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Thought leaders shine light on women's experiences, challenges in public relations profession

Rethinking the Table: Women Leaders in Public Relations in Canada

shares progress, barriers to equity in PR profession

Calgary, AB: Two of Canada's leading public relations experts released their new book, *Rethinking the Table: Women Leaders in Public Relations in Canada* at the Canadian Public Relations Society (CPRS) conference in Banff, AB this week, where the co-authors both received the 2025 CPRS Thought Leader of the Year award. The non-fiction work shares the stories of Canadian female PR leaders and their professional journeys, reflecting on their struggles to find balance between work and life, and the ways in which they confronted the barriers they encountered along the way.

Based on the authors' original research, the *PR Profession, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion* study conducted by Leger in 2021, and the 2024 *Women in Leadership roles in Canadian Public Relations/Communications Management: "You've (almost) come a long way, baby"* capstone research project by Nicolle Wahl, MCM., the book offers a window into the state of the profession in Canada, the progress made and the barriers that continue to limit full equity for women in the profession.

A collection of personal narratives and survey results, the book looks at leadership in the workplace, including the impacts of technology, equity, diversity and inclusion, leadership identity, work-life balance and mentorship, role modelling and championing. Further, it examines opportunities to earn a seat at the boardroom table, being an active participant in decision-making and factors that lead to success. Finally, it offers recommendations on how to level the playing field, and to support emerging leaders.

"When we sat down to write this book, we were excited about the potential of this project to create space for women to share their experiences and for Canadian PR practitioners to collectively describe the state of the profession from a perspective of their intersectional identities," noted co-author Amy Thurlow. "Throughout the process we were humbled and inspired by the willingness of those who participated in this journey with us to share their stories."

Co-author Colleen Killingsworth, added, "As we reflected on the narratives we gathered, it became increasingly clear that the public relations profession is at a pivotal moment in its history. Women have long been central to the development and evolution of this field, yet their experiences are still marked by significant challenges—many of which are compounded by intersectional factors including race, age, gender, and more."

Five key findings:

- The research found that despite forming 70 per cent of the public relations work force, women only occupy 30 per cent of senior-level leadership positions in the industry.

- There is an ongoing disparity where pay inequity remains an issue and women continue to struggle to reach the dominant coalition.
- Concerns exist about the disproportionate impact that advances in AI may have on women in public relations due to historical data used to train AI systems, which may reflect existing gender biases.
- While there are many women in the field, the “Old Boys network” remains influential.
- Balancing work and personal life continues to be a significant challenge for many women in leadership roles.

The authors concluded while women have made strides in obtaining leadership positions, particularly in mid-tier management, the C-suite remains a glaring gap. They emphasized the importance of mentorship, sponsorship, and the creation of pathways for younger women to see themselves as future leaders. Their work highlighted the need for a more inclusive and supportive work environment - it is not enough to have women in leadership positions if the structures that support their success are not reimaged. The relentless expectation of being available 24/7 is not just unsustainable; it is a model that disproportionately affects women, who are often still tasked with additional caregiving responsibilities outside of their professional roles.

“Ultimately, the goal of this project—and of the ongoing work that will follow—is to ensure that the future of PR is a place where women’s leadership is celebrated, supported, and empowered, and where diversity and inclusion are the cornerstones of progress and innovation,” added Killingsworth. “Let’s keep the conversation going!”

Rethinking the Table: Women Leaders in Public Relations in Canada is available via Amazon.ca.

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About the authors:

Colleen Killingsworth, MCM, APR, Fellow CPRS

Co-author

Colleen brings her perspectives from more than 30 years of experience in public relations and communications management leadership to this project. She has a strong track record in leadership, collaboration, successfully managing complex, transformational projects, and quickly earning the

confidence and support of internal and external stakeholders. She has worked in the health care, energy, education, municipal government, travel and tourism, and transportation sectors.

She is an accredited communications professional and a member of the CPRS College of Fellows. Career highlights include leading the University of Calgary's participation in the Royal Visit to the University of Calgary; serving as president of the Canadian Centre for Energy Information; providing change management support and mentorship for the people side of change for a major oil and gas company's consolidation of its Calgary workforce (1,700 people) from five locations to one; and serving as a two-term National President of the Canadian Public Relations Society. Colleen is a sessional instructor in the McMaster Master of Communications Management (MCM) program, and an instructor in the Public Relations and Communications Management Extension Certificate Program at Mount Royal University in Calgary.

She holds a Master of Communications Management from McMaster University, and a Bachelor of Arts in Journalism from the University of Nevada, Reno. Her work has won local, national and international awards. In 2011 she was awarded the Philip A. Novikoff Memorial Award from the Canadian Public Relations Society (CPRS) for superior and outstanding service over time as a public relations professional. In 2013, she was named one of Canada's top PR Influencers in a CPRS and Cision Canada survey, "A Day in the Life of PR." In 2018, Colleen was recognized by the CPRS with the Lamp of Service for co-leading the work in shaping the future of the Society. The roll out of the new Strategic Framework generated the most collaboration and engagement in CPRS's history. Most recently, Colleen was awarded the 2025 CPRS Thought Leader Award, alongside her co-author, Amy Thurlow.

Colleen would like to acknowledge her parents (Ben and Dee) and husband (Lee Farquharson) for being her role models for integrity, humility, and a strong work ethic. They inspired her love for travel and adventure and instilled in her that she could do anything she put her mind to. They always created the space for her to shine. With an open mind and can-do attitude, she continues to be presented with experiences she could never have imagined.

Amy Thurlow, Ph.D., APR, Fellow CPRS

Co-author

Amy is Professor of Communication at Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, Canada. Her research is motivated by a curiosity about how humans socially construct and enact organization through processes of identity construction. Her recent work includes historical constructions of identity and the alternative histories often ignored in that process. Her 2019 book, *Social Media, Organizational Identity and Public Relations: The Challenge of Authenticity*, investigates identity construction in a virtual context. Her most recent book, *Diversity and Business Storytelling* (2023), is a collection of works exploring diversity in organizations from a variety of perspectives, co-edited with Dr. Jean Helms Mills.

Among other courses, Amy teaches Strategic Public Relations in the Master of Public Relations program, as well as the Foundations of Public Relations course in the Bachelor of Public Relations degree program, both at MSVU. She has been teaching for the past two decades and previously worked in public relations as a communications officer in the international development and health care sectors. She is an

accredited public relations practitioner and a member of the Canadian Public Relations Society College of Fellows. Amy was recently awarded the 2025 CPRS Thought Leader Award, alongside her co-author, Colleen Killingsworth.

Amy would like to acknowledge her gratitude to her husband, Paul Card, and their children, Owen and Mirissa, for their unwavering love and patience as she navigates the challenges of work-life balance as a woman in public relations.

Nicolle Wahl, MCM

Contributor

As fate would have it, at the time the authors began their journey to research and write this book, Colleen was serving as Nicolle's Master of Communication Management (MCM) capstone advisor. She has graciously agreed to contribute many of her research findings from her capstone project *Women in Leadership Roles in Canadian Public Relations/Communication Management: "You've (almost) come a long way, baby"* to this project.

Nicolle is an award-winning marketing and communications professional with more than two decades of experience in the higher education field at the University of Toronto and Sheridan College. She completed her master's in communications management from McMaster University in August, 2024 as the 200th graduate of the program.

Nicolle wishes to acknowledge the unwavering love and support of her family, particularly her husband Andrew, her children Meghan and Erik, and her parents Larry and Marianne Charbonneau.