Corporate Conversations with the State

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Abstract

Corporations exist and operate at the pleasure of the home state and the host state. Effective and efficient conversations between the corporation and the state are essential for a mutually beneficial relationship. The nature of these conversations in the context of meeting the needs of the parties is reviewed. Suggestions are offered for improving the effectiveness of the conversations.

Corporate Conversations with the State

Foundation

In this section we describe the foundation for the remainder of this paper.

The word *conversation* is used rather than *communication* to indicate there are at least

two parties in the conversation. The word *communication* carries a connotation of

unidirectionality that does not capture the spirit of this paper or the spirit of what we think

conversations between corporations and states should be about.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* explains diplomacy as "art of, skill in dealing with

people so that business is done smoothly". Therefore, "Corporate Diplomacy" is an

attempt to manage systematically and professionally the business environment in such

as a way as to ensure that "business is done smoothly" – basically with an

unquestioned "license to operate" and an interaction that leads to mutual adaptation

between corporations and society (in a sense a co-evolution) (Steger, 2003, pp. 6-7).

It is difficult to conceive of corporate diplomacy as described by Steger without

meaningful conversations. One part of the foundation for these conversations are principles

of communication.

1. The grammar and syntax of the messages being exchanged is easily
    understood.

2. The information communicated in the messages is relevant.

3. The medium of communication is acceptable.

4. There is a desire to communicate (i.e., to exchange value).

5. There is confirmation of understanding (James Drogan, 2007a, pp. 2-3).

While Drogan calls this list *principles of communication*, the wording is strongly indicative of the notion of conversation. We also call attention to Steger's use of the phrase "mutual adaptation." We interpret this as an expression of acceptance of tolerance. We think that the goal ought to be one of "mutual benefit" implying collaboration.

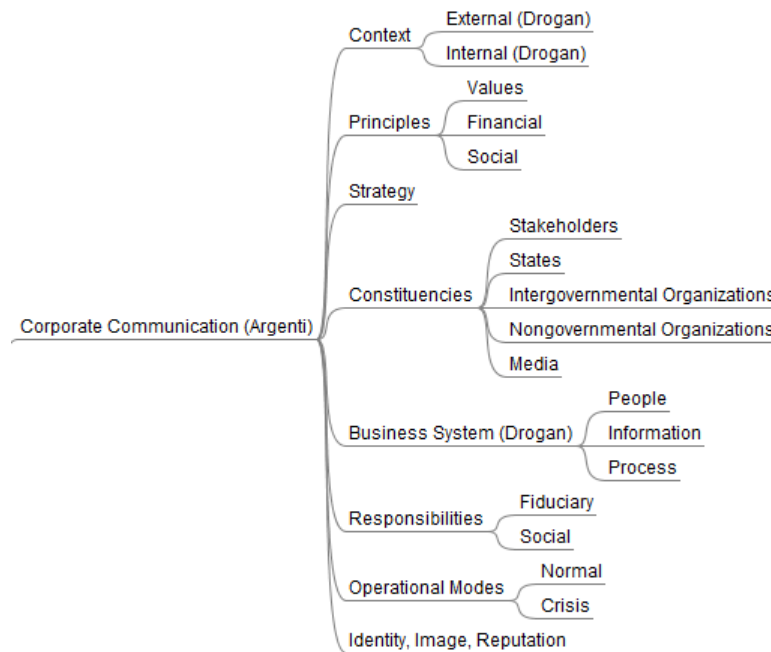Two other sources are included as elements of the foundation.

Figure 1 From Corporate Communication (Argenti, 2009)

Figure 1 summarizes the major points from Argenti's work considered contributory to the notion of conversations. Argenti's work provides valuable guidance for the detailed application of the principles of communication. However, insofar as can be ascertained, Argenti does not take up the matter of confirmation of understanding. One might argue that

understanding is confirmed in contracts, treaties, and the like. However, as Anthony

D'Amato and Jennifer Abbassi point out, "The three major classifications of

treaty-qualifying unilateral statements are reservations, understandings, and delarations"

(D'Amato & Abbassi, 2006, p. 49). One should not be too sanguine as to the sanctity of a

formal agreement of understanding.

