



Ethics & Professionalism in Public Relations

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Define ethics and morality
- ✓ Discuss the Obligations of a Public Relations Practitioner

Ethics & Professionalism in Public Relations

Definitions of Ethics and Morality

Previously, we briefly highlighted why ethics and moral are important in PR. We will now proceed to provide extended clarification on other aspects of these topics.

Definition: *Morals are personal values or principles that guide behaviour. Ethics are systematic frameworks which codify moral principles. Values are those factors that are important to the individual, e.g. fairness, truth, honesty, acquiring wealth, having status.*

Some people get confused about the meaning of “moral” and “ethics” as they are often used interchangeably. But these two terms are indeed different in meaning. Morals are an individual’s knowledge of what is “good” and what is “bad”. Morals are personal values unique to each person with each having his or her “moral code”. Ethics involve translating moral principles into systematic rules to help people know whether they are making the wrong decision or the right one. For example, laws on theft or murder are based on moral principles.

According to Trevino and Nelson (2004), moral codes influence business ethics. They reasoned that organisation’s ethical decision-making process consist of three steps:

- Moral awareness (understanding that there is an ethical dilemma)
- Moral judgement (deciding on what is right)
- Ethical behaviour (doing the right thing)

Bothe individuals and organisations’ characteristics influence all of the three steps mentioned above.

According to McElreath (1997), ethics is actually about knowing what is good and what is bad and not just knowing what is right and wrong. McElreath asserts Don Wright’s view that ethics really has to do with understanding what “a good action is” and deciding to be good by doing “what is good”. A good action could entail being honest or truthful. Aristotle is believed to have said that “people become virtuous by practising virtue”. In other words, one becomes good by ‘doing good’. Knowledge of ethics helps to systematically assess situations and promotes consistent behaviour and response to situations. People value PR practitioners who are consistent when building relationships with them.

Ethical decision-making ensures transparency and fairness to stakeholders and makes them confident of your approach to work.

Ethics in Public Relations

PR is now a very important tool used by managements of organisations for effective decision-making, as well as, to influence public policies. But the road taken by PR to reach its current status was not an easy one but it was fraught with many difficulties. The success of PR can be attributed to the following:

- Provision of right of expression and freedom of information
- Globalisation leading to opening up of previously closed societies
- Advances in telecommunication and transportation
- PR has been used and promoted by governments
- Global economic growth made it possible for PR to be adopted by diverse societies

We now turn our attention to the ethics of professionalism in PR.

Unethical Practices in PR

During the early stages of the development of PR, many press agents working under the guise of PR practitioners were known to have used unethical practices to achieve their selfish goals in the name of PR. The image of PR suffered severe blows and as a result PR got labelled as 'white-washing tool' or as 'propaganda tool' or as 'sugar-coating tool' and many other negative attributes.

What is regarded as ethical or not ethical is not that straightforward to many people, but it can be explained by saying: anything that troubles one's conscience and brings about guilty and dishonest feelings is unethical. It is choosing between what is good and what is bad. One cannot expect to use dishonest communication to build good relationships. Abraham Lincoln, the former President of USA, cautioned that it is not possible to fool all people all to the time. So, PR practitioners should be careful how they deal with the public in matters of ethics. You may want ask yourself this question: Is it alright to use your talent to promote an idea that you strongly believe is wrong? It is now widely accepted and proven that smoking is hazardous to people's health but the question is: would you promote smoking of cigarette knowing the effect? These are tough questions you face in many situations of work. You need to be absolutely convinced about what you do before you can persuade other to your cause.

Unethical acts include the following:

- Suppressing unfavourable news
- Misrepresenting facts
- Promising results that cannot be realised
- Misleading people to serve ulterior motives
- Un-legating a competitor

These unethical acts show that PR is also open to abuse by practitioners just like other professions. The misconception that PR can be used to undo a wrong is a fallacy that has to be discontinued because PR cannot undo or alter wrong actions.

Successful PR campaigns are based on ethical policies and truthful practices. There is no justification to use false or destructive means to accomplish PR objectives. PR cannot be used to cover wrong doing or underperformance. For example, one cannot use PR tools to stop public displeasure at environmental contamination with chemical effluent or to improve the reputation of a public company which

consistently renders poor services to the public. To steer clear of trouble, it is best to use PR in an ethical and honest way always to build a good reputation.

