary agreements. This can be done by integrating boundary spanners into the strategy formulation processes, who anticipate stakeholder concerns and try to influence the stakeholder environment (Freeman 1984:74, 78-79).

Bringing the above to the attention of top management and the board, is the strategic role of the most senior manager/practitioner responsible for the corporate communication function at the top management level—the role of the *PR strategist*. As a member of top management, it is this practitioner's responsibility to influence the enterprise strategy, developed by the board and top management. That is, to ensure that the organisation follows Freeman's (1984) strategic approach to stakeholder management; that processes were in place for regular communication with strategic stakeholders; that corporate social performance was not something done in isolation when there were discretionary funding around, but formed part of routine communication processes with strategic stakeholders, satisfying their social needs; and pointing out that an organisation must of its own volition undertake to satisfy its key stakeholders or a solution will be imposed upon it from the outside.

A strategy should therefore be in place for each stakeholder group—not only for stockholders, but also for groups such as consumer advocates, environmentalists, the media or any other affected by the organisation's decisions. Managing communication with stakeholders as if they were discrete and unconnected groups of people will not add value to the organisation. Although many processes are already in place in strategic management—

portfolio analysis, strategic review and environmental scanning are the ones often used--each of these processes alone is inadequate in terms of taking complex stakeholder relationships into account (Freeman 1984:68). What is needed is a more sophisticated approach, supported by well thought-through strategies, systems and behaviours--enabling organisations to prioritise between stakeholder needs, aligning strategies and activities directed at stakeholders (Scholes & James 1997).

The organisation needs concepts and processes that give integrated, strategic approaches for dealing with multiple stakeholders on multiple issues. For each major strategic issue, the organisation must think through the effects on a number of stakeholders. For each major stakeholder, managers responsible for that stakeholder relationship must identify the strategic issues that affect that stakeholder and must understand how to formulate, implement and monitor strategies for dealing with that group. Many organisations do it well with one stakeholder group (e.g. customers), but few have the processes needed to integrate a number of stakeholder concerns (Freeman 1984:27).

Management must satisfy stakeholder wants, because—collectively, if not individually—stakeholder groups have a great impact on an organisation's performance. The task of management, including strategic management, has become one of satisfying stakeholders' wants and needs--of managing the relationships between, and often conflicting demands of, various stakeholders. In fact, some authors feel that the ultimate objective of strategy should be to address stakeholder benefits (Hax & Majluf 1988).

As discussed in Chapter 3, however, it is not sufficient to identify and manage stakeholders alone--issues that affect the strategic direction of the organisation or business unit also need to be identified and tracked (Freeman 1984:22). When public issues (e.g. environmentalism, consumerism, civil rights, feminism, energy shortages or pollution) impact on an organisation's investments, operations, or

ability to act, an organisation needs to actively manage those issues. Public policy and social issues are no longer peripheral to business planning and management—today they are the mainstream of it (Marx 1990). Issues management should therefore be integrated with the stakeholder concept--new and emerging issues *and* stakeholders must be identified (Freeman 1984:224).

An organisation with stakeholder management capability, can be defined as

> *"having the ability to understand the organisation's stakeholder map and the stakes of each group, having the organisational processes to take these groups and their stakes into account routinely, and implementing a set of transactions to balance the interests of these stakeholders to achieve the organisation's purpose"* (Freeman 1984:53).

The body of knowledge on strategic management indicates a need for concepts and processes to deal with multiple stakeholders on multiple issues. The concept of corporate communication strategy is suggested as a strategic approach to determine *what* it is that should be communicated to strategic stakeholders to solve organisational problems or capitalise on opportunities presented.

This will necessitate a close working relationship between the *PR strategist*, functioning on the macro level (influencing top management and the board's attitude towards communication with strategic stakeholders, predisposing them towards the stakeholder approach and a symmetrical communication model) and the *PR manager*, operating on the functional level (developing the corporate communication strategy by putting processes in place for regular communication with strategic stakeholders, identifying the implications of organisational policies and other strategic issues on the stakeholders—deciding *what* should be communicated to solve or prevent problems or capitalise on opportunities).

4.4 THE BODY OF KNOWLEDGE ON 'STRATEGIC' CORPORATE COMMUNICATION (PUBLIC RELATIONS)

In the next section, the public relations literature was analysed in order to *firstly*, obtain references for what is meant by 'strategic' corporate communication and *secondly*, to identify existing corporate communication decision making approaches and models which could possibly be used as an approach in the conceptualisation of corporate communication strategy.

4.4.1 STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT ROLES IN CORPORATE COMMUNICATION (PUBLIC RELATIONS)

Strategic management applies to corporate communication in two important ways (Grunig & Repper, *in* Grunig 1992:120):

- The first is the most senior corporate communication manager/practitioner's role as part of the top management team in developing and implementing problem-solving strategies for the entire organisation. Also called the *mirror* function by Van Riel (1995:1-2), this strategic role refers to monitoring relevant environmental developments and anticipating their consequences for the organisation's strategies and policies, being a source of intelligence regarding the stakeholder environment and an early warning system that identifies issues before crisis erupts. (This role was conceptualised in Chapter 3 as the role of the *PR strategist,* a strategic role at the top management or macro level of the organisation.)

- The second way in which strategic management applies to corporate communication, refers to the corporate communication department's own

efforts to integrate and co-ordinate its work with that of the organisation, by managing its own programmes strategically (Grunig & Repper, in Grunig 1992:120)--a necessary condition for the function to make a contribution towards organisational effectiveness. (This is the role of the *PR manager*, another strategic role for corporate communication).

This latter role forms part of the 'window' function of corporate communication, with the responsibility of developing a corporate communication policy and strategy (Van Riel 1995). The *window* or external representation function is the information disposal function of the boundary spanner. It includes the preparation and execution of messages that portray all facets of the organisation. The philosophies, policies, programmes and practices of top management are interpreted and communicated to stakeholders, accomplishing an active outward orientation for the organisation.

This role is performed on the meso or functional level of the organisation (Grunig 1990). If corporate communication programmes/plans are to be managed strategically, the corporate communication strategy should be based on the corporate strategy in order that communication goals be aligned to organisational goals.

Another part of the 'window' or external representation function, are the activities that take place on the micro or the programme level of corporate communication. This is not seen by the researcher as forming part of the strategic management of corporate communication. Rather, it concerns the role of the *PR technician*, a role at the implementation level. As pointed out in Chapter 2, practitioners performing the technician role do not participate in management decision making, but carry out the low-level mechanics of generating communication products that implement policy decisions made by others. The *PR technician* provides the communication and journalistic skills—writing, editing, audio-visual production, graphics, and production of messages—needed to implement communication programmes (Dozier 1984; Broom & Smith 1979).

> The link between the corporate communication function and the organisational mission is the corporate communication strategy, ensuring that communication goals are derived from corporate goals. If the corporate communication strategy does not address issues of vital importance for the organisation's survival, communication plans and goals can not be considered as being aligned to corporate goals. This results in the corporate communication function not making a contribution to organisational effectiveness, nor satisfying top management's expectations.

4.4.2 A MODEL FOR THE STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT OF CORPORATE COMMUNICATION (PUBLIC RELATIONS)

The model described in Chapter 3 (see 3.2.2 and 3.2.3) is one of the few sources that refer to the role of corporate communication in the strategic management process (Grunig & Repper, *in* Grunig 1992:124-150). Since this model is also relevant in the conceptualisation of corporate communication strategy, a short summary is provided:

If communication is to be managed strategically, it is imperative that stakeholders and issues be identified and managed pro-actively:

- The *stakeholder* stage of the model refers to the identification of strategic stakeholders through environmental scanning and the need for ongoing communication with them.

- The *publics* stage refers to the identification of groups or individuals who see the consequences of organisational decisions/behaviour as problematic. It is advocated that they be involved in the organisation's decision making in order to manage conflict and obtain co-operation.

- The *issues* stage deals with the management of issues, and the important role of the media therein.

Stages four to seven of the model deal with communication programmes (objectives, planning, implementation and evaluation), the operational level of corporate communication, and will not be discussed here.

> The first three stages in the model is regarded by the researcher as steps also used in formulating corporate communication strategy: Since corporate communication strategy is a strategic approach for identifying and managing stakeholders and issues, it is important to differentiate between stakeholders and the publics/activists that emerge around issues. These individuals or groups are in different stages of communication behaviour, and the organisation needs to manage them, using different kinds of communication.

4.4.3 APPROACHES TO CORPORATE COMMUNICATION (PUBLIC RELATIONS) PLANNING

An analysis of the public relations body of knowledge indicates an emphasis on operational planning, rather than strategy formulation (Windahl, Signitzer & Olson 1993; Seitel 1995:146-147; Cutlip, Center & Broom 1994:316-327; Hainsworth & Wilson 1992).

According to Windahl, Signitzer and Olson (1993), a systematic approach to communication planning entails that all relevant receiver groups are reached, that messages are disseminated in the right order, that evaluations are done, and that a thorough goal analysis is part of the initial stages of a project. It is deduced that these authors are referring to planning on the *operational* level, but not to the problem defining stage at the macro level or the strategy stage at the functional level, as defined by the researcher.

The same emphasis on operational planning is shown by Seitel (1995:146-147). The researcher is of the opinion that Seitel is referring to *implementation strategy*, formulated on the programme or campaign level:

> *"Public relations people must think strategically. Strategies are the most crucial decisions of a public relations campaign. They answer the general question: How will we manage our resources to achieve our goals? The specific answers then become the public relations tactics used to implement the strategies."*

Cutlip, Center & Broom's (1994:316-327) view of strategic planning in public relations is also seen as referring to *implementation* strategy on the operational level:

> *"....decisions about program goals and objectives, identifying key publics, setting policies to guide selection of strategies and determining strategies. There must be a close linkage between the overall program goal, the objectives for each public, and the strategies selected."*

According to Hainsworth & Wilson (1992), the four-step 'PR process' model, introduced by Cutlip and Center 48 years ago, falls short of providing an adequate basis for the systematic analysis of corporate communication problems. What is needed is a coherent, consistent framework of analysis and planning that provides a rational approach to problem solving. Their proposed strategic programme planning matrix also refers to communication planning, although their first phase (research) seems to imply that plans/programmes are determined strategically.

4.4.4 MODELS OF DECISION MAKING PROCESSES USED IN THE FIELD OF CORPORATE COMMUNICATION

Since strategy is the outcome of a strategic thinking and decision making process, it is necessary to investigate corporate communication approaches to problem solving and decision making. Grunig & Hunt (1984:104-108) refer to different models of management decision making processes used by corporate communication practitioners (Haner & Ford; Maynes, Massie & Wallace; Cutlip & Center; Marston's RACE formula; and the planning and evaluation matrix developed by the Group Attitudes Corporation). All of these were brought together by Grunig & Hunt (1984) in a single and powerful theory called a behavioural molecule, based on the systems theory.

This molecule, especially the latter part, also seems to refer to the process of operational communication planning. Grunig and Hunt do however indicate that practitioners who do research in the 'detect' (first) stage, could use the full molecule to plan that research (Grunig & Hunt 1984:109). It therefore seems possible that the behavioural molecule can be used at the functional level (following all the suggested stages) as a decision making process in developing corporate communication strategy -- and then be repeated at the implementation level (once again following all the stages).

The different segments/stages suggested by Grunig & Hunt (1984) are indicated below, each followed by the **researcher's suggestion** as to how it can be used at the functional level to develop corporate communication strategy. (This would be the responsibility of a practitioner in the role of the *PR manager*, in consultation with the *PR strategist*.)

- In the **'detect'** segment, managers detect a problem from systems inputs.

> **Researcher's suggestion**: *The PR manager Identifies key strategic issues and stakeholders through environmental scanning, as well as from current/proposed organisational strategies.*

- The **'construct'** segment represents the cognitive processes--managers define the problem, suggest what is required to solve the problem, and formulate alternative solutions. This segment ends when the manager has constructed a single idea that makes sense of the situation.

> **Researcher's suggestion**: *The PR manager participates in strategy formulation by doing strategic thinking and deciding on options for the corporate communication function, i.e. considers the implications of the key strategic issues for the organisation's stakeholders and determines what must be communicated to deal with the issue.*

- In the **'define'** segment, managers specify distinctly how each alternative can be put into operation, how long it would take, how much it would cost, and what effects it would have.

> **Researcher's suggestion**: *The PR manager evaluates strategic options by determining whether the intended communication will indeed prevent the strategic issue turning into a major problem/crisis or whether the opportunity is exploited to full advantage.*

- In the **'select'** segment, managers make a decision. They select one of the alternatives to implement as a behaviour.

> **Researcher's suggestion**: *The PR manager prioritises key strategic issues and decides which ones will be addressed.*

- In the **'confirm'** segment, managers think through the consequences--about whether the selected behaviour will work and whether it is the best alternative, and what possibly could go wrong.

> **Researcher's suggestion**: *The PR manager revises the strategic decision by deciding whether these really are the most important issues facing the organisation and what the risks of communicating to stakeholders/publics/activists are.*

- In the **'behave'** segment, managers do something e.g. write a press release.

> **Researcher's suggestion**: *The PR manager formulates and documents the corporate communication strategy.*

One is now back at the beginning of the molecule, and the *PR manager* can repeat the process to develop a strategic communication plan for the corporate communication function.

- In the **'detect'** segment, managers examine the feedback from the behavioural outputs to detect if their objectives have been met.

> **Researcher's suggestion**: *The PR manager obtains feedback from top management/the PR strategist on the proposed corporate communication strategy.*

- The **'construct'** segment represents the cognitive processes--managers define the problem, suggest what it requires to solve the problem and formulate alternative solutions. This segment ends when the manager has constructed a single idea that makes sense of the situation.

> **Researcher's suggestion**: *The PR manager starts the thinking processes for developing a strategic master plan for the corporate communication function, i.e. which divisions/sections or project teams should address the issues pointed out by the strategy, etc. All stages in the molecule are repeated on the functional level with communication plans/campaigns as outcomes.*

One is now back at the beginning of the molecule, and the *PR technician* (in consultation with the *PR manager*) can repeat the process at the implementation level to develop individual communication plans/campaigns.