The third element of the foundation considered in this paper comes from Ulrich
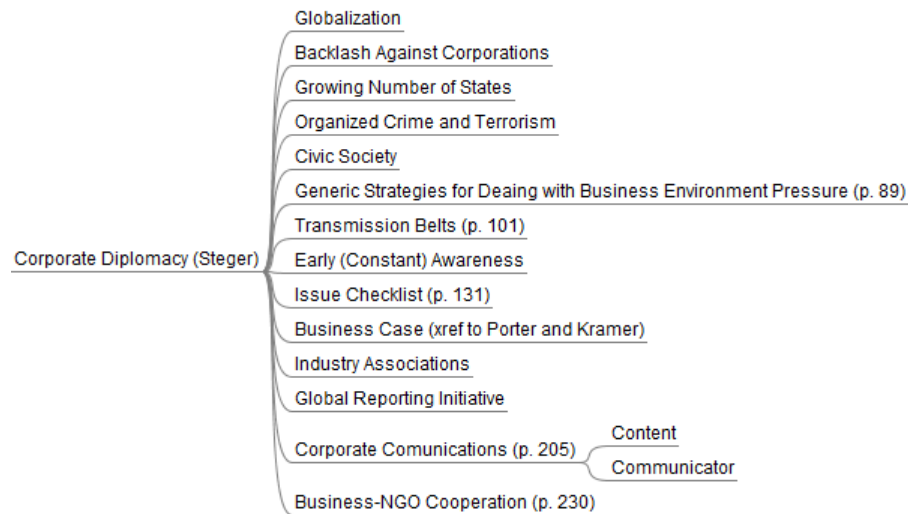
Steger's *Corporate Diplomacy*.

Figure 2 From Corporate Diplomacy (Steger, 2003)

The contents of *Figure 2* were selected so as to not duplicate in any significant

manner the contents of *Figure 1*.

Argenti's scheme for the application of the principles of communication as described by Drogan is thus seen as fitting within the larger context of corporate diplomacy addressed by Steger.
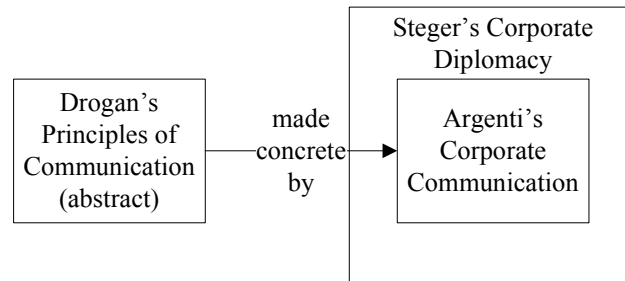

Figure 3 Relationship of Drogan, Argenti, and Steger

This relationship between Drogan, Argenti, and Steger is underscored and made clear by *Figure 3*.   We will draw upon this relationship during the discussion of a conversation management system beginning on page 20.

We are, however, left with questions of what it means to 1.) have a successful conversation, and 2.) to be successful at corporate diplomacy. Argenti provides little guidance as to responding to the first issue while Steger leads us to consider the Global Reporting Initiative as a means for addressing the second.

The Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) is a network-based organization that pioneered the world's most widely used sustainability reporting framework. GRI is committed to the Framework's continuous improvement and application worldwide. GRI's core goals include the mainstreaming of disclosure on environmental, social and governance performance ("Global Reporting Initiative Home Page," 2007).