Obligations of Public Relations Practitioner

Conflicting loyalties and duties can bring about dilemmas for PR practitioners. Four categories of duties of the PR practitioner have been identified by Seib and Fitzpatrick (1998), these include:

i. **Duty to self**

It is important as a first step for practitioners to consider their own personal codes of ethics when deciding which organisation to work for or what role they wish to undertake as a PR practitioner.

ii. **Duty to client organisation**

PR practitioners believe that they are under obligation to render a service to an organisation because they are being paid even though what they defend may be against their personal code of ethics. In their minds, they see themselves in similar position as a lawyer who is representing a client. But there is a big difference. In the legal world, clients have the right to be represented by lawyers even though the lawyer may not condone or agree with the beliefs or acts of the client because the law requires it. Organisations do not enjoy this same right and besides there are no judges to arbitrate during a public PR debate between the public and the organisation. Due to some organisations being well-resourced, the PR practitioner may be paid to try and defend the indefensible or even to suppress information on behalf of the company or simply to defend controversial action taken by the company. However, not all PR practitioners may bow to the pressure to suppress information on behalf of an organisation. Some actually inform the public about the full facts of the case to encourage proper debate and to promote democracy by equipping citizens with full information to make informed decisions. It is a matter of making persuasive appeal to the public to win their support for your views. PR Practitioners working for companies should be guided by their wider duties to society which should overrule defending harmful activities of organisations they work for.

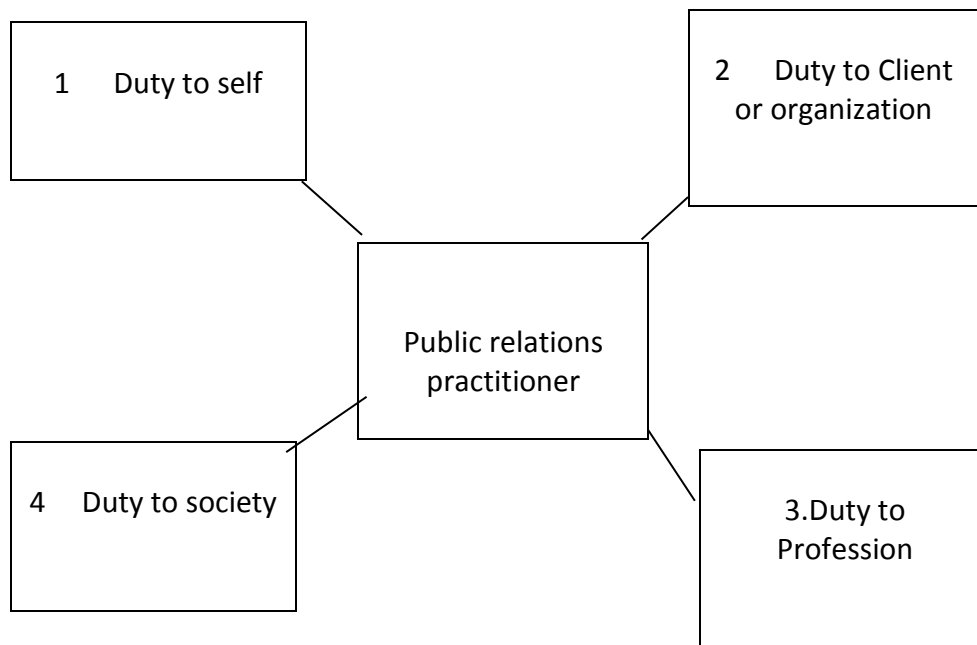


FIGURE 12.1 Loyalties and duties of practice (source: based on Seib and Fitzpatrick 1995)

iii. Duty to profession

The PR practitioner has a duty to support his colleagues and the success of his profession. This is achieved with the help of the professional code of conduct, which lists the principles of ethical practice for all PR practitioners. This code of practice guides both the practitioner and his/her employer about the limit within which they are to operate and which battles they can ethically choose to fight. Most organisations tend to encourage membership of professional bodies while others prescribe a code of conduct for their employees to follow.

iv. Duty society

The highest duty of a PR practitioner is not to his employer but to the society. For this reason, the PR code of conduct clearly states that 'the practitioner's primary role or responsibility is to society or the public interest'. But society and public interests are diverse, so, how can one identify which subset of society should be considered and which one should be ignored? Or what is of interest to the public? Clearly, there appear to be many conflicting interest at play here. But these questions are best answered by having a well-informed discussion with the public to understand their opinions about issues in an effort to meet the public interest through dialogue. Another guiding rule is to ask if your action will contribute to the good of society or it will be harmful to people.

Ethical issues in Public Relations

The conflicting duties of the PR practitioner can present a lot of problems in certain areas for them. We will now examine some of these areas which may lead to potential problems below.

Competency

There are concerns about practises of malfeasance and incompetence in some workplaces. In the case of malfeasance, people tend to provide services that are not required to be provided. For instance, a PR practitioner undertaking programmes which will yield absolutely no benefit or a dentist removing a healthy tooth may constitute malfeasance. When money is on offer, making the right or ethical decision becomes a challenge for some.

