

Strategic ambiguity in communicating public sector change

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Shirley Leitch

is Professor of Corporate Communication at the University of Waikato. Her research areas include corporate branding and discourse.

Sally Davenport

is a senior lecturer in strategy and technology management with research interests in strategic discourse and stakeholder communication.

Abstract This paper applies Eisenberg's¹ theory of strategic ambiguity to stakeholder relationship management during a period of significant change within a public sector organisation. Public sector organisations generally have a wider range of stakeholders than private sector organisations and must discharge their statutory responsibilities within the highly charged environment of the political arena.² This paper will contend that communication professionals may deploy strategic ambiguity to manage the competing demands of public sector stakeholders and also to stimulate a diversity of actions and creative responses in the stakeholder community. The paper draws upon an extensive case study of the major science-funding agency in New Zealand — the Foundation for Research, Science and Technology (FRST) — to illustrate the potential value of and identify some limits to the use of strategic ambiguity.

KEYWORDS: strategic ambiguity, public sector, change management, stakeholders

INTRODUCTION

In 1999, New Zealand's major public sector research funding agency, the Foundation for Research, Science and Technology (FRST) moved from being an 'allocator' of funds to being a 'leading investor, facilitator, catalyst and integrator'³ in the New Zealand science and innovation system. This ambitious new mission led FRST to embark on a radical restructuring of its internal operations and of the way in which it managed its external stakeholder relationships. A new board, put in place by a government determined to effect change, led the change process. Thus the new mission was a top down initiative rather than one resulting from general pressure from either staff or stakeholders — other than the government. In order to achieve

this new mission, FRST had to change the entrenched existing discourse of its multiple internal and external stakeholder groups. Moreover, it had to effect this transformation in the context of the highly political environment in which agencies such as FRST must operate. This paper applies Eisenberg's⁴ concept of strategic ambiguity in communication to the FRST change process.

STRATEGIC AMBIGUITY

Clarity is generally espoused as a central characteristic of effective organisational communication.⁵ Whether communication is defined using the process model⁶ that emphasises clear message transmission or using a transactional model that emphasises the creation of shared meanings, clarity is an accepted measure of successful

Shirley Leitch

Waikato Management School, The University of Waikato, Private Bag 3105, Hamilton, New Zealand;
Tel: +64 7 838 4494;
Fax: +64 7 838 5093;
E-mail: sleitch@mngt.waikato.ac.nz

communication.⁷ In contrast, Eisenberg suggests that there may be multiple 'personal, relational and political factors'⁸ that lead an organisation to conclude that some degree of ambiguity in its communications will enhance its ability to achieve its goals. Strategic ambiguity is, therefore, based on the premise that when people in organisations are confronted with multiple and often conflicting pressures from internal and external stakeholders they may 'respond with communicative strategies, which do not always minimize ambiguity, but are nonetheless effective'.⁹

Eisenberg¹⁰ contends that strategic ambiguity may serve four roles in organisational communication in that it:

- promotes unified diversity
- preserves privileged positions
- is deniable
- facilitates organisational change.

The promotion of unified diversity speaks to the tension between the desire to promote unity around organisational goals while at the same time preserving space for individual creativity and initiative. Clarity and precision in communication may sometimes place undesirable limits on creativity and initiative in a way that is counterproductive to the achievement of organisational goals. Eisenberg's primary concern was with the use of strategic ambiguity within organisations but it appears equally applicable to the need that many organisations have to achieve unified diversity with their external stakeholders. Thus, vaguely worded mission statements that allow multiple interpretations may be examples of strategic ambiguity to promote unified diversity with both internal and external stakeholders.¹¹ Arguably, the more diverse the stakeholders and goals that an organisation has to serve, the more useful strategic ambiguity may be in promoting unity

around the organisation's mission. In such organisations there is little chance that a more concrete mission will gain general support and every chance that it will provide a rallying point for opposition.¹² While strategic ambiguity may sometimes serve the purposes of private sector and community organisations, it may be of particular importance to public sector organisations, such as FRST, that by definition are open to public scrutiny and are always confronted with diverse stakeholder interests and pressures.¹³ Indeed, Kant's assertion that social systems should ensure 'maximum individuality and maximum community'¹⁴ provides for Eisenberg the philosophical basis for the pursuit of unified diversity and seems particularly apt for the public sector.