Not evident in GRI are key metrics of corporate performance as defined by Robert

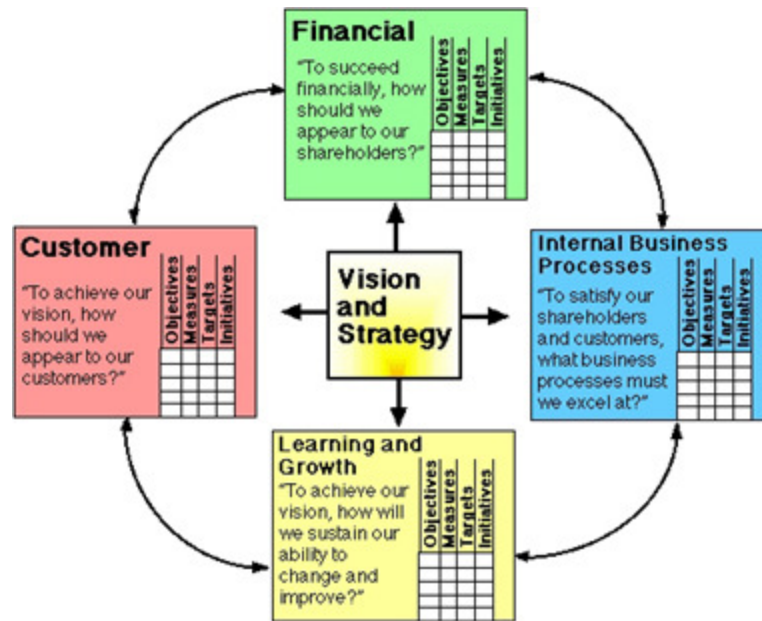Kaplan and David Norton as *The Balanced Scorecard* (Kaplan & Norton, 1992).

Figure 4 Balanced Scorecard ("What is the Balanced Scorecard?," 2010)

We assert that the measure of success of corporate diplomacy comprises the Global

Report Initiative <u>and</u> the Balanced Scorecard (BSC). This is a view that is articulated well by

Michael Porter and Mark Kramer in *Creating Shared Value*.

Companies must take the lead in bringing business and society back together. The

recognition is there among sophisticated business and thought leaders, and promising

elements of a new model are emerging. Yet we still lack an overall framework for

guiding these efforts, and most companies remain stuck in a "social responsibility"

mind-set in which societal issues are at the periphery, not the core.

The solution lies in the principle of shared value, which involves creating economic value in a way that also creates value for society by addressing its needs and challenges. Businesses must reconnect company success with social progress. Shared value is not social responsibility, philanthropy, or even sustainability, but a new way to achieve economic success. It is not on the margin of what companies do but at the center. We believe that it can give rise to the next major transformation of business thinking (Porter & Kramer, 2011).

This idea of shared value has the potential of fundamentally changing the nature of corporations, states, their constituencies (shared and unshared), and the relationships amongst all these parties. It suggests, therefore, that a reexamination of the work of Argenti and Steger, as well as others, may be in order.

Reporting corporate performance through a combination of GRI and BSC is, however, but reporting. What counts is the response of the constituencies to this reporting. We briefly touch on assessing response in the conversation management system.

Our principle concern in this paper is for the conversations between the corporation and the state. Measuring the success of these conversations on the basis of the success of corporate diplomacy implies a time lag between cause and effect. This may also cause the impact of the conversations on corporate diplomacy to be obscured and potentially unresponsive to immediate needs.

Corporate diplomacy can be characterized as a sense, interpret, decide, act, learn (SIDAL) loop.
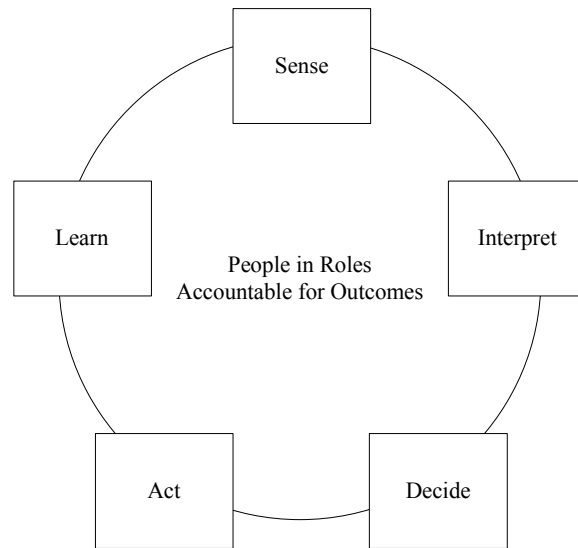