The researcher therefore proposes that the behavioural molecule be used *firstly* at the functional level by a practitioner in the role of the *PR manager* as a decision making process in developing corporate communication strategy. *Secondly*, that the behavioural molecule be repeated at the functional level to develop a strategic communication plan. *Thirdly*, that the behavioural molecule be repeated at the implementation level to develop individual communication plans/campaigns.

4.4.5 THE BODY OF KNOWLEDGE ON CORPORATE COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

Although the public relations body of knowledge refers to a strategic role for the corporate communication manager, there are but a few references to corporate communication 'strategy' in a strategic organisational context.

Tibble (1997:356) is the only author found by the researcher who questioned the meaning of strategy in a corporate communication context. He was of the opinion that although the corporate communication industry acknowledges that strategy

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should be an integral part of its communication programmes, in practice this amounts to little more than lip service:

> *"Strategy and the communications world, and particularly the PR part of that world, just do not seem to go together. It is certainly unusual to come across a memorable, cogent, sustained, and effective communications strategy. Not a brand strategy. Not a marketing strategy. Not an advertising strategy—a communication strategy."*

The word strategy is 'used very sloppy', is 'bandied around like a mantra' but contains little of substance. The main thrust of Tibble's (1997) thinking is that few practitioners understand the meaning of strategy, although it is a familiar, uncomplicated concept to those acquainted with management theory. The key problem seems to lie in the application of strategy for corporate communication issues, i.e. what strategy actually means in a communication context. The word strategy is often used by corporate communication practitioners to describe something 'important' (as in *strategic* messages, *strategic* direction) or to describe 'activities' (as in communication *strategy*). It is also used mistakenly while, in reality, describing a communication aim, objective, or tactic.

According to Tibble (1997:358), an effective strategy should provide the following:

- leadership of thought and activity processes for the communication programmes;
- the context, and a guiding principle, for all communication activity;
- the link between the 'why' and the 'how'; the logic that binds objectives and tactics together.

Tibble (1997:358) states that *"the definition of strategy in a communication context is open to debate"*. The purpose of this chapter is to enter this debate by suggesting the meaning of strategy in a corporate communication context, i.e. providing a conceptualisation for *corporate communication strategy*. (A model for the process of developing such a corporate communication strategy will be hypothesised in Chapter 5).

In conclusion, it can be said that with the exception of Grunig & Repper's model for the strategic management of corporate communication *(in* Grunig 1992), the approaches to corporate communication (public relations) planning and the models of decision making processes described above, refer mostly to communication *planning* rather than to *strategy* (as differentiated earlier in this chapter -- see 4.3). This view is supported by Tibble (1997) who stated that 'strategy' in the context of corporate communication is not understood and hardly exists.

It is therefore clear that there is a need for a strategy on the functional or meso level of the organisation that will provide the focus and direction for communication with the organisation's stakeholders—an approach for managing stakeholders and issues strategically, providing the processes needed to align communication goals to organisational goals.

Based on the discussion of 'strategy' and 'corporate communication strategy' in this chapter, a conceptualisation of *corporate communication strategy* will now be provided.

4.5 CORPORATE COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

4.5.1 A CONCEPTUALISATION

In conceptualising 'corporate communication strategy' based on the concept strategy, an attempt will be made to explain the meaning of 'strategy' in a corporate communication context.

It can be said that a corporate communication *strategy* provides the focus and direction for an organisation's communication with its stakeholders. It determines *what* should be communicated to avoid conflict and obtain win-win solutions, thereby stabilising relationships with strategic stakeholders, and contributing towards the achievement of organisational goals.

Corporate communication strategy is the corporate communication function's pro-active response to a fast-changing environment, an approach that directs its course of action and provides an indication of its positioning for the future. It is a pattern in important decisions and actions with regard to communication with stakeholders, developed within the context of the organisation's vision, mission, corporate culture and policies, goals and objectives (the internal environment), but focusing on an assessment of the external environment.

Corporate communication strategy can be seen as a pro-active capability to adapt the organisation to changes in stakeholder expectations, opinions, even feelings (obtained through environmental scanning and boundary spanning activities). It can create a competitive advantage for the organisation through the early detection and management of issues, involving strategic stakeholders in

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decision making, giving the organisation the autonomy to concentrate on achieving its mission.

Corporate communication strategy focuses on strategic communication decisions, and is the outcome of a strategic thinking process by senior communication practitioners and top managers with regard to the identification and management of stakeholders and issues. It is problem solving in unstructured situations, selecting the right problems to solve—it produces a profile that can be used to determine which stakeholders and issues should receive more or less emphasis.

Corporate communication strategy does not follow the traditional 'linear' approach where the emphasis is on strategic planning, but is moulded on the more modern approaches to strategy. By adapting the organisation to trends, events and stakeholders in the environment, it can be considered 'adaptive' strategy. It also focuses on relationships, symbolic actions and communication, emphasising attitudinal and cognitive complexity among diverse stakeholders, which is the essence of 'interpretive' strategy. These approaches to strategy is easily explained when considering that the purpose of corporate communication is, per definition, "*to establish and maintain mutually beneficial relationships between an organisation and the publics on whom its success or failure depends* (Cutlip, Center & Broom 1994).

Corporate communication strategy can be said to be the thinking, the logic behind the corporate communication function's actions -- *what* is to be done rather than *how*. It will result in the corporate communication function doing the right things, rather than doing things right. It therefore focuses on impact and outcomes (an effectiveness approach), rather than on process (an efficiency approach). It is clear that corporate communication strategy is not the same as communication plans. Corporate communication strategy provides the framework

for the strategic and operational communication plans necessary to implement the strategy.

The corporate communication strategy makes the corporate communication function/department relevant in the strategic management process through its focus on communication with strategic stakeholders, aligning communication goals to organisational goals. This provides the vital link between enterprise/corporate/business strategies and the corporate communication function. Although the corporate communication strategy is influenced most by the organisation's enterprise strategy -- and provides strategic inputs in the enterprise strategy -- it also supports the corporate and business strategies. In contributing to organisational effectiveness in this manner, corporate communication will go a long way in satisfying the expectations that top management seems to have of them.

Not only does the concept of corporate communication strategy provide a new way of thinking about, defining and studying organisational and communication problems, it also provides a new way of evaluating the efforts of corporate communication practitioners. It therefore provides a richer, unifying perspective, a new paradigm for corporate communication called the *organisational/managerial effectiveness* paradigm.

To conclude, it can be stated that the process of developing corporate communication strategy provides the strategic approach needed by organisations to identify strategic stakeholders, and to manage communication with them. This is achieved by identifying stakeholders and their major concerns; considering the effects thereof for the organisation; and considering the implications/effects of each strategic issue or organisational strategy on the stakeholders. These implications become the strategic communication concerns that have to be addressed by the organisation/corporate communication function, i.e. it

determines *what* should be communicated in order to solve organisational or communication problems; or to capitalise on the opportunities presented by key organisational issues. This is the essence of corporate communication strategy.

4.5.2 AN OPERATIONAL DEFINITION

Corporate communication strategy is a process of:

- analysing the organisation's internal and external environment;

- drawing up/refining the stakeholder map by identifying strategic stakeholders and their concerns, and the consequences thereof for the organisation;

- identifying the organisation's key strategic issues, either through environmental scanning/issues analysis or by analysing current/proposed organisational strategies;

- considering the implications of these strategic issues, specifically focusing on the consequences thereof for the organisation's strategic stakeholders;

- identifying **what must be communicated** to strategic stakeholders to manage the stakeholder concerns or the consequences of the strategic issues (i.e. to solve the problem or capitalise on the opportunity presented by the strategic issue)—this is the essence of corporate communication strategy;

- deriving communication goals from the corporate communication strategy, providing a framework for the strategic communication plan;

- contributing to the achievement of organisational goals by providing the link between communication plans and the corporate strategy.

4.6 PRECISE HYPOTHESES FOR THE ROLE OF THE *PR MANAGER* AND THE *PR TECHNICIAN*

In this section, precise hypotheses for empirically measuring the role of the *PR manager* and the role of the *PR technician* are developed -- to be tested in a future quantitative study. They are based on the guiding hypothesis set in Chapter 1, and are adapted resulting from the new insights gained during the literature investigation conducted for this chapter.

Hypothesis 8: CEO expectations for the most senior manager/ practitioner responsible for the corporate communication/public affairs function is statistically significantly higher in the role of the *PR manager* than his/her perceptions of the performance in this role.

Hypothesis 9: CEO expectations for the most senior manager/ practitioner responsible for the corporate communication/public affairs function is statistically significantly lower in the role of the *PR technician* than his/her perceptions of the performance in this role.

Hypothesis 10: CEO expectations for the most senior manager/practitioner responsible for the corporate communication/public affairs function are statistically significantly higher in the role of the *PR manager*, than in the role of the *PR technician*.

Hypothesis 11: CEO perceptions of the performance of the most senior manager/ practitioner responsible for the corporate communication/public affairs function are statistically significantly lower in the role of the *PR manager* than in the role of the *PR technician*.

4.7 MEASUREMENT QUESTIONS FOR THE ROLE OF THE *PR MANAGER*

The following 10 items are suggested to measure the role of the *PR manager*, a strategic role at the functional level. The activities representing this role are seen mainly to deal with the development of a corporate communication strategy and a strategic corporate communication plan for the function.

Develop corporate communication strategy that supports corporate strategy (Steyn 1999).
Take responsibility for the success or failure of corporate communication strategy (Steyn 1999).
Take responsibility for the success or failure of corporate communication plans (Dozier *et al* 1995:11)·
Develop corporate communication plans, e.g. crisis or employee communication or media plans (Grunig & Hunt 1984).
Manage the implementation of corporate communication plans (Grunig & Hunt 1984).
Evaluate functional tactics e.g. the channels used to reach communities (Grunig & Hunt 1984).
Manage the public relations budget (Robbins & De Cenzo 1998; Floyd & Wooldridge 1994).
Develop functional tactics to effectively communicate organisational messages to stakeholders (Grunig & Hunt 1984).
Translate communication goals into communication activities (Digman 1990).
Monitor the performance of corporate communication practitioners or sub-divisions (Robbins & De Cenzo 1998; Floyd & Wooldridge 1994).

4.8 MEASUREMENT QUESTIONS FOR THE ROLE OF THE *PR TECHNICIAN*

The following items are suggested to measure the role of the *PR technician*, an implementation role at the micro or programme level. The activities representing this role is seen mainly to deal with the development and implementation of functional tactics. The items were based on, but are *not exactly the same*, as the references mentioned. One new item was developed, namely *"Keep a media clipping service"*. This item was included because media clipping is an activity that takes place in many organisations, seen as the responsibility of corporate communication/public relations.

Produce audio-visual materials for presentations (based on Groenewald 1998a).
Generate publicity e.g. write media releases (based on Groenewald 1998a).
Keep a media clipping service (new item).
Edit public relations materials e.g. speeches or the annual report (based on Dozier, *in* Grunig 1992:334, as well as Groenewald 1998a).
Write articles for the organisation's publications (based on Dozier, *in* Grunig 1992:334, as well as Groenewald 1998a).
Organise special events e.g. open houses or exhibitions or gala evenings (based on Groenewald 1998a).

4.9 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES ACHIEVED IN CHAPTER 4

Primary Objective 2

Corporate communication strategy was conceptualised as a strategy at the functional level, providing focus and direction to the organisation's communication with its stakeholders. The process involves identifying key strategic issues and determining their implications for the stakeholders, as well as identifying stakeholders and their concerns, and the implications for the organisation's strategies and policies. Furthermore, to determine *what should be communicated* to solve these problems or capitalise on the opportunities.

Secondary Objectives:

- A corporate communication *strategy* was differentiated from a communication *plan*. The former is seen as the thinking process performed by senior communication practitioners and top managers, identifying *what* needs to be communicated. The latter was seen as breaking the strategy into steps that could be implemented.

- An operational definition for the process of developing a corporate communication strategy was provided.

- Precise hypotheses for empirically testing the role of the *PR manager* (a strategic role for the corporate communication practitioner at the functional or departmental level of the organisation) were generated.

- Precise hypotheses for empirically testing the role of the *PR technician* (an implementation role at the micro or programme level of the organisation) were generated.

- Items for empirically measuring the role of the *PR manager* and the role of the *PR technician* were developed.

4.10 CONCLUSION

The corporate communication function is in need of a new paradigm--a new pattern of thinking about and studying organisational and communication problems, and of evaluating corporate communication (public relations) practice. Developing a corporate communication strategy will assist in establishing such a paradigm—an *organisational/managerial effectiveness paradigm.* The emphasis in such a paradigm is on making a contribution to organisational effectiveness by aligning communication goals to the organisational mission, thereby fulfilling top management's expectations of the function.

However, to achieve this will necessitate both a strategic role for corporate communication at the top management or macro level (the conceptualised role of the *PR strategist*), as well as a strategic role at the functional or meso level (the redefined role of the *PR manager*). The latter will be responsible for developing a corporate communication strategy and a strategic communication plan, and for managing the planning, implementation and evaluation of communication plans/programmes/ campaigns strategically by aligning communication goals to organisational goals.