The use of strategic ambiguity to preserve privileged positions may be characterised as a self-serving option for morally bankrupt leaders, as a necessary corollary of unified diversity, or as a mixture of the two. Eisenberg argues that strategic ambiguity shields the powerful from close scrutiny in a way that protects them from conflict. Stakeholders are likely to react in a negative way if they identify this strategy in action. Strategic ambiguity can, however, also be a means of avoiding the revelation of confidential details while still providing a general overview of a situation for stakeholders. In such cases strategic ambiguity is a generally accepted practice and may serve to reinforce the status of the user as a person who has to deal with high level or sensitive information that must be protected for the overall good of the organisation.

The ability to deny a particular interpretation of a message is the third role of strategic ambiguity. Eisenberg states that clarity in communication has the potential to put premature closure on situations in a way that may limit future options.¹⁵ Thus, he argues for the use of strategic ambiguity during the early stages

of negotiations as a way of ensuring that particular interpretations of messages, which unduly hinder progress in the negotiation, may be denied. Deniability may also be desirable if one is attempting to discern stakeholder reactions before committing an organisation to a particular course of action. Floating an idea in vague terms allows an organisation or individual to find out what elements of the idea, or interpretations of these elements, are most resisted or opposed. These elements or interpretations may be explicitly denied and then avoided when the idea is given final shape as a policy or organisational strategy. In both cases, of negotiations and of proposal formation, strategic ambiguity is deployed during the early stages with the goal being the development of a more clearly stated proposal that is acceptable to all parties.

The final role that Eisenberg ascribes to strategic ambiguity, ie the facilitation of organisational change, is the most relevant for this paper. Eisenberg states that:

‘At the organisational level, strategic ambiguity facilitates change through shifting interpretations of organisational goals and central metaphors. At the interpersonal level, ambiguity facilitates change through the development of relationships among organisational members.’¹⁶

In particular, Eisenberg draws attention to the use of new metaphors or the changing interpretation of existing metaphors by organisations embarking upon change processes.¹⁷ Organisational metaphors, such as the family, provide strategically ambiguous rallying points to unite diverse stakeholder groups. In the case drawn upon in this paper, FRST deployed new metaphors as a central element of its communication with external stakeholders during the change process. Metaphors are, by their very nature, ambiguous and open to multiple interpretations by stakeholders.

RESEARCH METHOD

This paper draws on an ongoing research project on FRST begun in mid-2000. Data for the project consisted of transcribed interviews with 35 internal and external stakeholders as well as the significant volume of documents, including strategy papers, board papers, website material and internal reports, produced by FRST since it embarked upon its change process. The printed data was organised chronologically and read in conjunction with the interview transcripts in order to identify categories for a thematic analysis. A total of seven major categories were identified: organisational structure; organisational strategy; organisational culture; internal change processes; organisational communication; external stakeholders; resources for change. These major categories were further divided by more detailed subthemes, some of which went across categories and some of which were unique to a category. This paper focuses on only one element of the transformation process — the value and limitations of the deployment of strategic ambiguity as a communication tool during a period of change. Thus only a portion of the data collected were relevant and much of these were derived from the organisational strategy and organisational communication categories. Where possible the anonymity of interviewees has been preserved in this paper. In the case of very senior individuals in FRST who played specialised and central roles in the change process, anonymity was not, however, possible.

STRATEGIC AMBIGUITY IN PRACTICE

The FRST case does not provide a perfect example of the deployment of strategic ambiguity to effect change. Rather, the case demonstrates the potential uses of strategic ambiguity as well as some limits on the use of ambiguity — be it strategic

or accidental. FRST staff and board members were not familiar with the concept prior to their contact with the researchers for this project. Thus the elements of strategic ambiguity identified by the researchers within the FRST change process were not given that label by those responsible for them. Moreover, some elements of the change process that appeared to demonstrate effective strategic ambiguity were clearly shown to be accidental upon closer examination and were, therefore, not included in the analysis for this paper.

While FRST's role was defined as simply allocating government funds to research providers, its communication activities were limited. FRST adopted the research priorities determined by another agency, the Ministry of Research, Science and Technology (MoRST) and then communicated these priorities, and the processes whereby funds would be allocated, to research providers. FRST assisted providers with their applications and then informed them as to their success or failure. Communication was thus very process related and unidirectional.¹⁸ Arguably, there is no room for ambiguity — strategic or otherwise — in process communication, which must be clear and unambiguous in order to stimulate the exact behaviours desired from stakeholders.