Figure 5 SIDAL Loop (adapted from Haeckel & Slywotzky, 1999)

The outcomes of conversations need to be assessed very quickly, especially when dealing with crises. This means the need for a short cycle SIDAL loop. One has to constantly, quickly, and with confidence assess the impact of communications. BP's communications during the Macondo well disaster – "I wish I had my life back." Tony Hayward CEO (Kraus, n.d.) – is illustrative of the lack of such a cycle.

What, then, are the outcomes of conversation? In a general sense we suggest the following:

1. To be polite.

2. To attract attention.

3. To inform.

4. To prompt or forestall action (James Drogan, 2007b).

In the day-to-day conversational environment these outcomes are too abstract. However, they can provoke us to create more precise desired outcomes for conversations, which then become the basis for assessing whether these outcomes are achieved. To the extent possible, every conversation needs to be designed to deliver an outcome that supports the intent of corporate diplomacy. This is why corporate communication is embedded in corporate diplomacy in Figure 3. The modern conversational environment – social networks, instant messages, global media in search of a story, always on, always connected, always transacting – presents special difficulties in meeting this design point. The consequence is a need for a highly adaptive and responsive conversational mechanism built around a set of well-informed, highly trusted individuals in the corporation. We elaborate on this theme in the discussion of the conversation management system.

Complexity

The context in which conversations take place can be extraordinarily complex. Consider the following.

For example, states are not the sole actors in international politics. Peter Willets estimates 95,000 political actors in the global system (p. 332). This number excludes what Willets refers to as non-legitimate groups and liberation movements, actors of considerable influence in the modern world. These actors have the potential of creating an extremely large number of relationships (approximately 9 billion), most of which are not realistic. These actors and relationships are the means for establishing regimes. It is unlikely that all regimes pertinent to the conduct of international affairs

can be identified. Without being identified they cannot be understood for what they

are, what they do, and what impact they have in the world. They are beyond the reach

of theory and have the potential for generating large unknowns in our equations of

international relations. This suggests the need for a theory of the unknowns, an

attempt to understand how much we do not know about international relations and an

estimate of the risk associated with this uncertainty (James Drogan, 2009, p. 15).

The product of the number of relationships and the number of conversations across

these relationships can amount to an almost unfathomable number. The process of managing

these is perhaps not knowable in its entirety. One does the best one can in managing the

sense, interpret, decide, act, and learn loop, but there are an uncountable number of these

loops with varying cycle times.

In the preparation of this paper, a mind map was created to help organize the thinking. That map is reproduced here.

Figure 6 Mindmap for Corporate Conversations with the State

The context is complex, rapidly changing in unpredictable and opaque ways, and the guidance for navigating this "permanent white water," as indicated in *Figure 6*, is also

complex if perhaps less rapidly changing and opaque. Consider also that Drogan, Argenti,

and Steger are not the only ones that have something to say about conversations, corporate

communication, and corporate diplomacy. We are, in short, confronted with a system,

comprising issues and resolutions, of growing complexity. A maxim of systems theory is the

more complex a system, the less one can understand. The less one understands, the more

problematic the task of management and control. Yet, the issue must be confronted and ways

are needed to do this.

The recommendation to be made on this point is that the important conversations

need to be identified in the context we are presented. The management process is then

designed, implemented, and operated to focus on these important conversations. We suggest

that system dynamics can play a critical role here.

The professional field known as system dynamics has been developing for the last 35

years and now has a world-wide and growing membership. System dynamics

combines the theory, methods, and philosophy needed to analyze the behavior of

systems in not only management, but also in environmental change, politics,

economic behavior, medicine, engineering, and other fields. System dynamics

provides a common foundation that can be applied wherever we want to understand

and influence how things change through time (Forrester, 1991).

