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Public Relations Foundations (Second Course)

You already know the foundations. You can map an audience, write a release that leads with the news, work a deadline honestly, and plan a campaign whose results you can show. This second course takes you further — from doing public relations well to thinking like the person leadership turns to when the question is bigger than a release. It is a deeper, more strategic course: how to research before you act, position an organisation so its stories make sense together, design integrated campaigns that run across months and channels, lead communication through risk and crisis, and prove value in the language of the boardroom.

This course helps practitioners with foundation experience who are ready for counsel-level work: the in-house lead advising a chief executive, the agency account lead trusted with a client's difficult quarter, the nonprofit communications director sitting in strategy meetings rather than receiving decisions afterward. It also helps founders and senior managers who must judge PR advice — to tell the difference between a strategy and a list of activities wearing a strategy's clothes. If the first course taught your hands, this one trains your judgment.

It matters because the cost of communication failure rises with seniority. A weak release wastes a week. A weak position wastes a year — every announcement pulling in a different direction, every audience hearing a slightly different organisation. An unresearched campaign spends real money persuading people who were never the obstacle. A crisis handled at foundation level — a statement issued, a deadline met — can still fail at the strategic level if the organisation's actions contradict its words for a month afterward. Senior PR work is the discipline of alignment: research before commitment, position before messages, actions before announcements, and evidence before claims of success.

A warning that is also a promise. This course will not teach you to be cleverer with words. At this level, words are the smallest part of the work. It will teach you to ask harder questions earlier — about what the organisation is actually doing, what its publics actually believe, and what change is actually possible — and to keep asking them when the answers are unwelcome. That is what counsel means: not the person who writes the announcement, but the person trusted to say, in the room, "we are not ready to announce this, and here is why." Everything that follows builds that trust and shows you how to use it well.

What You Will Learn

- How to move from tactics to strategy: diagnosing the real problem before choosing any activity.
- How to run foundation-level research — audits, perception studies, and environment scanning — and turn findings into decisions.
- How to build and defend a positioning platform: the core idea every message, proof point, and decision must support.
- How to architect an integrated campaign across paid, earned, shared, and owned channels, sequenced over time and properly resourced.

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- How to identify issues early, assess reputational risk, and prepare an organisation before a crisis arrives.
- How to lead communication during a crisis at the strategic level — actions, stakeholders, and recovery, not just statements.
- How to measure communication at outcome and impact level and report it to leadership in business language.
- How to act as counsel: advising senior leaders honestly, including when the advice is that the plan itself must change.

Lesson 1 — From Tactics to Strategy: Diagnose Before You Prescribe

The defining failure of junior PR is reaching for a tactic. The defining skill of senior PR is refusing to — until the problem has been diagnosed. A tactic is an action: a release, an event, a film, a partnership. A strategy is a reasoned choice about how change will happen: which publics, shifting from what belief or behaviour to what other belief or behaviour, through what mechanism, in what order, given what you know about the world. Strategy always comes first, because tactics are interchangeable and strategy is not. If the strategy is right, a dozen different tactics can carry it. If the strategy is wrong, flawless tactics merely deliver the wrong change, beautifully, on time.

Diagnosis begins by separating the symptom from the problem. "Nobody is covering us" is a symptom. The problem might be that the organisation has nothing new to say, that it is pitching the wrong outlets, that its real publics do not consume news media at all, or that a competitor's story is simply stronger this year. Each diagnosis prescribes different work, and three of the four prescriptions involve no media relations whatsoever. "Sales are down" is a symptom. The communication problem inside it might be awareness (people do not know you exist), comprehension (they know, but misunderstand what you offer), trust (they understand, but do not believe you), or advocacy (they believe, but nobody credible repeats it). A senior practitioner tests which one it is — with evidence, from Lesson 2's research — before proposing a single activity. Treating a trust problem with an awareness campaign is the classic expensive error: more people learn your name, and believe it less.