Prior to the commencement of the change process, FRST's communication was oriented towards information dissemination and was tactical rather than strategic in character.¹⁹ FRST did not have a developed communication strategy and, despite the large number of stakeholders with which it had to contend, FRST did not have a stakeholder relationship management plan. FRST staff also indicated that FRST's internal communication was poor and that little emphasis had been placed on this area. One senior FRST manager stated:

'Internal communication, in my view, has never been a strong point within the Foundation. The groups on different floors are isolated from one another and some floors communicate better internally than do others.'

Thus, the communication function within FRST was not perceived by staff to be functioning well internally and was limited in scope externally as FRST entered the change period.

When the expectations of FRST's role were increased, so that it aimed to become a 'leading investor, facilitator, catalyst and integrator'²⁰ in the New Zealand science and innovation system, the scope and nature of the communication activities it needed to undertake in order to be effective, changed significantly. The processes that organisations establish and the staff that they hire are oriented towards the roles and strategies of the organisation. Changing these roles and strategies does not in itself change an organisation. The FRST board and senior managers were thus confronted with a radical, more ambitious role to fulfil and an organisation that was structured, staffed and resourced to serve a more conservative mission. Moreover, as a top-down initiative, the changes were not necessarily supported by either staff or external stakeholders.

The new chairman and his mostly new board, appointed by a Minister of Science and Technology determined to effect change, formulated the wording of the new mission in a single meeting. They did so in response to a draft mission statement presented to them by FRST staff that emphasised, as all FRST missions had emphasised, process rather than goals. In contrast, the new mission was designed to, in the words of the Chairman 'give life and meaning to the government's goals for the science envelope'. The Chairman indicated, however, that he had intentionally used ambiguity as a strategy

when communicating this new mission because, while the general direction of change was clear, the detail and exact course for change were not. He explained:

‘I knew we were going to leave so we set sail. The fine tuning of the compass as to where we were going to end up in the new world happened after that. . . . You don’t wait around to define nirvana in detail, you just work out if you’re in the wrong space. If you start heading towards the sun then you’ll define the exact landing spot through a process of iterations that will naturally occur and can be stimulated during the journey.’

The chairman’s statement suggests a fifth use of strategic ambiguity in addition to the four suggested by Eisenberg. In this instance, ambiguity was deployed to provide the time and interpretive space for the organisation to develop fully its policies and procedures internally while still clearly signalling to external stakeholders the goals of change and the outcomes that were sought. The emphasis was on achieving momentum for change as soon as possible rather than on waiting until the procedural details of the desired change were fully worked through.

The changes that FRST had to undergo as a result of the adoption of the new mission involved a radical transformation of the whole organisation. The FRST board elected to use what was called a ‘transition year’ so that the organisation could be restructured and appropriate new staff hired and so that external stakeholders, particularly research providers, could also make the necessary changes. During the transition year, funding was carried forward so that research providers faced no cuts to their programmes. This decision meant that the change process was not immediately threatening to research providers. However, providers were also asked to enter into negotiations with FRST over

the future directions of their programmes and to demonstrate how they would move their research capabilities away from areas of low priority and into areas more likely to generate benefits for New Zealand.

In order to achieve its new mission, FRST relied upon research providers to respond in creative and innovative ways to the change messages. In effect, FRST drew upon Eisenberg’s fourth role for strategic ambiguity — its use to facilitate organisational change by ‘allowing people the interpretive room to change their activities’.²¹ Of the four elements in the FRST mission, ‘investment’ emerged as the element most focused upon by FRST and by stakeholders in the change process. Indeed, FRST’s Statement of Intent for 2000–2003 was entitled ‘Investing in Innovation’. A senior member of FRST commented in relation to communicating the investment metaphor to research providers that:

‘There are few good investors in New Zealand’s innovation system. They don’t know how to invest, they have no skills, they have no perspective, and so to just shift overnight would achieve nothing. What we have to do is help them build capability in the same way as the Foundation is. . . . So what I’m saying with the CRIs [Crown Research Institutes] is that they have to develop those same capabilities [that FRST does]. So we’re moving the dialogue. There’s a transformational vision and it’s quite clear where we’re going to end up and there’s incremental steps: moving the dialogue, building the capacity, moving the dialogue, building the capacity.’