We have had some experience in using systems dynamics to analyze various types of problems. System dynamics, for example, is being used to determine the key issues associated with the following hypothesis.

In order to broadly grow a robust economy that optimizes opportunities for all who participate in it, inexpensive sources of energy are required. The more expensive is energy, the shallower is any economic growth, and the fewer who are benefitted by that growth (Howard, 2007).

We have also referenced this discipline in another research paper.

Meyers and Tan tie in to Forrester's system dynamics and also to the matters (SIDAL and metrics) raised in the previous section. Meyers and Tan caution us to be alert for the "contested, temporal and emergent" nature of culture. That is, the understanding needed to appreciate culture, especially cultural differences, as a force shaping the observed behavior may not be in the generally accepted repertoire of managers. The risk contingent in using the accepted repertoire is that we may be tempted to massage the problem to fit a known solution. "I have no data yet. It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts" (Sherlock Holmes, A Scandal in Bohemia) (James Drogan, 2010).

Conversations are within the social realm and the advice of Meyers and Tan – and Holmes – is to be heeded.

Once the important conversations are identified the guidance of Drogan, Argenti, and Steger can be applied to help design a conversational management system.

The importance of conversations is also function of the cultural environments in which the corporation does business. Project GLOBE is an extensive study of how 18,000 middle managers in 62 countries make decisions (House & Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness Research Program, 2004). This study identified nine dimensions of culture and ten global societies across the world.

Table 1

Cultural Dimension and Groupings

Dimensions of Culture	Cultural Groupings
Assertiveness	Anglo
Future Orientation	Arab
Gender Differentiation	Confucian
Humane Orientation	East Europe
In-Group Collectivism	Germanic
Institutional Collectivism	Indigenous Africa
Performance Orientation	Lain America
Power Distance	Latin Europe
Uncertainty Avoidance	Nordic
	South Asia

The conversations, even with respect to similar issues, are likely to vary across and within the groupings. This adds another dimension of complexity that needs to be dealt with by the conversational management system.

Role of the Corporation

A contemporary corporation needs to understand the nature of the interaction at the confluence of its business model with that of the state. Whilst Susan Strange may well have been correct when she wrote *The Retreat of the State* (Strange, 1996), the state nevertheless grants the "license to operate" mentioned by Steger. The state may be retreating, but sovereignty continues to be a paramount force.

The corporation and the state will share some portion of their respective constituencies. The corporation thus needs to be clear about the relationships that it and the state have regarding shared constituents.
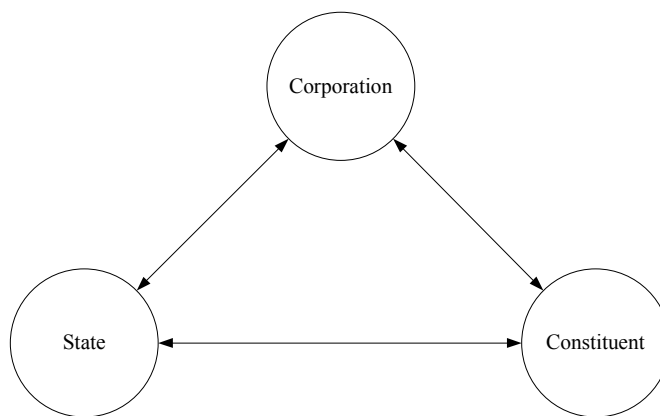
Figure 7 Relationships

Since conversations are first and foremost about the management of relationships, the corporation needs some sense of how the state and the constituent see their relationships with the corporation and, equally important in our view, how the state and the constituent see their

relationship independent of the corporaion. This is, of course, issue dependent. A recent, notable example of this point is the recall by Toyota of automobiles due to random acceleration.