In order to determine corporate communication strategy, senior corporate communication practitioners will need to understand the business issues that the organisation faces. Rather than trying to move communication further up´top management's agenda, they will link communication with what is already at the top of that agenda. By thinking and talking only in terms of communication
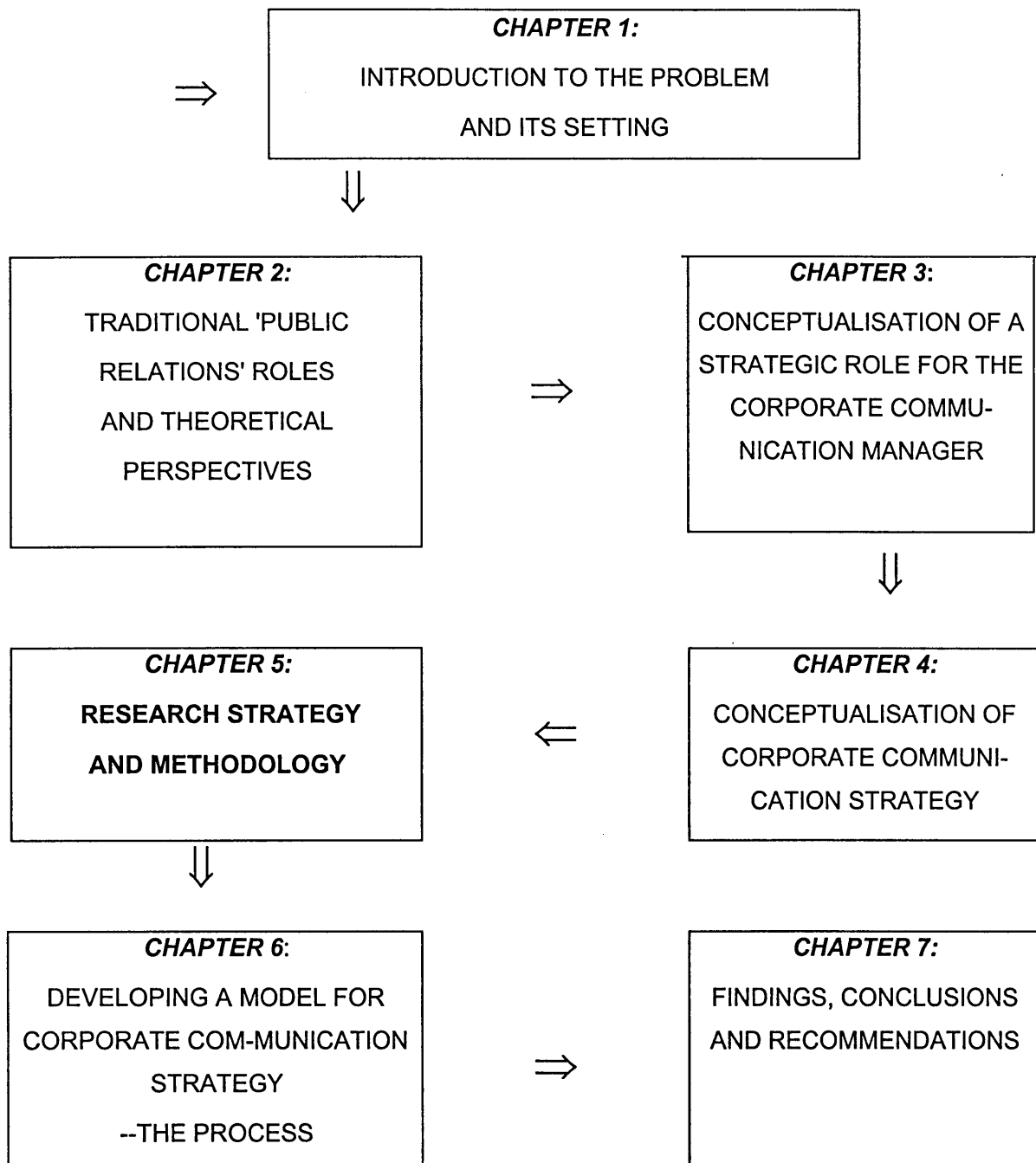
processes without identifying the underlying business problems, corporate communicators risk imposing inappropriate solutions.

Top management is interested in solutions to business problems, not in communication problems. If the corporate communication function is to make a real contribution towards organisational effectiveness, they will have to become expert in using communication to help remove the barriers to organisational success (Quirke 1996). In developing their communication plans, practitioners will have to ensure that they are addressing organisational problems/goals, and not only achieving communication goals (as often seems to be happening). In the literature there are few guidelines on how this is to be achieved. This study is an attempt to provide such guidelines to senior corporate communication practitioners.

Chapter 4 is the final chapter in the conceptualisation phase of this study, explicating the 'what' and the 'why'. In Chapter 5, the research strategy and methodology is explained i.e. how the study has been conducted. In particular, the chapter will focus on action research as a methodology for the development of a model that can be used by practitioners and students to guide them in the process of developing a corporate communication strategy for an organisation.

CHAPTER 5

OUTLINE OF THE RESEARCH REPORT

$\Rightarrow$

CHAPTER 1:
INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM
AND ITS SETTING

$\Downarrow$

CHAPTER 2:		CHAPTER 3:
TRADITIONAL 'PUBLIC RELATIONS' ROLES AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES	$\Rightarrow$	CONCEPTUALISATION OF A STRATEGIC ROLE FOR THE CORPORATE COMMU-NICATION MANAGER

$\Downarrow$

CHAPTER 5:		CHAPTER 4:
RESEARCH STRATEGY AND METHODOLOGY	$\Leftarrow$	CONCEPTUALISATION OF CORPORATE COMMUNI-CATION STRATEGY

$\Downarrow$

CHAPTER 6:		CHAPTER 7:
DEVELOPING A MODEL FOR CORPORATE COM-MUNICATION STRATEGY --THE PROCESS	$\Rightarrow$	FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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CHAPTER 5

5. RESEARCH STRATEGY AND METHODOLOGY

This chapter discusses the research strategy (qualitative), the research design (both exploratory and confirmatory), and the methodology of action research. It also provides detail on sampling procedures, data generation and recording, data analysis, reliability, validity and generalisability.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Research Objective 1 was achieved in Chapter 3 and Research Objective 2 in Chapter 4, by means of a literature investigation. In this chapter, the procedures that were used to achieve these two objectives are detailed. Furthermore, action research as a *methodology* for achieving Research Objective 3 (implementing, evaluating and improving a hypothesised model for developing corporate communication strategy), is described. The various *stages* in the action research process are to be addressed in Chapter 6 (i.e. the initial literature study, the resulting hypothesised model and the process of implementing, evaluating and revising the model.)

5.2 RESEARCH STRATEGY OR APPROACH

> The strategy is a road map, an overall approach for undertaking a systematic exploration of the phenomenon of interest (Marshall & Rossman 1995:40).

To answer the specific research questions posed in this study, a qualitative strategy has been selected. Qualitative research differs markedly from quantitative research in that it is *"analytic and interpretative—it attempts to examine phenomena in a holistic manner"*. Events or extraneous variables are not controlled—the purpose is to capture the normal flow of events (Du Plooy 1995:33).

Qualitative data are in the form of words, rather than numbers. It is therefore a source of *"well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of processes occurring in local contexts"*. Qualitative data is more likely to lead to integrating new theory since it helps researchers to go beyond initial preconceptions and frameworks (Miles & Huberman 1984).

The qualitative strategy fulfils two important criteria, as set out by Zelditch (1962):

- *Informational adequacy*: The research strategy maximises the possibilities that the researcher will be able to respond to the questions thoroughly and thoughtfully, and elicit the sought-after information.

- *Efficiency*: The strategy allows adequate data to be collected at the least cost in terms of time, access, and cost to participants. (Since the participants to the action research were a lecturer, students and non-profit organisations, this criterion was of the utmost importance, both in terms of time and money.)

A qualitative strategy also fulfils ethical considerations as a critical criterion (Marshall & Rossman 1995), as it does not violate the participants' privacy or unduly disrupt their every-day worlds. In this study, participation by non-profit organisations in the action research was entirely voluntary. They were non-profit organisations specifically selected by students on the grounds of their enthusiasm for participating, and the total access to information they were willing to provide. Although participation by students were 'obligatory', the action research constituted their practical project for the subject Strategic Communication Management--they were therefore obliged to set the time aside. Furthermore, not only did the project represent a large percentage of the total second semester mark (40%), but the knowledge and experience gained were deemed invaluable by the students, upon completion of the project.

According to Marshall (*in* Marshall & Rossman 1995:43), a qualitative study is research:

- *"that delves in depth into complexities and processes;*
- *on little-known phenomena;*
- *on unstructured processes in organisations;*
- *that cannot be done experimentally for practical reasons;*
- *for which relevant variables have yet to be identified".*

A qualitative research approach was therefore particularly valuable in answering the research questions posed in this study.

It must be noted that there are real problems associated with the output of qualitative studies. There is a serious question of sampling involved, since the sheer bulk of data makes it unlikely that a sample of more than a few dozen cases can be managed. In this study (Project 1), each student group selected *one* non-profit organisation for in-depth interviewing, which spread the work to manageable proportions. Not only did this result in a sizable sample, but more

importantly, it increased the quality of the data generation and analysis. In Project 2, the lecturer/researcher did a census—all 90 existing projects on corporate communication strategy were analysed. Since the projects constituted the students' practical projects for obtaining semester marks, they were evaluated individually as part of the lecturer's academic responsibilities. The only 'extra' work was the analysis of the projects in order to improve the model. This was done during the December holidays—a quiet period--that again improved the quality of the analysis.

The generalisability and the replicability of qualitative analyses also merit concern. The most serious difficulty in the use of qualitative data is that methods of analysis are not well formulated. There are *"few guidelines for protection against self-delusion"*. Another concern is that analysis methods are rarely reported in detail in published case studies and one can therefore not follow how a researcher arrived at conclusions (Miles & Huberman 1984). The generalisability, replicability and methods of analysis of this study will be dealt with later in this chapter.

5.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

A research design constitutes the blueprint for the collection, measurement and analysis of data. It is the plan and structure of the empirical investigation to obtain answers to research questions, and provides a framework for specifying the relationships among the study's variables (Cooper & Emory 1995:114).

In achieving Research Objectives 1 and 2, as well as the first secondary objective under Research Objective 3 (see next page) the design of this study is *exploratory*. Exploratory research is a particular type of descriptive research, its advantage being that the subject of investigation need not be precisely

determined but is left open for adjustment (Bless & Higson-Smith 1995: 41). It often serves as an initial step before a quantitative study, which is the case in this study: the conceptualisation of the role of the *PR strategist* (Research Objective 1) and the conceptualisation of corporate communication strategy as the primary activity of a practitioner in the role of the *PR manager* (Research Objective 2) have served as initial steps before a future quantitative (formal) study.

Exploratory research is used to "*gain insight into a situation, phenomenon, community or person, arising out of a lack of basic information on a new area of interest*". This research design has assisted the researcher in becoming more familiar with the situation in order that an exact problem could be formulated and precise hypotheses be developed for the future study. It has also assisted in assessing the correctness of the concepts (Bless & Higson-Smith 1995:41), and in identifying/discovering important variables (Marshall & Rossman 1995:41). Use have been made of *guiding* hypotheses, which have indicated some possible directions to follow, but has allowed the researcher the freedom to *explore and generate* other hypotheses.

The first guiding hypothesis that was set in Chapter 1 is the following:

Guiding hypothesis 1a

The chief executive is not satisfied with the role played by the corporate communication manager.

Guiding hypothesis 1b

The chief executive expects the corporate communication manager to play a strategic role at the top management level.

The first objective set for the study is the following:

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 1

Primary Objective: To conceptualise the role of the *PR strategist*, i.e. a strategic role for the corporate communication (public relations) manager at the top management level (Chapter 3).

Secondary Objectives:

- To determine, by means of an analysis of the relevant literature on public relations, what the role of the *PR strategist* entails.

- To determine, by means of an analysis of the relevant literature on strategic management, whether a need exists for the corporate communication/public relations manager to play a strategic role at the top management level of the organisation (the role of the *PR strategist*).

- To operationalise the role of the *PR strategist*.

- To develop precise hypotheses for empirically testing the role of the *PR strategist*.

- To develop items for empirically measuring the role of the *PR strategist*.

To achieve Research Objective 1, the means of exploration has been a *secondary data* investigation: *firstly* of the body of knowledge on public relations to determine the constructs for the role of the *PR strategist*; and *secondly* of the strategic management literature in order to determine whether a need exists for such a role. Whereas the theory on corporate communication (public relations) is well-known to the researcher, the strategic management theory is not. Since an attempt is made to develop a strategic role for the corporate communication

manager, with the emphasis on gathering strategic information through environmental scanning as well as the identification of strategic stakeholders and issues around which publics emerge, it has been deemed important that the researcher familiarise herself with the following:

- the strategic thinking, planning and decision making processes;

- the needs of top management regarding information gathering and interpretation;

- whether environmental scanning continues to be important to top management as an information gathering process;

- whether environmental scanning is well defined, well organised and well managed at the top management level;

- which person or organisational unit in the organisation typically carries the responsibility for managing the environmental scanning process.

Furthermore, to determine

- the importance of stakeholder management to the organisation;

- who, or which function, takes responsibility at the top management level for the identification and management of stakeholders;

- who, if anyone, develops a corporate strategy for stakeholder relations;

- the importance to the organisation of publics and activists that emerge around issues.

The aim of the literature analysis is to establish whether a real need exists at the top management level of organisations for someone to play the suggested strategic role; to develop arguments as to the suitability of the corporate communication manager for playing this role; and to make suggestions as to how this role would fit into the strategic management process.

The second guiding hypothesis that was set in Chapter 1 is the following:

Guiding hypothesis 2

The chief executive expects the corporate communication manager to develop a corporate communication strategy for the organisation.

The objective set for the second part of the study, is the following:

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE 2

Primary Objective: To conceptualise *corporate communication strategy* (Chapter 4).

Secondary Objectives:

- To differentiate between a corporate communication *strategy* and a communication *plan.*

- To provide an operational definition for the process of developing a corporate communication strategy.

- To develop precise hypotheses for empirically testing the role of the *PR manager* (a strategic role for the corporate communication manager at the functional or departmental level of the organisation) and the role of the *PR technician* (an implementation role at the micro or programme level).

- To develop items for empirically measuring the role of the *PR manager.*

The means of exploration to achieve Research Objective 2 has been a secondary data investigation of:

the body of knowledge on strategic management, in order to clarify the concept 'strategy' in an organisational context;

the literature on public relations to determine the meaning of the concept 'corporate communication strategy'; the context within which it is used; and whether there is indeed a difference between a communication 'plan' and a 'corporate communication strategy'.

The third guiding hypothesis set in Chapter 1 is the following:

Guiding hypothesis 3

A model is a suitable tool to satisfactorily explicate the process of developing corporate communication strategy to third-year corporate communication students at the University of Pretoria.

The research objectives set for the third part of the study are:

Research Objective 3

Primary Objective: To develop a model that can satisfactorily explain the process of developing corporate communication strategy to third-year corporate communication students at the University of Pretoria, and to identify the lessons to be learnt to serve corporate communication practitioners (in the non-profit, for-profit and government sector) and corporate communication students at other tertiary institutions.