Thus, rather than attempting to dictate to research providers what the investment message would mean for them, FRST entered into a dialogue with these stakeholders in which there was room for individual, creative responses and time to build new organisational capabilities. Discussions about the implications of the

new mission for research providers led the providers to make changes, which in turn led to more discussions and more changes. Arguably, the providers were in a stronger position than was FRST to identify new opportunities and to determine exactly how they would change. As one FRST staff member explained, 'It's like letting the winners step forward rather than picking winners'. In allowing providers room to negotiate and, to a certain extent, determine their own futures, FRST hoped to achieve a better result than if it had taken a more directive approach.

FRST's use of the investment metaphor included reference to the negative term 'disinvestment'. While investment signalled that FRST would look with more care at the outcomes of research programmes, disinvestment signalled that money could be taken away. When FRST released a paper on disinvestment to research providers it understandably led to a great deal of discussion and some hostility. One research provider explained that:

'The disinvestment paper really annoyed us because we'd gone through a phase of negotiation and ... most of us felt that we'd made quite a lot of change. Then the Foundation was almost coming back and saying, well, you haven't changed quickly enough. It was a bit of a slap in the face. ... There's an awful lot at stake for the science community if the Foundation puts a foot wrong as it did with the disinvestment paper. People read into it all sorts of things that may never have been there because there's a climate of concern.'

The reaction to the disinvestment paper illustrates one of the limits of strategic ambiguity. While the investment message generated a creative engagement between FRST and at least some of its stakeholders, the disinvestment message provoked the exact opposite reaction. Negative metaphors are unlikely to generate either

'unified diversity' or to 'facilitate change'. Instead, they are likely to provide rallying points for opposition, which is precisely the outcome that strategic ambiguity is intended to avoid.

As a metaphor for, rather than an exact description of, the changes that FRST desired its stakeholders to make, as well as for its own internal changes, the investment message was intended to signal the radical nature of the changes required. A senior member of FRST noted 'Investment was a way of getting a mind shift change.' Like all metaphors, however, the investor metaphor was open to interpretations that were not necessarily desired by FRST. One FRST staff member noted that:

'There was an external perception that investment was being used in a private sector economic sense. But internally the dialogue has been focused on the wider meaning of investment — investment for wealth and well-being and for the benefit of New Zealand.'

FRST is charged with delivering on the 'triple bottom line' of social, economic and environmental wealth and yet the investment metaphor, with its clear links to the world of finance, suggests a primary focus on economic wealth. The investment metaphor may not, therefore, have been the best choice as a vehicle for FRST's change message. Indeed, one senior member of FRST observed that 'If I had one thing to do again I would probably redefine investment because people saw investment in terms of what they do with an investment bank and I saw it somewhat different to that'. Eisenberg's third role for strategic ambiguity — that it is deniable — is brought into play in such cases when an organisation wishes to avoid particular interpretations of its messages.

The controversial investment and associated disinvestment metaphors required skilful stakeholder relationship

management if a political storm was to be avoided. Like all public sector organisations, FRST had a power base, which was derived from the resources it controlled and the legislation that defined its sphere of responsibilities, that could be undermined by stakeholder resistance taken into the political arena. The use of strategic ambiguity is potentially a means of avoiding such negative reactions by allowing multiple interpretations of a change message that fit with the differing, potentially conflicting, needs and goals of stakeholder organisations.²² The ability of stakeholders to respond creatively varies, however, depending upon the capabilities of each stakeholder organisation. Moreover, their willingness to respond in this case appears to have also depended upon the relative importance of FRST funding to the stakeholder. The responses of the research providers to the FRST change messages can, therefore, be divided into two groups. The first group, which was made up primarily of Crown Research Institutes (CRIs), responded in a mostly positive way to the change messages. The CRIs were highly dependent upon FRST funding and this dependency had led them to take a defensive position in relation to their research programmes. To admit that a programme might not represent the best use of science resources was to place funding at risk. The transition year gave the CRIs the opportunity to move out of poorly performing areas and into areas that were likely to be more productive over the longer term without putting their overall funding levels at risk. Thus the interpretive room provided for stakeholders during the change year was largely welcomed by the CRIs.

In contrast, New Zealand's other major group of research providers, the universities, largely responded in either negative or apathetic ways to the ambiguity of the change messages.