A useful strategy statement fits in a short paragraph and survives hard questions. It names the situation as research shows it, not as the organisation wishes it. It names the priority publics and the specific shift sought in each. It names the mechanism — the reason this approach will produce that shift: the proof you will demonstrate, the voices who will carry it, the experiences people will have. And it names what you will not do, because a strategy that excludes nothing chooses nothing. When leadership asks for "a PR strategy" and receives a calendar of activities, they have been given tactics in disguise. When they receive the paragraph above, with the evidence under it, they can actually govern: approve the choices, fund the mechanism, and judge the results against the shifts promised.

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Diagnosis also includes the honest internal conversation. Sometimes research shows the obstacle is the organisation's own behaviour — a pricing practice publics resent, a service failure leadership has not faced, a promise marketing makes that operations cannot keep. At foundation level, you communicate around such findings as best you can. At counsel level, your job is to bring the finding into the room, with its evidence and its reputational cost projected forward, and to recommend changing the behaviour before communicating at all. This is uncomfortable and career-defining in equal measure. The practitioners who do it become indispensable. The ones who only ever bring tactics become interchangeable.

The Steps

1. When given a brief, restate it as a symptom first. Write down what has been observed, in neutral words, before accepting anyone's explanation of it.
2. List at least three possible underlying problems that could produce that symptom, including at least one that is not a communication problem at all.
3. Identify what evidence would distinguish between those explanations, and gather it — data, interviews, records, coverage analysis — before proposing activity.
4. Classify the core problem: awareness, comprehension, trust, or advocacy. Name the evidence that supports your classification.
5. Draft the strategy paragraph: situation, priority publics, shift sought in each, mechanism, and what you will deliberately not do.
6. Test the paragraph with three questions: Could a competitor use this same strategy word for word? Does it depend on anything the organisation cannot actually deliver? Would we know in six months whether it worked?
7. Present diagnosis and strategy to leadership before presenting any tactics. Get the choices approved; tactics follow in a separate, later conversation.

A Worked Example

A regional theatre company briefed its new PR lead, Hannah, to "get younger audiences talking about us" after a season of weak ticket sales to under-thirty-fives. The tactic-shaped response would have been a social campaign. Hannah diagnosed instead. Box-office data showed under-thirty-five awareness was actually high — the company's shows were well known locally. The drop was in conversion: young people knew the shows and did not buy. Interviews with twenty lapsed attenders found the mechanism plainly: ticket prices were assumed to be high, the booking site hid the under-thirty discount until the final screen, and no one in their friendship groups went first, so no one went at all. The problem was comprehension and advocacy, not awareness. Her strategy paragraph proposed shifting price perception with proof — the real discount price in the first line of every listing — and building first-mover advocacy through a bring-a-friend scheme carried by past young attenders' own voices. The social content served that strategy; it was not the strategy. Sales to the target group recovered within two productions, and Hannah's diagnosis file — not the posts — is what the board asked to see again the following season.

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Common Mistakes

- **Accepting the brief's diagnosis as fact.** Briefs describe symptoms in the language of whoever is most frustrated. Your first job is to verify what the problem actually is.
- **Calling a calendar a strategy.** A list of activities with dates is a plan of tactics. Strategy is the reasoned choice those tactics serve — publics, shifts, mechanism, exclusions.
- **Treating every problem as awareness.** Awareness is the easiest problem to spend money on and the least common real obstacle. Test comprehension, trust, and advocacy before buying reach.
- **Hiding the internal finding.** When the obstacle is the organisation's own behaviour, communicating harder makes it worse. Counsel means bringing that evidence into the room.
- **A strategy anyone could claim.** If the paragraph fits every competitor unchanged, it chooses nothing. Specificity — to your publics, your proof, your situation — is what makes it strategy.