Secondary Objectives:

- To hypothesise a model for developing corporate communication strategy.

- To involve third-year corporate communication students at the University of Pretoria as action researchers in the implementation of the model amongst some non-profit organisations in South Africa.

- To determine the student groups' understanding of the process of developing a corporate communication strategy, *firstly* by assessing each individual group project and *secondly*, by comparing them in order to pinpoint the areas/constructs where problems are experienced, or alternatively, are (well) understood.

- To evaluate the hypothesised model, *firstly* by analysing and comparing the corporate communication strategies (student group reports) to ascertain common problem areas; and *secondly*, to analyse the theory on which the model was based--also provided to the students to improve their understanding of the model--as a possible cause of the problems experienced.

- To improve the model based on the analysis of the implementation results.

- To identify the lessons to be learnt to serve corporate communication practitioners (in the non-profit, for-profit and government sector) and corporate communication students at other tertiary institutions.

- To make the findings public through presentations at academic and industry conferences, as well as through articles in academic and industry publications.

- To attempt to make a contribution towards theory building on the little-known subject of corporate communication strategy.

The means of *exploration* to achieve the first secondary objective under Research Objective 3 (namely to hypothesise a model for developing corporate communication strategy), has been an investigation of both the strategic

management as well as the public relations literature. All the other secondary objectives, namely to involve students in the implementation of the model, and evaluate and improve the model, has been achieved by means of action research—employing a *confirmatory* design.

According to Miles & Huberman (1984), qualitative research can be '*outright confirmatory.*' This kind of design is used when preliminary work has provided insight into a phenomenon (*in this case, the initial literature study and hypothesised model*) and the researcher wants to enquire as to how this would work in natural settings (*i.e. whether the hypothesised model is adequate for guiding students and their action research partners in the process of developing corporate communication strategy, and whether the constructs in the model are valid).* The researcher therefore goes into the field with a nearly complete theory or a set of hypotheses (*the hypothesised model*).

The reasons for having provided a pre-existing conceptual framework for the action research in the form of the hypothesised model (based on the literature investigation), rather than having used action research to also *create* the conceptual framework, will now be explained. According to Miles & Huberman (1984), an important consideration with qualitative studies is whether there should be a pre-existing conceptual framework, or a set of research questions, or even pre-designed devices for collecting data. There is a lively debate amongst academics/researchers on whether such 'bounding' of the study blinds the researcher to important features in the cases investigated and causes misreading of participants' perceptions; or whether *lack* of bounding and focusing leads to indiscriminate data collection and data overload.

The conventional viewpoint is that the conceptual framework should emerge empirically from the field in the course of the study (the inductive model) and that pre-structuring and tight designs should be kept to a minimum. Miles &

Huberman (1984) is of the opinion that the latter makes sense when there is plenty of time or when one is exploring very complex social realities. However, when investigating better-understood social phenomena, a highly inductive approach is a waste of time. Also, the looser the initial design, the less selective the collection of data. If different field-workers are working inductively, with no common framework or instrumentation, they are bound to end up with data overload and lack of comparability across cases.

Miles & Huberman (1984) therefore consider it advantageous to the qualitative study to have a conceptual framework--identifying the constructs, giving the constructs descriptive or inferential names, and getting some clarity about their interrelationships. A conceptual framework explains, either graphically or in narrative form, the main dimensions to be studied—the key variables and the relationships amongst them. This forces the researcher to decide in advance which dimensions are more important, which relationships are the most meaningful, and what information should be collected and analysed. It also allows multiple researchers/fieldworkers to be sure that they are studying the same phenomenon. (The latter was an important consideration in this study, since plus minus 45 student groups--with 4 to 5 students in each group— constituted the fieldworkers every year).

The above provides the rationale for the researcher's decision to achieve Research Objective 3 (involving the students in implementation, and evaluating and improving the model) by means of a deductive approach—having started with some orienting constructs, and having assumed certain relationships between the constructs obtained by means of the literature investigation. The resulting conceptual framework was displayed graphically in the form of the hypothesised model (see Chapter 6). The model was then used as a guideline in collecting and analysing the data, confirming its validity through the selected methodology of action research, rather than identifying the initial constructs/categories by means of exploration.

The advantages of having used a confirmatory design was *firstly*, that much time was saved and *secondly*, that the conclusions were deemed more valid. The participant community (non-profit organisations) were not knowledgeable on the subject of corporate communication strategy, and neither would the students have been without the model. The student researchers, having studied the hypothesised model, participated in the research endeavour as full partners by offering their knowledge, whereas the non-profit organisations' leaders contributed their practical experience. Having shared knowledge and experience widely resulted in better outcomes for the projects.

The reader's attention is drawn to the fact that the remainder of this chapter will focus on action research, as the methodology selected to implement, evaluate and improve the model for developing corporate communication strategy.

5.4 ACTION RESEARCH AS METHODOLOGY

Whereas the research strategy (discussed in section 5.2) can be considered a road map or overall approach for undertaking a systematic exploration of the phenomenon of interest, the *methodology* is the specific tools for conducting the research (Marshall & Rossman 1995:40).

Action research is a particular form of participatory research, the latter being the encouragement of the active participation of people whom the research is intended to assist. Participatory research is not necessarily action research, but action research is always participatory (Bless & Higson-Smith 1995:56).

Action research as a research methodology for implementing, evaluating and improving the hypothesised model for developing corporate communication

strategy (amongst some non-profit organisations in South Africa) has been most suitable for this study--it suggests a particular complementary relationship between action and research, with the researchers and participant community each bringing valuable resources to the project. There is no general formula for doing action research--a*ction* and *research* takes place alternatively in an ongoing learning process for everyone involved.

Being a lecturer in the third year subject Strategic Communication Management at the University of Pretoria, the researcher used the opportunity presented by the lack of theory or textbooks in this sub-field to involve third year corporate communication students in research with the aim of building theory. Action research is an ideal vehicle, not only for building theory, but also for *"improving practice and understanding the process of improving practice"*, which are the central tenets of this research method. The main focus of action research in classrooms is to encourage teachers to become involved in their own practice, and to view themselves as researchers (Stenhouse 1975).

> *"Increasing numbers of teachers are gaining the confidence to challenge the way academics have traditionally thought about education. They are developing ways of understanding practice which involves the systematic examination of practical problems. They are imagining solutions, acting and evaluating the outcomes of their actions" (McNiff 1988).*

Unfortunately, the work of most researchers in the different disciplines and curriculum areas who employ action research "often emphasise *understanding* and is rich in practical description, but is rather sparse in *explanation* and weak on case studies of their own attempts to improve practically a process of education" (McNiff 1988).

In looking at the rationale for action research, the social basis can be regarded as *involvement*; whereas the educational basis is *improvement*—using action research implies/demands *changes*. Action research means ACTION, both of the system under consideration, and of the people involved in that system. It is participatory in that it involves the teacher in his/her own enquiry, and collaborative, in that it involves other people as part of a shared inquiry. It is research WITH, rather than research ON (McNiff 1988:3-4).

Action research is not just teaching. It is being aware and critical of that teaching, and using this self-critical awareness to be open to a process of change and improvement of practice. It encourages teachers to become adventurous and critical in their thinking, to develop theories and rationales for their practice, and to give reasoned justification for their public claims to professional knowledge (McNiff 1988:5).

Action research is a "*systematic enquiry made public*" (Stenhouse 1980)—this is precisely what distinguishes the activity as research (McNiff 1988:3-4). The latter was the justification for having included the following secondary objective under Research Objective 3: 'to make the findings public through presentations at academic and industry conferences, as well as through articles in academic and industry publications'.

5.4.1 STAGES IN THE ACTION RESEARCH PROCESS

Bless & Higson-Smith (1995:59) see five stages in the action research process. (In Chapter 6, the course of the action research project will be explicated according to these stages.)

STAGE 1: Implementation begins with a period of research where the resources and needs of a community are systematically assessed and the necessary information to guide action is gathered.

This stage refers to the lecturer/researcher having become aware of the need for a model to develop corporate communication strategy through requests from corporate communication practitioners to provide examples or guidelines for developing such a strategy. A literature search for a model/theoretical description to guide practitioners resulted in the realisation that neither seemed to exist. An informal request to a few corporate communication managers to supply their written corporate communication strategies to the researcher, provided further evidence of the seeming non-existence of guidelines in this regard--the so-called 'strategies' that were provided seemed to be no more than plans or a collection of activities. Furthermore, no pattern could be discerned in the way the strategies were developed.

Thereupon the lecturer/researcher conducted the initial literature investigation for this study in 1997, resulting in a hypothesised model for the development of corporate communication strategy (Model 1), as explained in Chapter 6 (the first secondary objective under Research Objective 3). A paper was delivered on this subject at the SACOMM Conference in Bloemfontein, in September 1997.

STAGE 2: Some kind of action is undertaken together by the action research partners.

The model was implemented by student researchers amongst 48 non-profit organisations during the second semester of 1998 (middle July to middle September).

STAGE 3: Thereafter the results of the action are to be assessed.

The 48 written reports on corporate communication strategy, developed by the student groups and participants, were individually assessed by the lecturer/researcher during the last two weeks of September 1998.

STAGE 4: A further period of research (of an evaluative nature) is initiated.

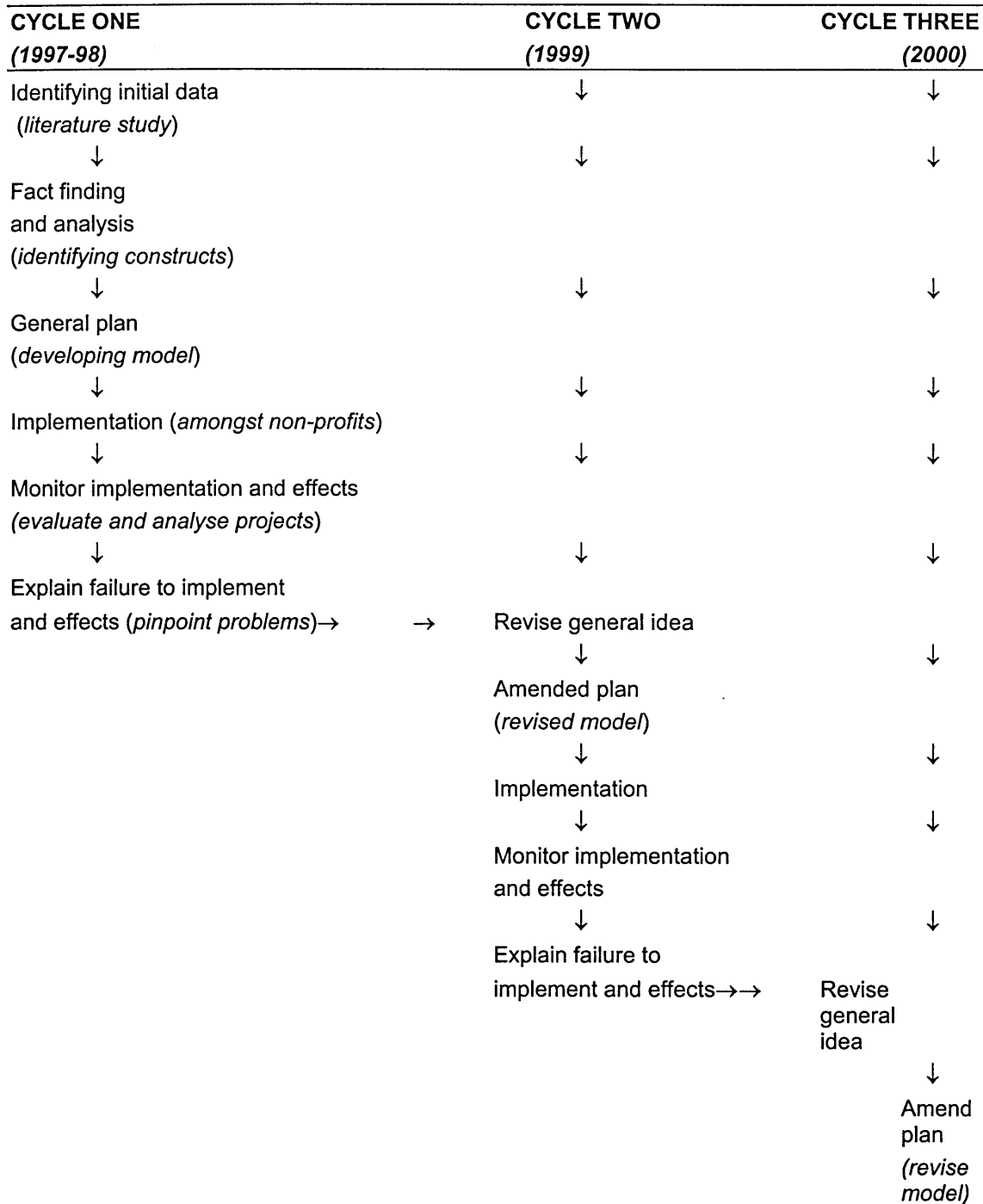*The results of the assessment were analysed by comparing it across projects, in December 1998.*

STAGE 5: Depending upon the results of the research, it may be necessary to develop or completely redesign the original action undertaken.

Another literature investigation was undertaken by the researcher in January 1999, to validate and/or explain the results of the assessment. The model was adapted/improved in February 1999.

At the beginning of the second cycle of action research (second semester 1999), the adapted model and literature study was presented to student groups and the whole process started over again--an adapted model, new student groups and different non-profit organisations. This process is to be repeated again during the third cycle, starting the second semester of 2000.

The action research process, graphically presented by McNiff (1988), is displayed on the next page. The researcher has indicated the course of this action research project in (*italics*).