Incompetence on the other hand is performing work which the practitioner is not qualified to do to the highest standard required. Again, the motivation for incompetency is linked to the quest for financial gain. In the UK, the CIPR Code of Conduct states that only work within the competency of the practitioner should be accepted by the practitioner. There are three elements that can be used to identify competency:

- Ensure your skills match the job to be done
- Update your knowledge, skills, and expertise frequently
- Do not give employers or client the impression you can guarantee specific results

The last point had to do with overpromising due to having unrealistic view about your capability and also out of desperation to win and keep employment opportunities. Overpromising is quite widely spread PR practice and is generally unacceptable.

Conflicts of Interest

According to UK's CIPR Code of Conduct, practitioners should present in writing any conflict of interest with employers, clients, or potential clients for them to be able to make informed decisions about whether or not to continue with their services or dispense with them. When conflict of interests arise in the course of work, the practitioner may offer to resign from working for one of the conflicting parties. Conflict of interest usually occurs when a practitioner who was representing two different clients suddenly finds himself/herself in a situation where the interest of his/her employers become similar, so that there is now the danger of unfair promotion of one the detriment of the other, what is normally termed as favouritism. CIPR (UK) Code of Conduct also prohibits revealing inside information to another party. Sometimes practitioner's code of ethics may clash with the interest of a client. Some organisations make provision for 'conscience clause' for employees not to engage in activities which violate their personal interest or their code of moral values.

‘Whistle blowing’

The practitioner may be in a dilemma when he/she discovers illegal activities at his/her workplace because most practitioners tend to know intimate details of companies they work for. For instance, an employee may be revealing financial and other confidential information to outsiders and breaking company’s rules in the process. What does the practitioner do? Is it ethical to report the guilty party?

Definition: *A whistleblower is someone who goes outside the normal reporting procedures to alert internal senior managers or external sources of wrongdoing in the organization*

The Media

PR practitioners and the media work in an interdependence sort of arrangement based on mutual respect and considerations. One important aspect of PR is to cultivate the media and establish a good working relationship with them. Care must be taken that no act of kindness is misconstrued as violating the law or codes of conduct. For example, would provision of gift, hospitality treats or gadgets to journalists be taken as a sort of bribery? The watch words in the PR profession should therefore be accuracy, honesty and truth. PR practitioners are also advised strongly to avoid misleading by omission of key details in stories, knowing the press may fill the gap with false assumption. This is a highly unethical thing to do. To be on the safe side, it is recommended that full disclosure be used to “tell the whole truth”, but sometimes, it may not always be the right thing to do.

Parsons’ four pillar to support ethical media relations (Parsons, 2004):

- Honesty and accuracy
- Judiciousness (knowing when and how to use the media)
- Responsiveness
- Respect

Ethical decision-making models and their application

PR practitioners need to make ethical decision that cannot be discredited. To do so, they need to be guided by individual, external guides as well as following good decision-making models. We will consider each of these in more detail below.

The Individual

Every individual starts learning about ethic from the home. According to Lawrence Kohlberg (1981), an American psychologist, individuals go through three (3) levels of moral development and each level is made up of two stages:

Level 1:

Stage 1: obey rules and avoid punishment

Stage 2: serve own needs, make fair deals

Level 2:

Stage 3: be loyal/good to others and positively conform to rules

Stage 4: do one's duty to society

Level 3:

Stage 5: uphold basic rights, values, and contract of society

Stage 6: follow universal ethical principles

The first level is common to all groups of people in society; from children to adults. Here, children learn to obey their parent and usually for a reward. As people mature, they learn to also consider the interest of others; this is represented by levels 2 and 3 or Kohlberg's classification system. But there are some people who do not seem to get past level 1.

What we learn from Kohlberg's views is that people tend to have respect for themselves and also for others and generally understand that they have certain duties and a role to perform for their benefit as well as for the benefit of society. They make these choices based on some principles or code of conduct which may derive from religious sources, philosophical sources, or self-constructed codes. Most successful senior PR practitioners tend to apply these codes to their practice.

External Guide

External sources of Code of Practices can serve as an objective source to validate the personal source of codes of practices listed above. The first source of external code of practice is from the law which develops regulatory codes such as criminal law, Financial Regulations Acts for societies; albeit certain limitations may exist in the laws (some aspects of the law may not be socially acceptable). The law usually specifies the minimum requirements of workers' welfare and operation conditions be met but corporate and social responsibility (CSR) programmes even go further to say that is not enough, but organisations should rather seek to do no harm at all and make positive contribution to communities.