Lesson 2 — Research, Insight, and Positioning: Earn the Right to Have a Message

In the foundations course, messages were built from what the organisation knew about itself. At this level, messages are built from what research shows about the world: what publics actually believe, what the environment is actually doing, and where the organisation can honestly stand that others cannot. This lesson covers the three research instruments of the senior practitioner and the positioning platform they exist to produce.

The first instrument is the communication audit: a structured review of everything the organisation currently says and does communicatively. Gather a period's releases, posts, speeches, web pages, sales materials, and internal announcements, and read them as a stranger would. Note the claims made, the audiences addressed, the tone, and — critically — the contradictions. Most organisations are startled by their audit: the website promises what the sales deck qualifies, the chief executive's interviews describe a different company from the recruitment page, and three departments run three vocabularies for the same service. The audit's product is not blame. It is a map of the gap between the organisation's intended story and its actual emitted story, which is the only story publics ever receive.

The second instrument is perception research: finding out what key publics actually think, in their own words. At this level you combine methods honestly within your means. Depth interviews with a dozen well-chosen stakeholders reveal language, reasoning, and emotion that surveys cannot. A short, well-built survey of a defined audience gives you proportions and a baseline you can repeat. Listening work — reviews, community forums, front-line logs, media framing — shows what is said when you are not in the room. The discipline is in the interpretation: an insight is not a finding. A finding says "residents mention parking in 40 percent of comments." An insight explains the belief underneath: "residents experience the development as something done to them, not with them — parking is where that feeling becomes concrete." Insights, not findings, are what positioning is built from, because insights name the belief your

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communication must actually move.

The third instrument is environment scanning: the systematic watching of the world your reputation lives in — regulatory movement, competitor positioning, media agendas, cultural shifts, emerging critics and allies. Scanning is a rhythm, not a project: a short, regular review, recorded, with implications noted. Its purpose is to ensure the organisation is never surprised by a conversation it should have seen forming, and to spot the open ground — the subject your publics care about, that fits your proof, that no credible voice yet owns.

From these three instruments you build the positioning platform: the single organising idea that every future message must support. A strong position has four properties. It is relevant — it answers a belief or need research shows is real. It is distinctive — competitors cannot claim it with equal truth. It is provable — the organisation can demonstrate it with evidence and behaviour, repeatedly, not just assert it. And it is durable — it will still make sense in three years, across campaigns and crises. Under the core position sit proof points, the verified facts and stories that demonstrate it, and message houses for each priority public that translate the position into their language without changing its meaning. Positioning is slow to build and must then be defended — against every internal request for an announcement that contradicts it, every fashionable topic that dilutes it, every shortcut that claims it without proof. That defence, repeated calmly for years, is what turns a sentence into a reputation.

The Steps

1. Run a communication audit: collect a defined period of external and internal materials, read them as a stranger, and log every claim, audience, and contradiction.
2. Design perception research proportionate to your means: depth interviews for reasoning and language, a repeatable survey for baselines, listening sources for unfiltered views.
3. Separate findings from insights in writing. For each major finding, ask "what belief produces this?" until you reach a statement about what people think and why.
4. Scan the environment on a fixed rhythm: regulation, competitors, media agendas, critics, allies. Record implications, not just events.
5. Draft candidate positions and test each against the four properties: relevant, distinctive, provable, durable. Discard any that fail provability, however attractive.
6. Build the platform: core position, three to five verified proof points, and a message house per priority public translating — never altering — the position.
7. Socialise the platform with leadership as a commitment, not a slogan: agree what the organisation will do, and stop doing, to make it true.
8. Review the platform annually against fresh research, and defend it in between against dilution and contradiction.