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## Figure 5.1: THE ACTION RESEARCH PROCESS

CYCLE ONE (1997-98)	CYCLE TWO (1999)	CYCLE THREE (2000)
Identifying initial data (*literature study*)	↓	↓
↓	↓	↓
Fact finding and analysis (*identifying constructs*)		
↓	↓	↓
General plan (*developing model*)		
↓	↓	↓
Implementation (*amongst non-profits*)		
↓	↓	↓
Monitor implementation and effects (*evaluate and analyse projects*)		
↓	↓	↓
Explain failure to implement and effects (*pinpoint problems*)→ →	Revise general idea	
	↓	↓
	Amended plan (*revised model*)	
	↓	↓
	Implementation	
	↓	↓
	Monitor implementation and effects	
	↓	↓
	Explain failure to implement and effects→→	Revise general idea
		↓
		Amend plan (*revise model*)

Source: Applied based on McNiff (1988:30)

Action and research therefore continue as alternate processes in the solution of the research problem, as stated in Research Question 3: How can the process of *developing corporate communication strategy* be explicated to third-year corporate communication students at the University of Pretoria, and what are the lessons to be learnt to serve corporate communication practitioners (in the non-profit, for-profit and government sector) and corporate communication students at other tertiary institutions?

The repeated cycle of research and action, neither one possible without the other (see Figure 5.2), produces a process of ongoing learning for all the participants.

Figure 5.2:THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ACTION AND RESEARCH
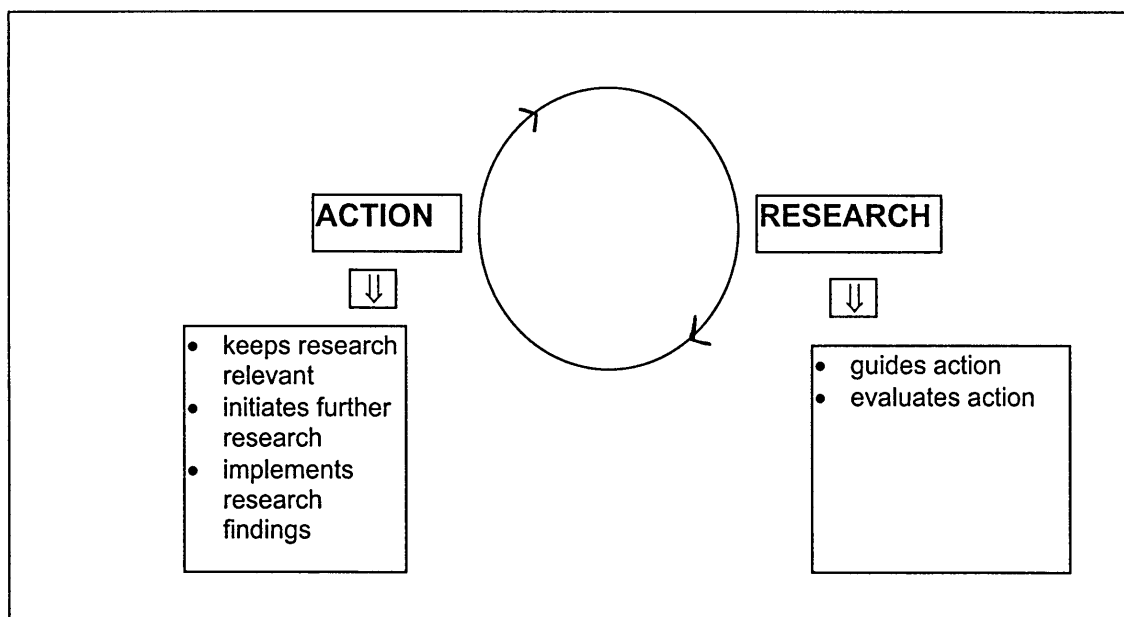
Source: Bless & Higson-Smith (1995:59)

5.4.2 Participants in the action research project

Participants were the following:

- Third-year corporate communication students who were registered for the subject Strategic Communication Management during 1998 and 1999 were the student researchers that conducted Project 1 (the implementation of Model 1 amongst the non-profit sector, of which the outcomes were research reports in the form of corporate communication strategies).

- The lecturer of the third-year course in Strategic Communication Management (KOB 320, Module A) at the University of Pretoria was the leader of the longitudinal action research project and the principal researcher that conducted Project 2 (an analysis of the student group projects in order to improve the hypothesised model, hereafter referred to as Model 1).

- The participant community during 1998 and 1999 was the non-profit sector. (During 2000, this longitudinal research project will be directed towards the SA government sector). Each student group was responsible for selecting *one* non-profit organisation as their research partner. The only requirement was that the organisation and its leaders be willing and eager to participate in the project, and be prepared to provide total access to relevant information.

The student researchers and the participant community in this study established a broad ethical framework based on mutual trust, within which they worked together. Student researchers were encouraged by their lecturer (the researcher) to sign a formal action research contract which outlined exactly what each party was expected to contribute to the project, and what each party expected to gain from the project. Following is an example of a simple action research contract (shortened):

Figure 5.3: SIMPLE ACTION RESEARCH CONTRACT

	PARTICIPANT COMMUNITY	RESEARCHERS
To provide	• active participation • firsthand, practical knowledge of the problem on the ground	• active participation • academic and research skills

Source: Adapted from Bless & Higson-Smith (1995:58)

The student researchers and the participant community reached a compromise on the goals of the project beforehand. The students informed the participant community by means of a written and/or oral presentation exactly what information was needed to find a solution to the problem and how that information was to be collected--participants had to agree to make the relevant information available to students, before they were selected as partners. It was also discussed how the project was to be broken down into manageable parts and how the responsibility was to be distributed amongst all participants. A good relationship between participants and students was deemed essential for the success of the action and the research.

5.4.3 TIME DIMENSION

The design of this study was longitudinal, since data collection (*generation*) was distributed over an extended period of time (Cooper & Emory 1995:116).

According to Gall (*in* Leedy 1997:223), a longitudinal study involves collecting data from a sample at *different points in time*, in order to *study changes* or continuity in the sample's characteristics. The aim of this research was to study

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the students' group projects (in the form of the corporate communication strategies) over a period of several years to ascertain whether the model was an effective tool to explicate the process of developing corporate communication strategy, and to determine the problems in implementation. Furthermore, to use the students' knowledge and experience gained to assist in improving the model, and also to determine the effect of the changes/improvements of the model upon students' understanding of the process.

The action research was conducted over an extended period of time, namely two full cycles over two academic years, specifically during the second semester (July to October). This was the period during which third year students, enrolled for the subject Strategic Communication Management, were expected to participate as student researchers in order to obtain a mark for practical work. The third cycle of action research, commencing in July 2000, will not form part of this research script.

5.4.4 EMPIRICAL OBJECTIVES

Although the research objectives of the study were stated in Chapter 1, the specific empirical objectives to be achieved were the following:

Empirical Objective 1: To implement the hypothesised model by developing a corporate communication strategy for a number of non-profit organisations.

This objective was to be achieved by the student researchers, and will be referred to as **Project 1** in the ensuing discussion.

Empirical Objective 2: To analyse and evaluate the corporate communication strategies (research reports) of all the student groups (as the outcome of the implementation process and a measure of their understanding of the process), *firstly* by assessing each individual project against the hypothesised model, and *secondly* by comparing the projects with one another in order to ascertain common problem areas.

This objective was to be achieved by the lecturer/principal researcher, and will be referred to as **Project 2** in the ensuing discussion.

5.4.5 SAMPLING PROCEDURES

According to Smith (1988:75), the following concepts are fundamental in understanding sampling procedures:

5.4.5.1 Element or unit of analysis

An element is the basic unit or 'thing' about which information is collected (Smith 1988).

In communication research, the element of interest is usually either the subjective perceptions, feelings or beliefs of individuals or groups, or the outputs of such individuals or groups (Smith 1988).

Project 1

There were three elements of interest in Project 1: For the student researchers, the first element of interest was the organisational members' *knowledge* of the non-profit organisation—of its operations, structures, policies, plans, corporate culture, stakeholders, etc. Once 'collected', the students could apply this knowledge to the model and write a corporate communication strategy for the non-profit organisation.

The *model* can be considered the second element of interest for the students— information was 'collected' on the model by repeatedly studying it. The lecturer's *knowledge* on corporate communication strategy was the third element of interest for the students -- they consulted with her regularly in order to collect more information on the model and to improve their understanding of it.

Project 2

For the lecturer/researcher, the element of interest was twofold: firstly, the *understanding* that student groups had of corporate communication strategy, as measured by their ability to implement the model; and secondly the *suitability* of the model as a tool for bringing about such understanding.

5.4.5.2 Sampling unit

A sampling unit is *"that element or set of elements considered for selection in some stage of sampling"*. Sampling units may include elements other than those forming the basis of the study (Smith 1988).

The *final* sampling units were the *understanding* that these student groups had of corporate communication strategy, as manifested by the objective content of their projects.

5.4.5.3 Observation unit

An *observation unit* is the person(s) <u>from whom</u> information about a target element is collected (Smith 1988).

Observation units and elements are often identical (i.e. when individuals report about their own feelings, ideas, etc.). However, this is not always the case especially when individual/group *outputs* are the research elements.

Project 1

There were three observation units in Project 1, which were the same as the target elements: The student groups collected information for their research projects from certain *members* of their selected non-profit organisation. These organisational members were selected on the grounds of their holistic *knowledge* (target element) of the organisation. (This was the reason for having considered the director/manager the most desirable person to interview).

The hypothesised model can also be considered an observation unit—students 'collected' information from the model by studying it, trying to improve their understanding of the constructs in order to develop their corporate communication strategies.

The lecturer/researcher was the third observation unit. Students had regular contact with their lecturer, both in class and during consulting hours that were set

aside specifically for interviews with students about their projects. The students were interested in her *knowledge* (target element) on corporate communication strategy.

Project 2

In Project 2, there were two observation units: For the lecturer/researcher, the first observation unit was the group projects. The researcher collected information from the objective content of the students' projects in order to ascertain each group's *understanding* of the process of developing corporate communication strategy.

The second observation unit was the model -- the lecturer/researcher analysed and compared the student reports to identify constructs on the model where problems were experienced, and thus had to be improved.

5.4.5.4 Population

A population is the total collection of elements that the research focuses on (Cooper & Emory 1995:200); a comprehensive and well-defined group of the elements pertinent to a given research question or hypothesis (Smith 1988).

A *target population* is an idealised group representing the totality of target elements that interest the researcher. However, due to constraints such as time, cost or personnel, researchers do not always have access to the target population. In such circumstances, one has to be realistic and define the *accessible* population, to which one may generalise the findings (Du Plooy 1995). This is called a *survey population* by Smith (1988) -- a realistic group of elements available to a researcher after practical constraints have been taken into account.

Project 1

For the student researchers, the *target* population consisted of all the non-profit organisations registered in South Africa, both national and international. The *accessible* or *survey* population are the non-profit organisations (mainly in the Witwatersrand area, or close to their home towns, but not exclusively), to whom student groups could gain access--either by word of mouth, personal experience or contacts--and who were willing and eager to participate in the project.

Project 2

The target and survey population of Project 2 was the same--it consisted of the third-year corporate communication students' research reports (in the form of corporate communication strategies), developed by student groups since the project's inception. In 1998 there were 48 student groups and during 1999 there were 46. In total, the population consisted of 94 group projects on corporate communication strategy.

5.4.5.5 Sampling frame

A sampling frame is an actual list of the sampling units—usually the target elements—a roster of population members (Smith 1988).

Project 1

There was no sampling frame—every student group selected a non-profit organisation on a convenience basis.

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Project 2

For the lecturer/researcher, the sampling frame was the numbered list of student groups participating in the research project every year. (The names of group members were also on this list). Since the action research project had been conducted twice over the past two years, there were two sampling frames.

The validity of sample data depends in part on how accurately and completely a sampling frame represents the population of interest. In this case, it was a perfect representation, since a census was taken.

5.4.5.6 Sample

A sample is a subset of a population, consisting of a small number of sampling units (Smith 1988) selected to represent that population (Cooper & Emory 1995:63).

Sampling and selection are principles and procedures used to identify, choose, and gain access to relevant units which will be used for data generation by any method (Mason 1996).

Project 1

The only restrictions placed on sample selection was that student groups were responsible for finding a non-profit organisation that was willing and eager to participate in the project, and provided total access to information.

The students therefore used non-probability sampling—the specific type was *accidental* or *availability* sampling, called *convenience sampling* by Cooper & Emory (1995:202). Students groups as interviewers chose sample members at random, making no pretense of being representative of a population—i.e. no attempt was made to control bias. According to Leedy (1997), all research data do not have to be sterile, highly refined and controlled by criteria—however, *"without these safeguards, the research may not be trustworthy"*.

The fact that the design is longitudinal and different non-profit organisations will be selected by different student researchers every year increases the representativeness of the total sample each year.

Project 2

In this study, a sample was not drawn, but a census was done in both years—all corporate communication strategies that were developed by student groups, were assessed and analysed. A complete census was practical to achieve and also considered necessary, because the population was relatively small (94 projects during 1998 and 1999).

Although a census took place, it does not mean that no sampling had been done. Sampling had already been applied in the decision to use *third-year corporate communication students* at the *University of Pretoria* for the action research. 'Census' only implies that every unit within that specific category was selected (Mason 1996).

It can be said that the projects analysed during the two years, were from two different 'samples.' However, this was the aim of the study, being longitudinal.

5.4.5.7 Sample size

> Bertaux & Bertaux-Wiame (1981) claim that the size of the sample is dictated by the social process under scrutiny. *"You sample until you reach theory-saturation point, that is until you know that you have a picture of what is going on…..when your data stops telling you anything new."*
>
> Sample size should help to *understand the process* rather than to statistically represent a population (Mason 1996).

Project 1 and 2

The sample size for both projects were the same. Because of practical considerations, the sample size could not be set in advance—it depended on the number of student groups that registered for the class project each year. This was determined by the size of the third year class in the subject Strategic Communication Management (KOB 320, Module A), at the University of Pretoria. There are usually around 230 third-year students per year—with four to five students per group, this roughly results in about 45 groups per year. In the final analysis, the number of non-profits sampled and the number of projects analysed by the lecturer/researcher depended on the number of groups (who completed and submitted their projects).

At the time of documenting this research report (May 2000), data generation and analysis has already taken place twice over a period of two years. The number of strategies analysed has increased to 94 (48 projects in 1998 and 46 projects in 1999). This can be regarded as a considerable number as far as in-depth interviewing is concerned (Project 1), and also sufficient for drawing preliminary conclusions as to the suitability of the twice-revised model for guiding students in the development of corporate communication strategies (Project 2).