The worldwide 2009-2010 recall of some nine million vehicles by Toyota began after reports that several vehicles experienced unintended acceleration ("2009–2010 Toyota Vehicle Recalls," 2011).   Ultimately, the involved parties included the U.S. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA); The Japanese Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (MLIT); the U.S. National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA); the U.S. House Oversight and Government Reform Committee and the House Energy and Commerce Committee, as well as the alleged victims of the malfunction. The issue was heavily covered by the U.S. media. One hypothesis for the substantial negative publicity received by Toyota is the company's lack of appreciation for the nature of the relationships with their constituents, and the relationship of the constituents with the states.

It seems as if Toyota lacked consideration for many of the points of guidance provided by Drogan, Argenti, and Steger. We note as we write this paper that "Toyota Motor Sales says it will recall nearly 2.2 million vehicles to fix problems related to floor mats that could interfere with their accelerator pedals" (Welsh, 2011). It will be interesting to see what Toyota has learned about corporate conversations in the last 16 months.

Relationships need to be prioritized on the basis of their impact on the corporation. Resources can then be deployed to address the relationships based upon this prioritization. Corporate diplomacy and the centrality of conversation can be seen as risk management. The

assertion here is that many of the concepts of risk management, so well known in insurance and finance, may be usefully applied to this prioritization.

We cannot overemphasize the need to understand <u>all</u> the relationships that might affect the corporation, even those in which the corporation is not directly involved.

Role of the State

A recent discussion group (*Global Corporate Diplomacy; 201012_GD564L_Global Corp Diplomacy; Week 08 Discussion D8 Group 1*, 2011) took up the issue of current events in Egypt. There were suggestions that much of what one considers to be corporate diplomacy could be usefully applied by a state in dealing with its constituencies. This is view that we think has merit and ought to be examined in greater detail. The relationship between the state and its constituencies is changing brought on, in no small measure, by the forces of globalization, especially the mobility of capital. If a state makes it too difficult for a corporation to operate within its borders, the corporation may move to a state that is more hospitable.

Consider the World Bank Ranking of Economies by ease of doing business.

Economies are ranked on their ease of doing business, from 1 – 183. A high ranking on the ease of doing business index means the regulatory environment is more conducive to the starting and operation of a local firm. This index averages the country's percentile rankings on 9 topics, made up of a variety of indicators, giving equal weight to each topic. The rankings for all economies are benchmarked to June 2010 ("Ranking of Economies," 2011).

Economy	Ease of Doing Business Rank ▲	Starting a Business	Dealing with Construction Permits	Registering Property	Getting Credit	Protecting Investors	Paying Taxes	Trading Across Borders	Enforcing Contracts	Closing a Business
Singapore	1	4	2	15	6	2	4	1	13	2
Hong Kong SAR, China	2	6	1	56	2	3	3	2	2	15
New Zealand	3	1	5	3	2	1	26	28	9	16
United Kingdom	4	17	16	22	2	10	16	15	23	7
United States	5	9	27	12	6	5	62	20	8	14
Denmark	6	27	10	30	15	28	13	5	30	5
Canada	7	3	29	37	32	5	10	41	58	3
Norway	8	33	65	8	46	20	18	9	4	4
Ireland	9	11	38	78	15	5	7	23	37	9
Australia	10	2	63	35	6	59	48	29	16	12
Saudi Arabia	11	13	14	1	46	16	6	18	140	65
Georgia	12	8	7	2	15	20	61	35	41	105
Finland	13	32	55	26	32	59	65	6	11	6
Sweden	14	39	20	15	72	28	39	7	52	18
Iceland	15	29	31	11	32	74	35	79	3	17
Korea, Rep.	16	60	22	74	15	74	49	8	5	13

Figure 8 Top 16 Countries Based on Ease of Doing Business

Practicing the principles of conversation (considered as inclusive of the guidance from Drogan, Argenti, and Steger) can help a state attract capital and thereby better enable it to fulfill its aspirations. We would argue that while sovereignty as a principle for organizing the affairs of the world is likely not to change, sovereignty, in and of itself, is not sufficient for success on the world stage. One might argue that some states care little for this goal. Zimbabwe comes to mind. We would, however, suggest that recent events stretching from Morocco across North Africa and east as far as Iran call into question the leadership exercising the sovereignty. Perhaps a new approach to state governance, including what is being put forward in this paper, ought to be considered.