A Worked Example

A mid-sized accountancy firm asked its communications lead, Robert, to "refresh the brand message" before a recruitment drive. His audit found the emitted story in pieces: the website

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sold entrepreneurial energy, the partners' articles sold caution and heritage, and recruitment materials sold neither — they listed benefits. Perception interviews with recently hired staff and, more valuably, with candidates who had declined offers, produced the insight: strong candidates believed the firm would train them well and then narrow them — "a good place to become a smaller version of yourself" was the phrase that recurred. The firm's real, provable difference was that its partners had built unusually varied practices, and juniors rotated across sectors longer than at rival firms. The position Robert built — the firm where you become a broader accountant, not a narrower one — was relevant to the exact belief blocking recruitment, distinctive against rivals' claims, provable in rotation records and partner histories, and durable across campaigns. The recruitment drive was rebuilt on it, and offer-acceptance among target candidates rose over the following year. Note the order: no message was written until research had found the belief, and the position was chosen because it was true in a way competitors could not copy by lunchtime.

Common Mistakes

- **Research as decoration.** Commissioning findings to support a decision already made produces reports nobody can use. Research that cannot change the plan is theatre.
- **Mistaking findings for insights.** Percentages describe; beliefs explain. Positioning built on findings alone produces messages that are accurate and unmoving.
- **Positioning by assertion.** A position the organisation cannot prove in behaviour is a loan taken against reputation, and it is always called in.
- **Letting every campaign invent its own story.** Without a defended platform, each announcement optimises itself and the organisation's total story dissolves into noise.
- **Scanning once.** An environment review done at planning time and never repeated is a photograph presented as a film. Reputation threats form between annual plans.

Lesson 3 — Campaign Architecture: Integrated, Sequenced, and Resourced Like It Matters

A foundation campaign answers seven questions on two pages. A senior campaign is an architecture: a structure designed to bear weight over months, across channels, through setbacks, with each part reinforcing the others. This lesson teaches that architecture — how integrated campaigns are designed, sequenced, and resourced so that the whole persuades in a way no single tactic can.

Integration starts from a hard truth about how people actually encounter organisations: not in channels, but in life. A resident hears a radio interview, sees a neighbour's post, receives a letter, and talks to a member of staff, in no order you control. If those encounters contradict each other — different figures, different promises, different tones — the audience does not average them. They believe the worst one and discount the rest. Integration is therefore not a branding exercise in matching colours. It is the discipline of one position, one set of verified facts, and one story, expressed appropriately in each channel's native form. The modern shorthand divides channels into paid (advertising, sponsorship), earned (news coverage, independent

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commentary), shared (social platforms, community spaces), and owned (your website, your publications, your events, your premises). Senior design uses all four deliberately: owned channels carry the full proof, earned channels carry independent credibility, shared channels carry conversation and correction, and paid channels carry precise reach to publics the others cannot reliably find. Each channel is assigned the job it is genuinely best at — and no channel is asked to do a job it is bad at, such as using social posts to carry complex corrective detail that belongs in an owned, linkable, permanent page.

Sequencing is the second architectural skill. Campaigns unfold in phases because audiences must be moved in order: insiders before outsiders, affected before interested, understanding before action. A typical architecture runs: a foundation phase, where proof is built and owned materials are made ready; an insider phase, where staff, partners, and directly affected publics are briefed and genuinely consulted; a launch phase, where earned and paid activity create the public moment; a sustain phase, where stories, data releases, and community voices keep the position alive without repeating the launch; and a conversion phase, where the call to action is pressed while attention and trust are warm. Each phase has its own objective and its own success measure, and the plan states in advance what evidence would trigger moving on, pausing, or stopping. Amateurs launch everything on day one and have nothing left for week three. Architects hold material in reserve on purpose.

Resourcing is where architecture meets honesty. Every campaign plan at this level carries a full resource picture: money by phase, staff time by name, leadership time — the scarcest resource in most organisations — approval routes with realistic turnaround, and the dependencies on other teams, named with owners and dates. It also carries a risk register for the campaign itself: the three most likely ways this campaign could damage reputation while trying to build it, with mitigations. Finally, it carries the kill criteria: the conditions under which the campaign stops, agreed in advance while everyone is calm. A campaign that cannot be stopped cannot be governed, and ungoverned campaigns are how organisations end up defending, in month four, an idea that stopped being true in month two.