5.4.5.8 Key dimensions to sampling

The following dimensions to sampling are closely tied up to the question of validity. A judgement about whether data analysis is valid is a judgement about whether or not it measures, explicates or illuminates whatever it claims to do.

> ⇒ Temporal dimensions: This refers not only to what the researcher wants to sample, but specifically *when*.

Project 1 and 2

In both projects, the student researchers and lecturer were bound by the time of the year (first or second semester) that the third-year course in Strategic Communication Management (KOB 320, Module A) was presented. The action research fieldwork therefore had to take place during the second semester (middle July until the end of the September holidays).

> ⇒ Spatial or geographic dimensions: This refers to whether sampling units are *bounded* by place, space and location.

Project 1

No restrictions were placed by the lecturer on the sample of non-profit organisations selected by the student researchers--they were free to choose a non-profit anywhere in the country, as long as they could access them for data generation. Some students choose organisations in their home towns, which were geographically widely dispersed. However, for reasons of convenience, most students selected organisations located within the Witwatersrand area.

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Project 2

In this project, the students as *primary* sampling units were bound by place (the University of Pretoria) insofar their lectures on corporate communication strategy and access to their lecturer was concerned.

Geographical area had an influence on student groups (as *secondary* sampling units) as far as their place of living was concerned. Executing the research project necessitated many hours of group-work. Students who were living far from each other, experienced problems especially as far as working at night and during the September holidays was concerned (lack of transport, etc.).

> ⇒ Organisational, administrative, social, cultural or linguistic dimensions refer to how the sampling units are located in relation to the above dimensions.

Project 1

In selecting a non-profit organisation for their projects, few of the above dimensions created problems for the student researchers.

Project 2

In producing their corporate communication strategies, the student groups were influenced *firstly* by access to computers as well as computer literacy (for the presentation of the final report). They were also influenced by cultural and linguistic dimensions if the group was mixed. This presented a lot of conflict and influenced the output, in the form of the reports, to a great extent. Whereas culturally mixed groups were encouraged to manage conflict themselves, the

lecturer was available if necessary to provide advice to individual group members on several occasions.

5.4.6 INSTRUMENTATION

> An interview schedule is the 'questionnaire' that is used in an interview situation (Cooper & Emory 1995).

Project 1

Data was generated during *focused* in-depth interviews, where the student researchers guided the direction and coverage of the topic. It took place in the participants own environment, which was relaxed and unconstrained (an important characteristic for quality data). Since this was a confirmatory study, a semi-structured interview schedule was a logical choice—not only did it have the advantage of emphasising internal validity, generalisability and manageability, but provided the standardisation required for multiple cases (Miles & Huberman 1984).

To promote discussion and share as much information as possible, student researchers prepared an interview schedule with a set of *unstructured questions*, focused on the hypothesised model. Unstructured questions do not have a limited set of responses (they are open-ended) but provide a frame of reference for respondents' answers (Cooper & Emory 1995).

Project 2

The instrument used to gauge the understanding of the students was the hypothesised model.

5.4.7 METHODS OF GENERATING DATA

Data are the facts gathered from the study's environment (Cooper & Emory 1995). Qualitative data is any information the researcher gathers that is not expressed in numbers (Tesch 1990).

According to Mason (1996), it is more accurate to speak of *data generation* than data collection, because most qualitative perspectives would reject the idea that a researcher can be a completely neutral collector of information about the social world. Instead the researcher is seen as actively *constructing* knowledge about that world according to certain principles.

Qualitative studies often combine several data collection {*generation*} methods over the course of the study, depending on the type of information sought (Marshall & Rossman 1995).

Project 1

Data generation occurred *under actual environmental conditions,* also called a field setting. Student researchers generated their own data for the express purpose of the project. This is called *primary* data, since the data was collected for the first time and was original in character (Du Plooy 1995).

The method of data generation for Project 1 was a combination of participation, elite interviewing, and review of documents (Marshall & Rossman 1995:79-83).

Participant observation

Participant observation can both be an overall approach as well as a data gathering technique. (In this study, the latter is true). It is a technique that requires immersion in the community chosen for the study. The many hours spent at the non-profit organisations enabled student researchers to hear, see and experience the reality of a non-profit organisation as the participants did.

In-depth interviewing

This method is described by Kahn & Cannel (*in* Marshall & Rossman 1995:80) as "*a conversation with a purpose*". In-depth interviewing was used by students in two instances:

> ⇒ *To interview their selected non-profit organisation, in order to obtain information in the field that will enable them to write their corporate communication strategy research reports.*

The most important part of an interviewer's approach is to convey an attitude of acceptance, namely that the information is valuable and useful (Marshall & Rossman 1995). Student researchers had a vested interest in the outcome of their interviews--to obtain the right kind of information to be able to develop a corporate communication strategy for the particular non-profit organisation, in order that they may obtain a (good) semester mark. A fair chance thus existed that they would view the information as valuable and useful. Furthermore, since students did not have the information themselves and could not obtain it anywhere else (there is no literature on the subject), and also because experience has indicated that students enjoy practical projects, their attitudes probably conveyed eagerness and acceptance (as was confirmed by letters of

thanks received by the lecturer/principal researcher from the non-profit organisations afterwards).

{The Department of Marketing and Communication Management at the University of Pretoria require of their students to conduct large practical projects, at all levels of study. It has been noted that students are usually very enthusiastic about their practicals, even though it takes considerable time and effort to execute--the average student, however, does not necessarily exhibit the same amount of enthusiasm when it comes to studying and being tested on theory.}

The principal data generation method used by student researchers closely resembled a specific form of in-depth interviewing, called *elite interviewing,* which focuses on a particular type of interviewee. These are usually influential, prominent and well-informed individuals in an organisation/community, selected for their expertise in areas relevant to the research (Marshall & Rossman 1995:83).

In this project, students attempted to interview the person heading the non-profit organisation, i.e. the manager or director, since they were deemed the most probable to be able to provide an overall view of the organisation, and the information and perspective required for developing a corporate communication strategy. In the event that the most senior manager was not available, student researchers interviewed the corporate communication practitioner and as many relevant others that were deemed necessary or were willing to participate in the research—thus ensuring quality data collection.

The most important disadvantage of elite interviewing is usually the accessibility of important, busy persons. In the case of this project, it did not present a big problem-- the person heading a non-profit organisation was conceivably not under the same time constraints as those faced by the chief executive of a major

corporation. The student researchers, in all probability, also had more knowledge on the subject of corporate communication strategy than did the director/manager. This was bound to lend them credibility, increase the likelihood of holding the director's attention and obtaining a good interview by staying in control of the situation (which would not have been the case, for instance, with the chief executive of a major corporate).

⇒ *To interview their lecturer/the principal researcher (or the lecturer's research assistant)*

This was done during the lecturer's consultation hours over a period of two and a half months while the action research was being conducted. The consultation hours were specifically set aside for interviews with students who were experiencing problems in some way or the other. These occasions took place at the request of the student groups, but were also very meaningful to the lecturer/researcher as it shed light on problem areas.

Review of documents

The analysis of documentary sources is a major method of social research, referring to the gathering and analysis of documents produced in the course of every day events. Some documents are already in existence whereas others are generated through the research process. Text-based documents are used by researchers because aspects of the social world can be traced or read through them (Mason 1996). In some instances the documents are viewed in a literal sense—as data itself. In other cases they need to be read and integrated for evidence. Researchers must be forearmed with a good sense of what they are looking for—what the documents should be able to tell them about, i.e. what part of the intellectual puzzle they might help to address (Mason 1996). This data generating method was used in Project 1 as follows:

The student researchers reviewed existing documents and other visual communication products produced by non-profit organisations, to supplement the elite interviewing described above. This *unobtrusive* method provided an alternative angle on the data generated through the interviewing process. The method was used because the documents existed, they were relevant to the research question and it was easy to gain access to them (Mason 1996). In this project, documents referred mostly to vision and mission statements, organisational planning documentation, marketing or communication campaigns, letters or funding proposals to donors, etc. It also included videos, slides and other audio-visual materials.

In some instances the students viewed the documents in a literal sense--as data that could be transferred straight onto their reports, i.e. the mission and vision statements. In other cases the documents had to be interpreted to deduce the meaning with regard to the research objective (for instance, the planning documentation as well as the campaign plans).

Student researchers were encouraged by the lecturer/researcher to supplement their in-depth interviews with a review of existing documents. Obtaining and studying the above mentioned documentation even before the first in-depth interview took place, created a definite advantage for a student group. Not only did it familiarise them with the non-profit organisation, but it also assisted in drawing up relevant interview schedules. This probably increased the credibility of the student researchers in the eyes of the manager/director of the non-profit organisation, resulting in more in-depth discussions and more meaningful data generation.

Project 2

The review of documents was the principal data generation method used by the lecturer/researcher in the evaluation and analysis of the students' research reports.

These corporate communication strategy documents did not exist, but were generated through the research process in order to answer research questions. Student groups developed corporate communication strategies by implementing the model in a non-profit organisation of their choice. Through the evaluation and analysis of the projects, the researcher determined the extent to which student groups understood the concept of corporate communication strategy and the process of developing it in an organisational setting. In this project, the documents were not viewed in a literal sense—i.e. as data itself. They needed to be read, analysed and integrated to provide the necessary evidence (Mason 1996).

5.5 THE ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER(S)

In qualitative studies, the researcher is *"the instrument …..whose presence in the lives of the participants invited to be part of the study, is fundamental to the paradigm"* (Marshall & Rossman 1995:59).

A researcher's role might entail varying degrees of actual participation in a study—it could either be one of full participation or that of a complete observer.

Project 1

The lecturer as the principal researcher coached the student researchers and set broad guidelines, but did not become personally involved in the social interaction with the participant community (Marshall & Rossman 1995:60). The student researchers carried full responsibility for making contact with a non-profit organisation, obtaining their participation for the project. They were expected to make a presentation (both written and oral) in order to explain their role and activities, what they were interested in learning about as well as the possible uses of the information obtained. Also, they were to ascertain the expectations of the non-profit staff members for the research project.

To avoid any misunderstandings in this regard, it was obligatory for students to obtain a letter of intent (a kind of action research contract), signed by a senior representative of the non-profit organisation, which had to be included when submitting their research reports to the lecturer. The above procedure satisfied another requirement for good qualitative research (Marshall & Rossman 1995:65), namely that researchers were to inform participants on what their role entailed. Student researchers were furthermore responsible for conducting the research and providing follow-up by making the research report available to their research partners (after it had been assessed and evaluated by the lecturer/researcher).

In action research, the purpose of the study is revealed fully to the participant community -- their total participation is a prerequisite (Marshall & Rossman 1995:60-61).This was not difficult to obtain, since the non-profit organisations stood to benefit greatly from the outcome of the research. For the same reason, negotiating entry to the organisations did not present a problem. Nevertheless, the right of the non-profit to decline participation, was fully respected.

According to Marshall & Rossman (1995:64), qualitative studies depend primarily on the interpersonal skills of the researcher(s), referring to aspects such as building trust, maintaining good relations, and a sensitivity to human interaction. Student researchers were final year students in communication management, knowledgeable on the value of building good relationships with 'stakeholders'. Furthermore, during their second year of study, they had been equipped with knowledge on group and management communication, e.g. following a people oriented approach to motivation, conflict resolution, a participatory management style and leadership skills. This background was bound to prove invaluable in their interaction with the participant community.

Project 2

Although the lecturer/researcher did not involve herself physically in interaction with the participant community, her participation in the action research lay in:

♦ conducting the initial literature study

♦ hypothesising the model

♦ consulting with students throughout the duration of the project

♦ evaluating the individual group reports on the completed corporate communication strategies

♦ analysing the reports for possible implementation problems/new or difficult constructs, and

♦ adapting the model.

5.6 THE DATA ANALYSIS PROCESS

5.6.1 RECORDING AND MANAGING THE DATA

> Data should be recorded in a systematic manner that is appropriate and will facilitate analysis (Marshall & Rossman 1995).

Project 1

Students recorded the data that was generated in a systematic manner, by following the guidelines in the form of the hypothesised model. The lecturer made it clear to student researchers that the model was a tool or tentative guide with which to begin observation and analysis, but that they were free to record any additional information they considered relevant.

When using participation approaches for recording data, care should be taken that techniques used will not intrude unnecessarily on participants' lives/daily events. However, in action research approaches, this is not an issue. In this project, full participation was obtained in advance from the non-profit organisations, in some cases even solicited by them.

Project 2

The lecturer/researcher used evaluation forms to assess each student group's project according to specific criteria. (An example of the form is included in the section on 'Schedule and Project Management'--see 5.9.5 'Evaluation'). Furthermore, detailed notes were taken in comparing the projects against each

other—all problem areas were carefully noted, as well as the areas where no problems were experienced.

5.6.2 DATA ANALYSIS

> Marshall & Rossman (1995:111) see data analysis as the process of bringing order, structure, and meaning to the mass of data collected *(generated)*.

According to Miles & Huberman (1984), data analysis actually consists of three concurrent flows of activity:

> ⇒ *Data reduction* refers to the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the raw data that have been written up in field notes.

Data reduction occurred continuously throughout the life of both action research projects--even before data generation, when the lecturer/researcher decided which conceptual framework, research questions or data generating approaches to use.

Project 1

Data reduction already took place during data generation amongst non-profit organisations, when student researchers based their interview schedules on the model, and also during interpretation and report writing, when students once again used the model as their conceptual framework in taking decisions.

Project 2

Data reduction took place as the lecturer/researcher was evaluating student research reports, noting which constructs on the model was causing problems for students (meriting further attention/changes), and which could be left as is.

⇒ *Data display* is an organised assembly of information that permits conclusion drawing and action taking. The most frequently used form is narrative text, which is very bulky—more effective are matrices, graphs, networks and charts.

Project 1

The student researchers wrote their reports in narrative form, based to a large extent on the format of the hypothesised model.

Project 2

The initial (and later literature studies) was displayed by the lecturer/researcher in narrative form, and the resulting hypothesised model and its revisions in graphic form.

⇒ *Conclusion drawing/verification* takes place from the beginning of data generation, when the researcher(s) starts to decide what things mean--noting patterns, explanations, regularities, etc.