We believe the fundamental principles of communication as put forward on page 3 provide the most effective and efficient communication when adopted by both parties, and we believe the guidance provided by Argenti and Steger is most valuable when all parties

follow it, and have thus reached the conclusion is that states could benefit from moving towards adopting the guidance provided in this paper.

We also argue that the state needs to attend to the relationships depicted in *Figure 7* with the same diligence as the corporation. Mobility of capital, and equally as important, access to information by the citizens of the state, is an antidote, however mild, for the arrogance of power.

Conversation Management System

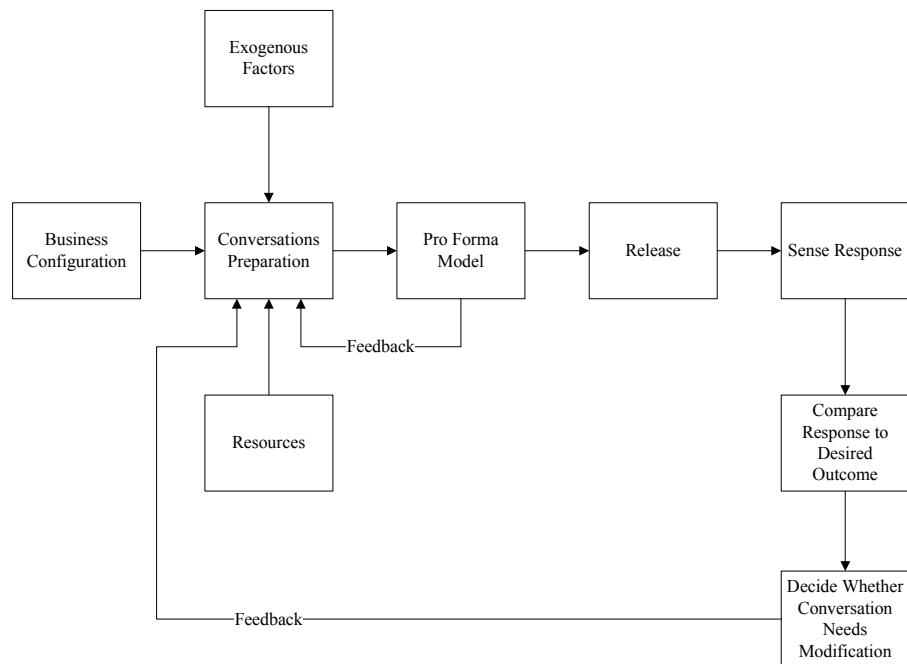In this section we provide an abstraction of a conversation management system (CMS).

Figure 9 Conversation Management System

CMS comprises a number of meta-processes described below (alphabetic order).

Business Configuration: This taxonomy of the corporation describes the what, where, why, how, when, and who comprising the business model (J. Drogan, 2007).

Compare Response to Desired Outcome: The differences between the expected and actual outcomes of the conversation are determined.

Conversations Preparation: Conversations are prepared based on interpretation of the Exogenous Factors and the needs of the corporation as specified in the Business Configuration.

Decide Whether Conversation Needs Modification: It is unreasonable to expect that conversations would produce precisely the outcome desired. There will almost always be a difference. Here a decision is made as to the importance of the difference. There is feedback provided to Conversations Preparation.

Exogenous Factors: The totality of the data, information, and knowledge describing the context external to the corporation. In general, the collection is built and maintained on the principle that everything of importance to the corporation must be visible.

Pro Forma Model: Conversations are tested to assure they will produce the desired outcome. There is a feedback to Conversations Preparation if modification is required prior to Release.

Release: The principals in the conversation are engaged.

Resources: Resources available for use in the conversations are assigned.

Sense Response: Response to the conversations are picked up from various probes in the context.