The Steps

1. Write the campaign's single position and verified fact set first. Every channel plan must draw from this one source; nothing is invented per channel.
2. Assign each channel family its proper job: owned for full proof and permanence, earned for independent credibility, shared for conversation and correction, paid for precise reach.
3. Design the phases — foundation, insider, launch, sustain, conversion — each with its own objective, audiences in order, and success measure.
4. Build a content reserve: hold back stories, data, and voices for the sustain phase instead of spending everything at launch.
5. Resource honestly: budget by phase, staff and leadership time by name, approval routes with turnaround times, dependencies with owners and dates.
6. Write the campaign risk register: the three most likely reputational harms the campaign itself could cause, with a mitigation for each.

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7. Agree kill criteria and pause triggers in advance, in writing, with the person authorised to invoke them.

8. Run a pre-launch contradiction check: read every channel's materials side by side and hunt for differing figures, promises, or tones. Fix before launch, not after a screenshot.

A Worked Example

A city-wide charity coalition, advised by communications consultant Fatima, planned a six-month campaign to increase regular monthly giving. The foundation architecture began with proof: the coalition built one owned page carrying audited figures on what a monthly gift does, verified once and used everywhere. Insider phase came first in the sequence — the twelve member charities' own staff and volunteers were briefed and asked for objections, which surfaced a real one: two charities' materials used different figures for the same programme, corrected before any public step. Launch used earned media — an independent report on local giving patterns, with the coalition's data offered as evidence — supported by tightly targeted paid placements aimed at past one-off donors, the public research showed was most movable. The sustain phase released a new verified story each month from the reserve Fatima had insisted on building, and shared channels were staffed daily for questions and corrections, with complex answers always linked back to the owned proof page. Conversion pushes ran only in months two and five, while trust was warm. Regular givers across the coalition rose substantially over the six months, and — the architectural point — when a critical article questioned one charity's costs in month four, every channel's figures already agreed, the correction was a link rather than an argument, and the campaign absorbed the blow without pausing. Integration was not the aesthetic. It was the armour.

Common Mistakes

- **Channel-first planning.** "We need to be on this platform" is not a reason. Channels earn their place by doing a defined job for a defined public.
- **Spending everything at launch.** A campaign with no reserve is a firework: bright, brief, and followed by darkness. Sequence and hold material back deliberately.
- **Letting channels drift apart.** Different teams producing different figures and promises is the most common and most preventable integration failure. One fact source, enforced.
- **Invisible resourcing.** Plans that omit leadership time, approval delays, and other teams' dependencies fail on schedule while looking sound on paper.
- **No kill criteria.** Without pre-agreed stopping conditions, sunk cost and pride keep failing campaigns alive until they damage the reputation they were built to grow.

Lesson 4 — Issues, Risk, and Crisis Leadership: The Work Before the Worst Day, and During It

Foundation PR teaches you to write a statement under pressure. Senior PR teaches you to make sure the organisation is rarely surprised, acts rightly when it is, and recovers stronger. This lesson covers the full arc: issues management before trouble, risk assessment as a

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standing discipline, crisis leadership during the event, and recovery afterward — the phase most organisations abandon and the one reputation is actually decided in.

An issue is a developing matter — a trend, a dispute, a regulatory direction, a grievance gathering voices — that could affect the organisation's reputation or freedom to operate if it matures. Issues management is the standing practice of spotting issues early, when they are still cheap to address. Maintain an issues register: each issue named in neutral language, its current stage, the publics forming around it, the evidence of movement, the organisation's honest exposure — including where the critics have a point — and the options, ranging from monitoring, to engaging, to changing policy while change still looks like leadership rather than surrender. Review the register with leadership on a rhythm. The strategic insight is that the cheapest crisis is the one converted, early, into a policy improvement and a story about listening. The most expensive is the one the register recorded and nobody acted on, which is why the register must name an owner and a next-review date for every issue, without exception.