Data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing/verification were interwoven before, during and after data generation--together it made up the data analysis.

Conclusion drawing/verification as part of data analysis will be discussed in the following section under 'Interpretation of the Data'.

5.6.3 INTERPRETATION OF THE DATA

In this study, final conclusions did not appear until data generation, analysis and evaluation was over, but they were prefigured from the start.

Project 1

The data generated from the interviews with, and the review of the documents of, the non-profit organisations was analysed and interpreted by the student researchers. In this process, they were greatly aided by the hypothesised model as a conceptual framework for developing a written corporate communication strategy for their particular non-profit organisation.

Student researchers were further assisted in the interpretation process by consultations with a research assistant, as well as with the lecturer/researcher. These consultations occurred on an ongoing basis while data generation and analysis took place, but intensified during the stage of interpretation and report writing. In order to counter the students' time constraints in this regard, the final date for submission of the research reports/corporate communication strategies were set after the September holiday break. This enabled students to work full-time on their reports for a week (without classes, tests, etc.) and also allowed unlimited access to the lecturer/researcher during this critical time.

Project 2

After having individually assessed and evaluated students' corporate communication strategies, the lecturer/researcher comparatively analysed these reports. Some implementation problems and new/related concepts were discovered, and other concepts discarded to improve the model. This process will fully be described/explicated in Chapter 6.

At the time of writing this research script, the process has twice been repeated during two consecutive years (94 reports in total). The researcher foresees that during the next (third) cycle of action research, major modifications should occur less often since constructs seem to have fallen into established categories. However, the process will continue with the new third year groups during the second semester of the year 2000 (July to September). Analysis will be considered complete when the critical categories have been defined, and the relationships among them have been established (Marshall & Rossman 1995:112).

5.6.3.1 Building explanations from the data

Qualitative researchers are in the business of producing social explanations, or addressing intellectual puzzles. Social explanation can do different things: *compare*, *develop* and *trace, describe, predict* and *theorise* (Mason 1996).

A researcher should decide which kinds of explanations are developed by the study: whether the data is an explanation in itself, or provides a way into an explanation, or represents/signifies an explanation--i.e. does the data need to be

interpreted, and must the researcher read behind or beyond the data (Mason 1996).

Project 1

The explanations provided by the non-profit organisations and the student researchers were *developing* and *tracing*. *Developmental explanations* are those which attempt to trace and account for the development of social phenomena, social processes, social change, etc. (Mason 1996). The data generated enabled the student researchers to trace and chart relevant developmental stages in the formulation of corporate communication strategy. The data did therefore not present an explanation in itself, but provided a way into an explanation of what corporate communication strategy constituted for that particular non-profit organisation.

Project 2

The lecturer/researcher developed *comparative explanations*, which aim to draw some explanatory significance from a specified set of comparisons (Mason 1996). The data, generated and classified by the student researchers on the key comparative components (the key constructs in the model) and presented in the form of a corporate communication strategy, was analysed and compared. A simplified version of cross-sectional analysis was used, which implies making comparisons across the whole of the data set, around certain specified themes (the constructs on the model). The focus of the activity was in comparing *everything* on the basis of specified themes, rather than selecting specific comparisons in order to test developing explanations.

This comparative approach was used across all the observations, and the evidence from many observations combined (King, Keohane & Verba 1994),

looking for negative instances. The latter signifies problem areas, e.g. where students did not understand the model, or what it was they had to achieve. This is where the most important changes were made—in the negative instances indications were found as to where problem areas were, and how they could be solved by improvements on the model.

In the process of analysing the 94 completed corporate communication strategies, the researcher had to read behind or beyond the data to assess whether student groups *understood* the constructs, were *able to implement* the model by generating and recording meaningful data and arriving at conclusions (a meaningful final product in the form of a communication strategy). The comparisons between the projects were used to *identify common problem areas* in the corporate communication strategies, signifying *weak/unclear constructs* in the model that had to be improved (secondary objectives under Research Objective 3). In some cases, strong student groups provided improved some constructs themselves. In Project 2, it can be said that the data stood for or represented evidence of something else in an interpretive or significative sense— it was not an explanation in itself.

The above process of analysis led to the lecturer developing further explanations, namely that of *theorising.* This implies that the qualitative data analysis had wider relevance to some explanatory body of knowledge. According to Mason (1996), the researcher must decide at what point in the research process the construction and development of theory is done. In this research script, both inductive and deductive reasoning was employed in building theory.

In achieving Research Objectives 1 and 2, inductive reasoning was used. Theory was the outcome of the literature investigations, in the form of the conceptualisation of the role of the *PR strategist* (Chapter 3), and the conceptualisation of *corporate communication strategy* (Chapter 4). Inductive

reasoning was also used in achieving the first secondary objective under Research Objective 3 (the hypothesised model for developing corporate communication strategy), since theory was again the outcome of a literature investigation.

However, in achieving the secondary objective of implementing the model, deductive reasoning was used—here theory came first in the form of the hypothesised model, generated in advance of the research process. The model was confirmed or measured against the data generation and analysis (the development of the corporate communication strategies). In achieving the secondary objective of improving the model, however, inductive reasoning was used. In this case, theory came last (the model was twice modified by the empirical research), developed from and through the data generation, analysis and comparison of the corporate communication strategies.

5.6.4 CONCLUSION

This longitudinal study can be seen as having using structured, organised data generating and analysing schemes, which still left enough freedom to record the new or unexpected. Where the model provided initial categories for data generation, the student researchers shifted/replaced them as data was generated and analysed. After evaluating and analysing the students' final research reports, the lecturer/researcher also shifted around and even discarded some concepts/categories, in order to improve the hypothesised model (Marshall & Rossman 1995).

5.7 RELIABILITY, VALIDITY AND GENERALISABILITY

In this section, the questions of reliability and accuracy of method; validity of data; and generalisability of analyses will be considered.

5.7.1 RELIABILITY AND ACCURACY OF METHOD

In quantitative research, reliability is often measured by observing the consistency with which the same methods of data collection produce the same results. *"Reliability is therefore conceptualised in terms of how reliable, accurate and precise the research tools or instruments are, and this in turn is being judged by the consistency with which instruments produce certain measurements"* (Mason 1996). It was not possible for the lecturer/researcher to perform reliability tests of this type because the data that was generated did not take the form of a clearly standardised set of measurements.

However, data generation and analysis should not only be appropriate to the research question -- it should also be thorough, careful, honest and accurate (Mason 1996):

- **thorough:** The qualitative research strategy maximised the possibilities that adequate information would be obtained enabling the researcher to respond to the research questions thoroughly and thoughtfully, eliciting the sought-after information.

- **careful:** Pains were taken by the researcher to make the students understand the importance of being extremely careful in their data generation and analysis, and so herself as well.

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- **honest:** The students were honest with the non-profit organisations in explaining what they could do, but also what they could not do for them. The importance of being honest insofar as not inventing or misrepresenting the data, was also explained. The fact that the students worked in groups, greatly assisted in ensuring honesty. There were three instances of dishonesty in the projects over the two years, but the lecturer's knowledge of the subject made it easy to recognise. The particular students were given the choice of appearing before a disciplinary committee, or doing the project over. In all instances they chose the latter.

- **accurate** (as distinct from true or correct): The information was deemed accurate for the following reasons: Participation by non-profit organisations in the action research was entirely voluntary--they were specifically selected by students on the grounds of their enthusiasm for participating, and the total access to information they were willing to provide. Many staff members of the non-profits were volunteers, with a passion and much enthusiasm for their work. Participant organisations also had much to gain from providing accurate information, since they were the beneficiaries in the end, by receiving a corporate communication strategy for their organisations.

Only one student group was allowed per non-profit organisation—this prevented interview fatigue. The groups usually consisted of four or five students, which acted as a safety mechanism in providing accurate information. Different non-profit staff members provided information, which meant the information could be double-checked. Students also provided their reports to the non-profits after they had been evaluated, which acted as a further control mechanism for providing accurate information.

What was very important, was that students seemed 'thrilled' that their knowledge was sought after and went the extra mile—the quality of the research reports were of a high standard.

5.7.2 VALIDITY OF DATA

The validity of the action research approach lies in the skills of the enquirer; it is more personal and interpersonal, rather than methodological (McNiff 1988).

A judgement about whether data analysis is valid, is a judgement about whether or not it measures, explicates or illuminates whatever it claims to do--it concerns the conceptual clarity of the study. Qualitative researchers tend to focus on validity, since it is a more meaningful concept to qualitative research than reliability. It is important that the validity of the data generation methods and the validity of interpretation should be demonstrated (Mason 1996).

- *Validity of data generation methods*

In the discussion of the research methodology up to date, care has been taken to indicate how the data sources (the model and non-profit organisations in the case of the student researchers, and the student groups' corporate communication strategies in the case of the lecturer) and the data generation methods provided the explanations necessary to answer the empirical objectives, as well as Research Objective 3. A short overview of this chapter, specifically referring to the validity of the data generation methods, will now be provided.

The researcher decided to create a pre-existing conceptual framework for the study in the form of a model. Although the traditional view is that the conceptual framework should emerge from the field, the researcher concurred with Miles & Huberman (1984) that a *lack* of bounding and focusing in this particular study would have led to indiscriminate data collection and data overload. The looser the initial design, the less selective the collection of data. Having decided thus, the researcher had to decide in advance which dimensions of the study were

more important, which relationships were the most meaningful, and what kinds of information should be collected and analysed. The model was then used as a guideline by the student researchers in generating and analysing the data, confirming its validity through the selected methodology of action research, rather than identifying the initial constructs/categories by means of exploration.

In conducting this confirmatory study, a semi-structured interview schedule was a logical choice—not only did it have the advantage of emphasising internal validity, generalisability and manageability, but provided the standardisation required for multiple cases (Miles & Huberman 1984). If different field-workers are working inductively, with no common framework or instrumentation, they are bound to end up with data overload and lack of comparability across cases. It also allowed multiple researchers/fieldworkers to be sure that they were studying the same phenomenon—a necessary requirement in this study where 94 organisations were interviewed over two years by approximately 400 students.

The fact that only one group of students were allowed to work within an organisation, prevented interview fatigue amongst organisational members, ensuring quality of data generation and therefore increased validity. This was further strengthened by the fact that the student researchers worked with different people in the organisation, obtaining different views on the same constructs. In most instances, the principal participant was the manager/director-- the most likely person to have the information relevant to the research questions.

Students also supplemented their in-depth interviews with a review of existing documents. Obtaining and studying relevant documentation even before the first in-depth interview took place, familiarised students with the organisation and assisted in drawing up relevant interview schedules. This probably also increased the credibility of the student researchers in the eyes of the

manager/director and other organisational members, resulting in more in-depth discussions and more meaningful/ valid data generation.

Another important factor in obtaining valid data was the fact that organisational members were willing and eager to participate in the project, and prepared to provide total co-operation and access to relevant information. The active participation of people whom the research is intended to assist, is an important advantage of action research. Organisational members seemed to appreciate the students' enthusiasm and earnest efforts to be of help, which resulted in good relationships between organisational members and students. (This was manifested by the letters and calls of appreciation that the lecturer received from members of the non-profit organisations. Some even attended the presentations that students made to a panel of lecturers upon completion of the project. The lecturer has since received calls from eight non-profit organisations, asking to be considered for the project during the next cycle.)

The validity of the data was also increased by the fact that student researchers and the participant community reached a compromise on the goals of the project beforehand. The students informed the participant community on their own role in the data generating process, what they were interested in learning about, and the use of the information obtained.

In drawing up the research assignment and work plan for the student groups, the lecturer/researcher considered important sampling dimensions which are closely tied to the question of validity—i.e. temporal, spatial/geographic dimensions, and organisational/administrative/social/cultural/linguistic dimensions. (These were fully explained in section 5.4.5.8 earlier in this chapter).

- *Validity of interpretation*

This involves asking how valid the data analysis is, and the interpretation on which it is based. Validity of interpretation is dependent on validity of method, since interpretation cannot be valid unless the methods and sources have enabled the researchers to get at the concepts they say they are getting at (Mason 1996).

The fact that the student researchers used the hypothesised model as a pre-existing conceptual framework for understanding the concept of corporate communication strategy, for basing their interviews schedules on it, and for recording/structuring/interpreting the data according to the constructs on the model, was a major factor in increasing the validity of the study. The biggest advantage of the confirmatory design was that the conclusions were deemed more valid. The participant community (non-profit organisations) were initially not knowledgeable on the subject of corporate communication strategy, and neither would the students have been without the model.

In view of the discussion in the previous section on the validity of the data generation, the researcher is reasonably satisfied that this aspect was well managed. With regard to the interpretation of the data, the researcher (and her research assistant) was personally much more involved through the consultations with students. Hours were spent with student groups in order that they might arrive at the correct interpretation of the data. In assessing the individual assignments, another 80 hours (per year) were spent in verifying that groups did indeed arrive at the correct interpretation, as manifested in their research reports/corporate communication strategies.

In the analysis and comparison of the different group reports, great care was taken to pinpoint the problem areas and difficult constructs. Specific attention was paid to 'negative instances' i.e. cases which you would not expect to see, if your explanations were adequate. These areas/constructs merited special attention--especially if there were several cases, all making the same mistake. This indicated the changes/improvements that had to be made on the model. The researcher is of the opinion that the biggest changes have now taken place and most conceptual improvements have been made. However, the action research project will continue until no new constructs/problem areas can be ascertained. It is planned that these projects will be directed towards the government sector in the second semester of 2000, and towards small to medium sized private sector companies in 2001.

5.7.3 GENERALISABILITY OF ANALYSES

According to Mason (1996), generalisation can be thought of in two ways: *empirical* generalisation and *theoretical* generalisation. An empirical generalisation is based on a logic whereby the researcher makes generalisations from an analysis of one empirical population (i.e. the non-profit organisations studied in the action research project) to another wider population (i.e. *all* non-profit organisations in South Africa), on the basis that the study population was statistically representative of the wider population. The researcher is unable to make this kind of generalisation.