Universities gain only a small proportion of their funding from FRST and so do not devote significant organisational time or resources to developing research strategies that fit with FRST objectives. The entirely process-oriented communication used by FRST when it was simply an allocator of research funds was thus favoured over the new, more complex and ambiguous communication environment that accompanied the investment metaphor. The head of research at one university described the new environment in the following way:

'The system has changed to the extent where, in 1990, the Cabinet Committee decided priorities and it got signed off by the full Cabinet the following Monday and that information trickled back to the system and FRST was supposed to implement it, to a system where [a senior FRST manager] — not even the CEO of the Foundation — is soliciting suggestions as to how it should be done from the stakeholders.'

The invitation to participate in the process of deciding research priorities was interpreted by this research provider as evidence that FRST did not know what it was doing. Thus, the ambiguity of the change messages led some within this group of stakeholders to question the competence of FRST. The head of research at another university commented:

'We don't know what the intentions of the Foundation are clearly. The [CRIs] don't know how things are going to develop. They're guessing. They're probably putting a lot of effort into the guessing and trying to prepare themselves in ways that actually might turn out to be inappropriate. [In this University], there are elements of readjustment going on as we see the opportunities through the tender process. We're taking the tender process as an indicator but I've certainly been very reluctant to start moving people's thinking in directions that are uncertain. In other

words, it's very easy to take the wrong path at the moment. The result is that no, we're not moving quickly on anything. I mean, quite deliberately not moving quickly'.

Neither university welcomed the interpretive room provided by strategic ambiguity. Instead, they adopted a mostly passive, 'wait and see' attitude to change, which was likely to have disadvantaged them in relation to other, more proactive, research providers. Thus, strategic ambiguity was not an effective way of achieving the desired changes in relation to this group of stakeholders.

In addition to providing an opportunity for research providers to negotiate the future directions of their research portfolios, the transition year was also intended to enable FRST to complete its internal restructuring and to put in place the procedural detail that would underlie all future negotiations with providers. The magnitude of the change was recognised by a CRI manager who noted:

'Almost overnight they swung from being a funder of science to an investor in science. And I know they're in chaos in there, I know them quite well and it's like the same when we have a reorganisation here. For the first few months nobody knows who's doing what and who's responsible for what etc, etc. They've got a lot of new faces in there.'

The magnitude of the changes that were occurring within FRST also led to some contradictions in the communication occurring between FRST and stakeholders. For example, one CRI manager observed that:

'They haven't done a clean, sharp transition. It came out during our negotiations that their intention was to be an investor but their questions and what they were challenging were focused on the detail that you wouldn't have thought would be the behaviour of an investor. . . . We were

sitting there thinking "why are you asking these questions?" It either meets your requirements as an investor or it doesn't.'

In the absence of clearly defined new procedures, it appeared that some FRST staff had reverted to behaviours consistent with the previous mission. Strategic ambiguity is about leaving meaning open to interpretation and should not be confused with contradictory or inconsistent communication. Arguably such contradictions and inconsistencies serve to undermine stakeholder confidence in the competence or honesty of an organisation and do little to encourage a positive engagement between an organisation and its stakeholders.

One reason for the appearance of some flaws in FRST processes during the transition year may lie in the fact that FRST both carried forward funding and entered into major negotiations with research providers. These negotiations consumed much of FRST's time during the restructuring period. One CRI interviewee noted:

'I don't think FRST fully anticipated the changes that they themselves were going to have to make and they didn't fully prepare their people. It's ironic in a way . . . while the Foundation has given us a period of one or two years to make that transition, they didn't create it for themselves.'

Under pressure to effect change quickly, FRST appears to have placed itself under more pressure during the transition year than it did its external stakeholders.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT

The FRST case provided an illustration of both the potential and the pitfalls inherent in the deployment of strategic ambiguity in the communication of change by a

public sector organisation. Faced with a political directive to enact radical change quickly, strategic ambiguity at the level of the organisational mission appears to have been a logical choice for FRST. FRST did not have all of the answers and did not necessarily know the exact changes that research providers should make in order to achieve the overall mission. Thus, in order to effect the desired changes, FRST required its major external stakeholders to engage with it in a creative dialogue. Strategic ambiguity provided a means of achieving such an engagement. The FRST case illustrates, however, that the characteristics of the stakeholders themselves may determine whether or not they are willing and able to respond to strategic ambiguity in a positive way. Specifically it appears that, in order to take advantage of the interpretive room provided by strategic ambiguity, stakeholders must have:

- the internal resources and capability to respond
- a strong incentive to engage
- goodwill and trust towards the organisation.