In *Figure 3* we depicted conversations as included within corporate diplomacy. In *Figure 9* we are assuming that corporate diplomacy is within the whole of the business configuration and, hence, it is not shown.

CMS is seen as a symbiotic relationship between people with knowledge, skills, experiences, attitudes, and behavior appropriate for the job. The more accomplished and sophisticated the people, the higher the quality of CMS. CMS clearly requires information technology in support of its heart, the person. The success of CMS and, by extension, corporate diplomacy, is a function of the level of commitment and support rendered to it by key decision makers and influencers within the corporation.

CMS needs to be tailored to the needs of the society in which the corporation finds itself. One can imagine a centralized CMS for a corporation with satellite CMSs tailored to the needs of the cultures in which business is transacted.

Conclusions

We have argued that *conversation* is more meaningful than *communication*. Engaging in meaningful conversations based upon the principles of communication is essential. These conversations must be orchestrated to deliver an outcome that supports the broader theme of corporate diplomacy and the effectiveness of these conversations must be measured. On page 9 we provided an abstraction of these outcomes. We have suggested that it is critical to understand how all critical relationships are affected by the conversation. The corporation may think its most important constituent is the state. The state may not see the corporation as equally important.

We believe the state can benefit from considering and adopting, as appropriate, the principles of corporate communication (Argenti) and corporate diplomacy (Steger). Our sense is that states are increasingly buffeted by the mobility of capital, the source, at least for the arguments being advanced herein, of economic well-being. Hence, moving from governance associated with compelling corporate behavior to one of collaborating with corporations to achieve a common goal is becoming increasingly important and ought to be based on common principles of communication. Finally, the states ought to view relationships with constituencies in a manner similar to that which we have recommended for the corporation.

 It is always easier to see and say what needs to be done then to complete what needs to be done. This paper calls for change. Much of what is here is not new. The issue, therefore, is one of fomenting change. We continue to be befuddled by the inability of corporations and states to learn from what has gone before. Compare, for example, the response of Johnson and Johnson to the Tylenol crisis (1982) with the response of BP to the Macondo disaster (2010).   As for the states, review the Chinese response to the 2008 Sichuan earthquake or the U.S. response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005 with the initial response of the U.S. to the 9/11 attacks.

Change, as Machiavelli reminded us in 1513, is hard.

There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things. Because the innovator has for enemies all those who have done well under the

old conditions, and lukewarm defenders in those who may do well under the new (Machiavelli, 1995) .

Our sense is that corporations will move more quickly in the direction outlined herein than states simply because they are not as beholden to political power as the states. Furthermore, corporations are boundary agnostic in way that states can never be. States, we expect, will require the presence of a significant negative event in order to start down the path of change. Perhaps the current global recession will provoke the beginning of this journey, but we remain unimpressed by progress to date.

On the other hand, status quo is unacceptable to us. We call on opportunism and an alertness for serendipitous times when a state or a corporation, properly prepared and alert, seizes the moment and changes. This puts a premium on Steger's idea of an Early Awareness System (Steger, 2003, pp. 15-18).

Singapore is ranked first in terms of ease of doing business in *Figure 8*. That, we aver, is not by chance, but by design. Yes, as the sailors say, the winds were at the backs of the Singaporeans and other conditions favorable, but they dared to move. "It's not the strongest who survive, nor the most intelligent, but the ones most adaptable to change." Charles Darwin. We would like to substitute "willing" for "adaptable" in Darwin's statement.

States and corporations have long been involved in a *pas de deux*. From time to time one partner is stronger than the other, but for all time a partner is needed. And from time to

time one of the partners or the other misses a step. The assertion made in this paper is that this level of performance need not persist.

There is, we believe, a new commons emerging that offers new opportunity, but carries with it the old concept of "the tragedy." Managing this new commons is, to borrow from John F. Kennedy's 1961 inaugural address, being passed to a new generation tempered by awareness of context, disciplined, yet freed, by globalization, and unwilling to settle for the world as it is. The sense, then, is that change requires generational change and the onset of new minds, new ideas, and new energies.

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