Risk assessment sharpens this. For each significant issue, judge likelihood and impact separately, and resist the human habit of downgrading likelihood because impact is frightening. Map the organisation's genuine vulnerabilities — the places where behaviour, history, or record-keeping would not survive fair scrutiny — because a crisis almost never invents a weakness; it illuminates one. Preparation then follows the map: holding statements drafted for the top scenarios, facts assembled in advance, spokespersons identified and media-trained, decision rights agreed for out-of-hours moments, and a dark site or holding page ready to activate. None of this is pessimism. It is the same professionalism as a fire drill, and it is judged the same way on the day.

When a crisis comes, senior communication leadership has three simultaneous jobs, and only one of them is communication. The first is to be in the decision room, ensuring the operational response itself is right — because in a crisis, actions are the message, and no statement can outrun a wrong action repeated daily. The second is stakeholder sequencing under pressure: affected people and their families first, staff second, regulators and partners directly, media as the channel to everyone else — never the reverse, because people who learn of their own harm from a broadcast do not forgive the organisation that allowed it. The third is the information discipline: one log of verified facts with times, statements built only from that log, update appointments made and kept, speculation refused in public and in private briefings alike. And throughout, the senior practitioner protects the long view in a room full of short-term pressure: asking what this decision will look like in the inquiry, the documentary, the anniversary story — because it will be seen there, and the organisation will still be living with it then.

Recovery begins when the cameras leave, which is exactly when most organisations stop communicating. Recovery work includes delivering every promise made during the crisis, on the record, with dates; publishing what was learned and what has changed, before any anniversary forces it; re-engaging the publics most affected and listening without defensiveness; and rebuilding the issues register with the crisis's lessons entered as standing practice. Handled this way, a crisis can leave reputation higher than it found it — not because the failure is forgotten, but because the response demonstrated, under the harshest light, what the organisation

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actually is. That outcome is never an accident. It is counsel-level work, prepared long before the worst day.

The Steps

1. Create an issues register: each developing issue in neutral language, its stage, forming publics, evidence of movement, your honest exposure, and options from monitoring to policy change.
2. Give every issue a named owner and a next-review date. Review the register with leadership on a fixed rhythm.
3. Assess likelihood and impact separately for each major issue, and list the genuine vulnerabilities a crisis would illuminate.
4. Prepare the top scenarios in advance: holding statements, pre-assembled verified facts, trained spokespeople, out-of-hours decision rights, a holding page ready to activate.
5. In a crisis, take your seat in the decision room: your first responsibility is that the operational response itself is right, because actions are the message.
6. Sequence stakeholders strictly: affected people and families, then staff, then regulators and partners directly, then media.
7. Run one verified-fact log with times. Build every statement from it, refuse speculation, and keep every update appointment.
8. Afterward, deliver and publicly track every crisis promise, publish lessons and changes before anniversaries force it, and fold the lessons into the register as standing practice.

A Worked Example

A passenger transport operator's PR director, Colin, maintained an issues register whose top entry for two years had been an ageing ticket-system supplier: failures were rising, the supplier's finances were questioned in trade press, and front-line staff were absorbing passenger anger. Because the register named the exposure honestly — including that the operator had twice deferred replacement on cost grounds — leadership had pre-approved a migration fund, pre-drafted passenger communications, and pre-agreed that if the supplier failed, the operator would honour all tickets and say so within the hour. When the supplier collapsed on a Friday evening, Colin's team activated rather than improvised: affected passengers received direct messages before the Saturday news bulletins, staff had their briefing and a one-page fact log by start of service, and the first public statement led with the ticket guarantee and the migration already funded. Coverage focused on the orderly response; the deferred-replacement history, which Colin disclosed himself in the second-day briefing with the corrective now funded, appeared as context rather than revelation. The crisis still cost money and a hard weekend. What it did not cost was trust — because two years of unglamorous register-keeping had converted a potential ambush into a rehearsed response.