A company's Code of Practice is another external guide for the PR practitioner to consult. These are internal codes of conduct to advise on concerns such as conflict of interest, receiving of gifts, and dealing with cases of harassment at work. Professional and business codes of conduct, such as, the UK CIPR (already discussed in this unit), are some of the other external codes of conduct that can be used as a supplementary guide to personal codes of conduct.

Ethical Decision-Making Models

The five pillars for ethical decision-making according to Parsons are:

- Veracity (tell the truth)
- Non-maleficence (do no harm)
- Beneficence (do good)
- Confidentiality (respect privacy)
- Fairness (to be fair and socially responsible).
- The following questions can be used to determine if there are ethical dilemmas to resolve:
 - Is there harm involved?
 - Is there a missed opportunity to do something good?
 - Could anyone be misled in any way?
 - Will anyone's privacy be invaded?
 - Is it unfair to assume?
 - Does it feel wrong?

Ralph Potter of Harvard Divinity School developed the Potter box ethical decision-making framework. It is one of several ethical decision-making frameworks that can be used by PR practitioners in the course of their duties. The Potter framework consists of four (4) steps in ethical decision-making:

1. **Define situation:** get all the relevant facts. What led to the situation? What is it now? Who is involved? Are there different views? What is the context?
2. **Identify values:** what personal values apply here? Remember Josephson's universal values. What values can you draw from professional codes of practice? Are there legal guidelines?
3. **Select principles:** choose the decision-making framework that you and/or your company espouse, for example the virtue ethics approach.
4. **Choose loyalties:** The PR practitioner must prioritize stakeholder who expect your loyalty. Whom you choose to show the highest loyalty will depend on the situation. The society becomes the highest priority if your company is engaged in something illegal and likewise, your company should receive your highest loyalty if it comes under severe attack.

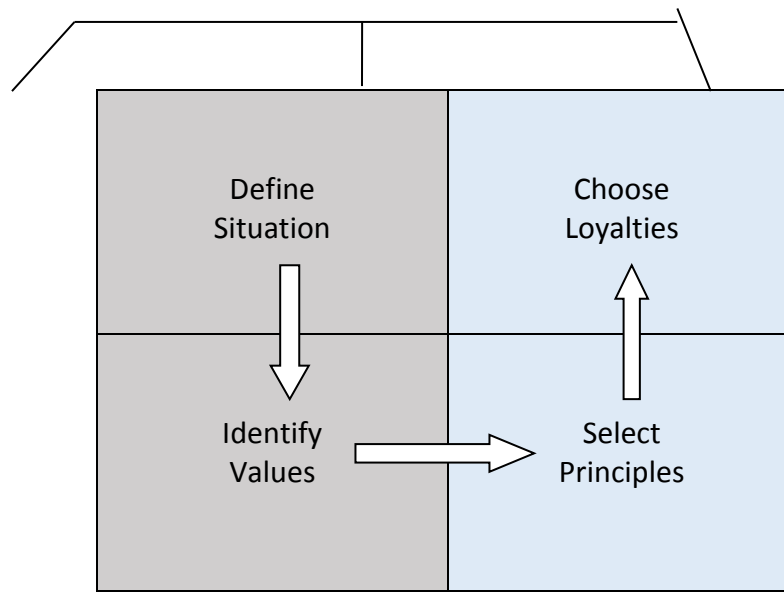


Figure 12.2: The Potter box (source: from Public Relation Ethics, 1st edition by Seib. © 1995. Reprinted with permission of Wadsworth, a division of Thomson Learning: www.thomsonrights.com. Fax 800 730 2215)

Sims (1992) offers an equally useful model, which involves seven steps. He devised it specifically to help working practitioners who were faced with ethical dilemmas:

Sim's (1992) 7 steps model to help PR practitioners who face ethical dilemmas in the course of their duties:

- i. Recognize and clarify the dilemma
- ii. Get all the possible facts, list all your options
- iii. Test each option by asking is it legal? Is it right? Is it beneficial?
- iv. Make your decision
- v. Double-check your decision by asking:
- vi. How would I feel if my family found out about this?
- vii. How would I feel if my decision was printed in the local newspaper?
- viii. Take action

These models encourage practitioners to adopt a critical thinking approach to dealing with ethical issues; an approach which should be 'logical, rigorous, able to remain even under extreme scrutiny, and transparent to all stakeholders. These models are designed to ensure consistent decision-making to make practitioners trustworthy and credible.

Further Reading:

- ✓ *Ethics in Public Relations: A Guide to Best Practice, (2008 2nd Eddition), By Patricia Parsons*
- ✓ *Public Relations Ethics and Professionalism: The Shadow of Excellence, (2008), By Johanna Fawkes*