However, the researcher does claim to make a *theoretical generalisation*, which does not represent one uniform method of generalising, but instead encompasses a range of strategies based on differing logics (Mason 1996). At the very least, it can be said that, although analysis had not been based on data derived from a representative sample, there is *no reason to believe that the sample and therefore the analysis is atypical*. Furthermore, that the analysis of

the process of developing corporate communication strategy amongst 94 non-profit organisations demonstrated *that it was possible for such processes to work in the way specified by the hypothesised model.* The lecturer/researcher is of the opinion that lessons can indeed be learnt from the study to serve not only other non-profit organisations, but also corporate communication practitioners in the for profit and government sector, as well as corporate communication students at other tertiary institutions.

The object of study in this research was not only the process of teaching corporate communication students how to develop a corporate communication strategy. The study was a case of a larger phenomenon--the particulars of the study served to illuminate larger issues such as the possible use of the model as a guideline to corporate communication practitioners in general, which pointed to the study's significance.

If it could be shown that corporate communication students at UP, as well as the staff of non-profit organisations understood how to apply the model, there is no reason to believe that practitioners, who are much more knowledgeable in the field, could not do so. Non-profit organisations are a particularly difficult setting, because there is little knowledge of strategy or planning—it therefore presented an excellent testing ground to judge the implementation of the model. Non-profit organisations as sampling units were therefore significant in theoretical, if not in empirical, terms.

In qualitative research, there is a serious question of sampling involved—the validity of sample data depends in part on how accurately and completely a sampling frame represents the population of interest. In Project 2, it was a perfect representation, since a census was taken. The researcher therefore judged 94 corporate communication strategies as being sufficient for drawing *preliminary*

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conclusions as to the suitability of the model for explicating the process of developing corporate communication strategy.

In Project 1, a convenience sample was drawn—no effort was made to control bias. However, the design of the study is longitudinal--different non-profit organisations will be selected by different student researchers every year to implement a different (revised model), increasing the representativeness of the total sample each year.

5.7.4 ALTERNATIVE CRITERIA OF SOUNDNESS

According to Lincoln & Guba (1985:290), the constructs of internal and external validity, reliability and objectivity are inappropriate for naturalistic or qualitative inquiry. They propose the following four alternative constructs that more accurately reflect the assumptions of the qualitative paradigm:

- *credibility,* in which the goal is to demonstrate that the inquiry was conducted in such a manner as to ensure that *the subject was accurately identified and described.* Within the parameters of the setting, population and theoretical framework, the research is deemed credible by the researcher.

- *transferability,* in which demonstrating applicability of one set of findings to another context rests more with the researcher who makes the transfer than with the original researcher. The researcher established the theoretical parameters of the research by constantly referring back to the original theoretical framework (the hypothesised model) to show how data generation, analysis and interpretation was guided by the constructs on the model.

- *dependability,* where a researcher accounts for changing conditions in the phenomenon studied as well as changes in the design created by increasing comprehension of the setting (this is in sharp contrast to the concept of reliability). In both projects, the lecturer/researcher constantly referred to the fact that different student groups selected different non-profit organisations

every year to study a different (revised model), thus accounting for both changing conditions as well as for changes in the design through increased comprehension.

- **confirmability** refers to the traditional concept of objectivity, i.e. whether the findings of the study could be confirmed by another. The preliminary findings of the study is simply that the revised model seems to be an effective tool to satisfactorily explain the process of developing corporate communication strategy to third-year students at UP. Furthermore, that there is no reason to believe that the model cannot successfully be applied by students at other tertiary institutions, by corporate communication practitioners, or in other sectors such as government or the private sector.

This has already been put to the test in that three corporate communication managers (one from a tertiary institution, one from a mining house and one from an information technology company) has recently used the model in developing a corporate communication strategy for their organisations. Upon perusing the strategies they had developed, the lecturer found that, in general, the model was successfully implemented. The one area that proved difficult to the practitioners (and also to the students) was namely to identify the implications of strategic issues on the stakeholders, in order to arrive at the communication issues that should be addressed (from which communication goals are derived).

This might be caused by the fact that the model is still seriously flawed. Alternatively, it might be that the link between communication goals and corporate goals truly is a problem for most students/practitioners. The lecturer/researcher is of the opinion that the latter is the case. This was exactly the problem spelled out by the 'Statement of the Problem' in Chapter 1—corporate communication practitioners are not addressing strategic issues. This might be because they do not know how to identify them or how to link their communication goals to corporate goals. This is therefore the area that will receive special attention in the third cycle of action research—trying to build theory and revise the model in such a way that the problem is addressed.

5.8 TIME, HUMAN AND FINANCIAL RESOURCES

The resources most critical to successful completion of a study are time, personnel, and financial support (Marshall & Rossman 1995).

5.8.1 TIME MANAGEMENT

Time was seen as presenting the biggest difficulties in implementing this research project. Third year students in their final semester before graduation are inundated with practical projects, tests and examination preparations. A very tight time schedule for the project and provision of assistance by the lecturer in developing it, was seen to be essential for successful completion of the research project. This was done by having provided a detailed section in the students' study guide, outlining the scope of the research project and setting preliminary deadlines for administrative as well as academic progress.

5.8.2 HUMAN RESOURCES

To staff the project did not present a problem. The researcher was a lecturer, conducting the action research as part of her research and teaching responsibilities. The research assistant was also a staff member, acting as academic/research assistant to the lecturer. The student researchers were obligated to conduct the research as part of their semester mark, and the non-profit organisations made their staff available upon their agreement to participate.

5.8.3 Financial support or extra facilities/equipment

Financial support or extra facilities were not required. The lecturer/researcher and research assistant worked from their offices, the non-profit organisations provided their inputs free of charge and the students carried their own costs (e.g. transport, computer equipment, typing paper, binding of reports, etc).

5.9 SCHEDULE AND PROJECT MANAGEMENT

5.9.1 Relationships

The relationship between the lecturer/researcher and student researchers was *firstly* that of lecturer to students and *secondly*, that of project manager to support staff. No problems were experienced in this regard.

5.9.2 Type and frequency of reports

The students were obligated to register their groups by a certain date, and also to 'register' their non-profit organisations in order that two groups were not preparing corporate communication strategies for the same organisation. The latter was done by supplying the research assistant with the letters of intent/action research contracts signed by the participating non-profits. This measure was deemed necessary because it was surmised that if a second group interviewed the same organisational members, they would not get the same quality of data as the first. This ensured quality of data and thus increased the validity of data generation.

Student researchers were furthermore obligated to report their progress twice to the research assistant (during the first two months) and once to the lecturer (during the third month) before submitting their reports. Both the research assistant and lecturer were available to the students on a daily basis for consultations, an opportunity that was used by most groups.

5.9.3 RESEARCH ASSIGNMENT

Following is an extract from the research assignment as provided to the students in their study guides at the beginning of the second semester. The first period of the semester was spent explaining the project.

Develop a **Corporate Communication Strategy** for any non-profit organisation. Apply the theory in Theme 1—use the model as a framework.

Develop the corporate communication strategy by first drawing up a *stakeholder map* and identifying strategic stakeholders and publics. Thereafter describe *five strategic issues* faced by the organisation, obtained through environmental scanning and a SWOT analysis. Clearly differentiate between strategic issues caused by wrong or no communication, and those organisational issues (not caused by communication) for which good communication provides a part of the solution.

Now identify and describe the *key communication issues* resulting from the five strategic issues, by analysing their implications for the organisation's strategic stakeholders and publics, both internal and external. Prioritise the key communication issues and state your reasons for why some have graver implications for the organisation than others—also indicate where pro-active

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communication will have the most success, i.e. contribute most to the organisation achieving its mission.

(Please note the evaluation criteria to see which other aspects must also be covered in-depth in your strategy).

The **written assignment** is to be submitted to the tutor on **Thursday 23 September**, between 9h30 and 11h30 (**E&B 4-103**), or to the academic assistant between 12h00 and 14h00 (**E&B 4-105**).

5.9.4 WORK PLAN

Following is an extract from the work pan in order to demonstrate the effort of the lecturer/researcher to assist the student researchers with time scheduling.

Register a group of 4-5 people <u>**before 23 July**</u> with the tutor in E&B 4-103.
- Names and student numbers must be presented, upon which a group number will be assigned.   - During registration with the tutor a **first** appointment is to be made to see the academic assistant to discuss your corporate communication strategy (a schedule of appointment times will be provided by the tutor—please bring your diary along).   - On this occasion please collect a letter of introduction from the tutor, which you can show to the non-profit organisation to prove your legitimacy and explain the nature of the research project.
Approach any non-profit organisation with both a *written* and *oral presentation* of what a corporate communication strategy entails, and what the advantages would be in actively taking part in the research project.

- Acquire the **written** permission of the organisation for your group to obtain the information required and to develop a corporate communication strategy for them. (This letter of permission must be handed in together with the written assignment).

- Organise a contact person in the organisation through whom all negotiations can take place.

- Work with different people in the organisation in order to obtain the necessary information about the organisation—include the manager/director if at all possible, since this person would be in the best position to assist you with information relevant to developing a corporate communication strategy.

It is **obligatory** for each group to visit the research assistant **at least twice** before submission of the project. The **first visit** must take place **before 12 August** and the **second visit before 9 September**. Your visits will be noted and taken into account should you be a border case at the end of the semester.

- During the **first visit** (before 12 August), the **name** of the non-profit organisation is to be **registered.** However, it is advisable that you register as soon as permission has been obtained. This will avoid disappointment, since **only one group per organisation** can be allowed.

Do not try to divide the project between group members. If one element of the strategy does not flow directly or logically from the previous, the group will loose marks.

The lecturer is available for consultations for the duration of the project (as well as during the holidays). Please note her consulting hours (provided in the study guide and on her door). Arrange an appointment if these times do not suit you.

Attend the **practical classes,** where practical cases and examples will be presented.

- Hand in on time and note the aspects on which you will be evaluated. For each day that the project is handed in late, **10%** will be deducted from your marks.

- See to it that you have finished writing up the project by the end of the holidays (19 September) in order to leave enough time for typing and editing.

- Please make backups on stiffies and print a hard copy **regularly**. It is imperative that you have a Plan B ready in the event of a crisis.

5.9.5 EVALUATION

Following is an abstract of the evaluation form used in 1999 to assess student reports.

TECHNICAL CARE	
• Table of contents, numerical system	5
• Language use and editing	5
• Bonus (neatness, special presentation, outside cover, etc.)	5
	15
CONTENTS OF THE PROJECT	
• Description of the corporate profile (vision, mission and corporate culture)	8
• Overall stakeholder analysis (internal and external)	10
• Identification of key strategic issues, environmental scanning and SWOT analysis	14
• Identification of key communication issues (implications of key strategic issues)	8
• Communication policy	5
• Overall media analysis	5
	50
CONTENTS OF THE COMMUNICATION PLAN	
• Situation analysis and objectives (derived from the strategy)	6
• Specific stakeholders/target publics	5
• Messages	4
• Implementation strategy and activities (action plans)	10
• Scheduling	5
• Evaluation research	5
	35
TOTAL FOR PROJECT	**100**

Of relevance to this research project is the second part, namely 'Contents of the Project'. Whereas the first part evaluates the technical care, the second part can be described as the core of the project, counting 50% of the marks.

Since the identification of stakeholders and issues were identified in the literature investigation of this research script as being the core of the two strategic management roles of the corporate communication function, the overall stakeholder analysis counts 10% of the total marks of the report. The identification of the key strategic issues and the scanning used therein counts the most namely 14%. The rationale behind this was explained in the 'Statement of the Problem' in Chapter 1. Chief executives were of the opinion that corporate communication practitioners do not address organisational problems/key strategic issues, but focus only on communication problems. The lecturer/researcher therefore attempts to focus the attention of students on the identification of stakeholders and issues <u>before</u> they start to develop communication plans.

The third part of the evaluation focuses on the development of a communication plan, based on one of the key strategic issues. The development of the plan is not addressed for the purposes of this script, since it is familiar to most corporate communication practitioners and students, and regularly appears in most corporate communication texts. However, what is important here is that students' attention was focused in their assignment on *communication goals* being the link between the communication plan and the organisational mission. Therefore, that a strategic stakeholder and issues analysis <u>must</u> precede the development of the communication plan, in order to link it to organisational issues/problems, and thereby to the achievement of the organisational mission.

5.10 CONCLUSION

Action research is clearly a valuable tool in knowledge sharing and ongoing learning. It was particularly apt in this study for the following reasons (Bless & Higson-Smith 1995:60-61):

- It is concerned with solving particular problems facing communities (students and non-profit organisations).

- It assists individuals, organisations and communities (students and non-profit organisations) to learn skills and obtain resources to function more effectively in future.

- It is a way of spreading understanding gained through research to individuals, groups, organisations or communities who can benefit from those findings (students, non-profit organisations, and practitioners through eventual publications and conferences).

- It facilitates communication between researchers and communities in need of assistance.

- It makes the work of researchers directly beneficial to society.

Because of a lack of resources, non-profit organisations in general do not have highly qualified corporate communication practitioners (if any), nor do their leaders have strategic communication skills. This poses a serious threat to them, since in most instances they are dependent on their donors for survival. Excellent long-term relationships with strategic stakeholders such as donors are of the utmost importance to most non-profit organisations. This project provides them with an opportunity to obtain knowledge on strategic communication by working closely with the student researchers. The end result, a corporate communication strategy for their organisation, is available to them at no cost (except their time invested).

Corporate communication students at the University of Pretoria, on the other hand, do not undergo internships, which results in a lack of practical experience. This is a disadvantage upon seeking a job, especially when compared to technicon students. This project provides them with an opportunity to obtain experience by applying their knowledge and learning firsthand of the problems facing industry. It also provides an opportunity for third year students to contribute their time and knowledge to the non-profit sector—acquiring not only strategic communication skills in the process, but also learning to become socially involved.

Having selected action research as a methodology for the implementation and improvement of the hypothesised model, the empirical part of this study represents the researcher's own attempts to improve practically a process of education—to involve students in building theory, to improve practice, and to understand the process of improving practice.

In Chapter 6, the procedures followed in developing a model for the formulation of corporate communication strategy is explicated by means of a detailed analysis of the different stages of the action research process, through two full cycles of action research completed for the purposes of this research script.