Common Mistakes

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- **A register nobody reviews.** An issues list without owners, dates, and leadership rhythm is a diary of future regrets. The discipline is the review, not the document.
- **Downgrading likelihood because impact is scary.** "It would be terrible, so it probably won't happen" is not assessment. Judge the two scales separately, in writing.
- **Communicating around a wrong action.** If the operational response is unjust or incompetent, your job in the room is to change the action. Statements cannot carry that weight.
- **Informing media before affected people.** The sequence is an ethical line, not a preference. People must never learn of their own harm from a broadcast.
- **Declaring the crisis over at the last headline.** Promises unkept in month three become the second crisis, and this one is about character. Recovery is tracked, public, and finished.

Lesson 5 — Measurement, Evaluation, and Counsel: Proving Value and Advising Power

The final lesson joins the two skills that decide whether a senior practitioner thrives: proving, in leadership's own language, that communication changed something worth money or mission — and advising leadership honestly enough to be trusted with the next decision. Measurement without counsel produces reports nobody acts on. Counsel without measurement produces opinions nobody funds. Together, they are the senior role.

Build measurement as a framework, not a pile of clippings. The mature model follows the chain you first met in the foundations course and extends it. Inputs are what you invested: budget, time, senior attention. Activities are what you did. Outputs are what reached the world: coverage, content, events, with their quality assessed — was the coverage in the outlets your publics trust, carrying your proof points, with your spokesperson quoted, or merely mentioning your name? Outtakes are what publics took in and retained: awareness shifts, message recall, understanding measured by survey or interview. Outcomes are behaviour: applications, donations, bookings, policy movement, reduced complaint volume, changed stakeholder positions. Impact is the organisational value of those outcomes: revenue protected or earned, costs avoided, mission advanced, risk reduced. Senior reporting walks leadership up that chain explicitly, states which links are strongly evidenced and which are inferred, and never lets a lower link impersonate a higher one. A folder of warm coverage is outputs. A rise in qualified applications traced to the campaign period, against a recorded baseline and a comparison the finance team accepts, is an outcome with impact — and it is reported in the finance team's language, with the method stated and the limitations named. Paradoxically, naming limitations increases belief. Leadership trusts the practitioner whose reports contain the sentence "this we cannot attribute, and here is why" far more than the one whose every campaign succeeds completely.

Set the framework before activity, with baselines recorded and targets agreed with the same leaders who will judge the results — targets negotiated afterward are fiction. Choose few measures and honour them for long enough to learn: a dashboard of six to eight indicators,

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reviewed on a rhythm, beats forty metrics reviewed never. Include at least one trust or reputation measure gathered independently of your own channels — a repeated survey question, stakeholder interviews by a third party, complaint and compliment ratios — because measuring your reputation using only your own applause is the senior version of marking your own homework.

Then, counsel. Counsel is the disciplined act of giving leadership your honest professional judgment, with evidence, in time for it to matter, in a form it can use. Its rules are learnable. Be early: advice delivered after the decision is commentary. Be brief in the room and deep in the appendix: leaders buy the paragraph and trust the file beneath it. Separate what you know, what you infer, and what you merely fear — and label each. Bring options with consequences, not a single recommendation wrapped in pressure, except on the rare ethical line where one option is the only defensible one, in which case say so plainly and accept the weight of saying it. Never surprise your own leadership in public, never brief against a decision externally once it is lawfully made, and never let a leader learn from a reporter that you disagreed. Discretion and loyalty are the price of the room; honesty inside the room is what you buy with them. Finally, keep a counsel log — dated notes of advice given and decisions taken. It protects the organisation's learning, and on the hard days, it protects the truth about who advised what.

This is where the second course ends: with the practitioner as a steward of trust in both directions — carrying the publics' reality to leadership, and leadership's decisions to the publics, honestly in both directions, with evidence. That stewardship, practised for years, is the whole of senior public relations. Everything else is technique.