In the absence of any of these criteria, ambiguity is unlikely to be well received. Moreover, the existing strength of the third characteristic, 'goodwill and trust', is likely to be damaged by the use of strategic ambiguity in the absence of the first two characteristics. Thus, in the FRST case, strategic ambiguity applied to communication with the CRIs was a relatively effective means of achieving the desired 'mind shift'. In contrast, strategic ambiguity may have damaged the relationship between FRST and the universities without achieving the level of change desired.

The FRST case also provided some insight into the deployment of metaphors in order to 'facilitate organisational

change'.²³ One advantage of using metaphors is that they are open to multiple interpretations and, therefore, provide interpretive room within which stakeholders may engage with an organisation. Metaphors, however, are not entirely open but, instead, carry with them associations that have been built up through common usage. In the case of FRST, the investment metaphor was intended to stimulate a dialogue with stakeholders about what it might mean to invest in an innovation system as opposed to simply fund science. The investor metaphor, however, carried its financial connotations strongly into the dialogue and was interpreted by some stakeholders as implying a single focus upon the economic at the expense of the social or environmental outcomes of research. This example suggests that organisations should map out the likely interpretations of metaphors before they are deployed so that they are well prepared for stakeholder responses. It also suggests that organisations should consider denying certain undesirable interpretations of metaphors from the outset.

The use of the disinvestment metaphor by FRST provided another lesson about the limits of the effective deployment of metaphors. It was suggested above that, in order to take advantage of the interpretive room provided by strategic ambiguity, there must be goodwill and trust between an organisation and its stakeholders. Negative metaphors, such as disinvestment, that imply that resources will be taken away from stakeholders are unlikely to engender goodwill and may damage trust. In such situations, stakeholders seeking to know precisely what the potential consequences of change may be and how negative consequences may be avoided, demand clear communication. Strategic ambiguity is, therefore, most likely to be effective for change management in situations in which

stakeholders can perceive clear benefits in engaging in a dialogue.

A fifth role for strategic ambiguity, in addition to the four proposed by Eisenberg, was also suggested by the FRST case. This role was to provide the time and interpretive space for an organisation to develop fully its policies and procedures internally while still clearly signalling to external stakeholders the goals of change and the outcomes that were sought. FRST did not have the luxury of waiting until it had completed its internal restructuring and finalised all procedural details before signalling to its stakeholders both that change was to take place and the general nature of that change. Moreover, as a public sector organisation, FRST was obliged to consult with its multiple stakeholders about the change process rather than simply inform them of the decision to change. Thus, strategic ambiguity was one mechanism deployed by FRST to foster a creative dialogue with stakeholders about the direction and detail of change while it put in place the internal structures necessary to support such change.

The final implication to be derived from the FRST case is that when strategic ambiguity is deployed with external stakeholders it must be well understood and supported within the organisation itself.²⁴ Ironically, it appears that strategic ambiguity within change management may rely upon a high degree of consistency in communication that can only be achieved if staff fully understand both what and why they are communicating. In the FRST case, for example, staff reversion to behaviours that were inconsistent with the investor metaphor caused confusion among some stakeholders. Thus, if strategic ambiguity is poorly managed, stakeholders may come to question the competence and even the integrity of the organisation. If, however, strategic ambiguity is well managed

internally and used with appropriate external stakeholders, it may provide an effective mechanism for engaging stakeholders in a productive dialogue around change processes.

This paper has concentrated on the deployment of strategic ambiguity within the context of a public sector organisation. The paper has contended that the nature of public sector organisations, with their complex sets of competing stakeholder interests and their need for public support, has made them particularly fertile ground for the use of strategic ambiguity. There was, however, no intention to argue that the concept does not apply to other organisational types. Indeed, the initial theorisation and application of the concept by Eisenberg and others²⁵ occurred primarily within a private sector context. An area that remains to be explored is that of third sector organisations and, to the extent that they share some of the characteristics of the public sector, strategic ambiguity may also prove to be a useful concept for communication managers operating in this context.

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