The Steps

1. Build your measurement framework across the full chain — inputs, activities, outputs, outtakes, outcomes, impact — and define each link for your organisation in writing.
2. Record baselines and agree targets with leadership before activity begins. Targets set afterward do not count.
3. Assess output quality, not just quantity: right outlets, proof points carried, spokesperson presence, tone, and prominence.
4. Measure outcomes from operational records — applications, donations, bookings, complaints — and state your attribution method and its limits in every report.
5. Include at least one independent reputation measure, gathered outside your own channels, repeated on a rhythm.
6. Report to leadership in their language — mission, money, risk — walking up the chain and labelling strong evidence versus inference.
7. Practise counsel by its rules: early, brief in the room with depth beneath, knowing labelled from inference and fear, options with consequences.
8. Keep a dated counsel log of advice given and decisions taken, and review it when outcomes arrive to sharpen your own judgment.

A Worked Example

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When a university's communications director, Simone, presented her annual report, she refused the traditional reel of coverage highlights. Her report opened with the chain. Inputs: a team of four and a stated budget. Outputs, honestly graded: strong coverage in the two outlets prospective postgraduates actually trusted, weak presence in a third the university had historically overvalued. Outtakes: aided awareness of the university's research strength up measurably in its target regions, on a repeated survey she had baselined two years earlier. Outcomes: postgraduate applications from those regions up by a figure she presented alongside the admissions team's own analysis, with the shared caveat — stated by her, before anyone asked — that a new scholarship scheme accounted for part of the rise and the split could not be exactly known. Impact: the application rise valued conservatively with the finance office's method, set against her full costs. Then she used the trust that honesty had bought. Her counsel item, delivered in one paragraph with a file beneath it, advised against the planned announcement of a campus expansion until the planning consultation closed — because announcing early would confirm the exact community suspicion her research had identified, and the cost would land in the following year's outtake figures. The vice-chancellor delayed the announcement. Simone's report is remembered in that institution not for its numbers but for its sentence about what could not be attributed — the moment leadership decided her numbers, and her judgment, could both be believed.

Common Mistakes

- **Reporting applause as impact.** Coverage volume and follower counts are outputs. Presenting them as organisational value teaches leadership to discount everything else you report.
- **Baselines after the fact.** Reconstructing a starting point from memory converts measurement into storytelling. Record baselines before activity, or label the work unmeasured.
- **Hiding attribution limits.** Claiming sole credit for changes that had several causes is discovered eventually, usually by finance. Stating limits first is what makes the rest believable.
- **Counsel delivered too late.** Advice that arrives after the decision protects your conscience, not the organisation. Earliness is a professional obligation, not a style.
- **Disagreeing in public.** The practitioner who briefs against a lawful decision externally has traded the room for a headline, once. Loyalty outside, honesty inside — both, always.

Try It

Take a campaign or programme you know well — one you ran, supported, or can reconstruct honestly — and rebuild it at counsel level. First, write the one-paragraph strategy statement from Lesson 1: situation as evidence shows it, priority publics, the shift sought in each, the mechanism, and what you deliberately did not do. Second, draft the positioning test: state the position the work assumed, and score it against the four properties — relevant, distinctive, provable, durable — citing the proof or admitting the gap for each. Third, draw the measurement chain for the work across all six links, from inputs to impact, filling each link only with evidence

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you actually have and marking every gap plainly as unmeasured.

Finish with a one-page counsel memo to a named senior leader about a real decision connected to the work: your recommendation in the first three lines, what you know, what you infer, and what you fear in three labelled sections, and two options with their consequences. Read the whole file once as if you were the leader receiving it. If any claim in it could not survive a finance director's question or a reporter's, rewrite it until it can. That file — strategy, position, honest measurement, and counsel in usable form — is the working portfolio of a senior practitioner, and the standard your next real campaign should be planned to.

Fortress shares what I learned, not professional advice. General info only, not legal / HR / financial advice.

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