

## **Ethics and Public Relations**

**Shannon A. Bowen, Ph.D.**

[http://www.instituteforpr.org/essential\\_knowledge/detail/ethics\\_and\\_public\\_relations/](http://www.instituteforpr.org/essential_knowledge/detail/ethics_and_public_relations/)

### **Executive Summary**

The central purpose of this article is to provide an overview of ethics in public relations. I review the evolution of public relations ethics, the current state of practice, and the thoughts of ethicists. Definitions will be provided and key areas of evolution and debate within the field will be addressed. Implications for practitioners are discussed, including the research showing that a strong sense of ethics and of how to arrive at ethical decisions can enhance the career prospects of public relations professionals. Recommendations for public relations practitioners are made, including topics such as gaining access to an organization's top decision makers, promotion to an ethical counselor role, on-the-job ethics training or ethics study, and approaches to ethical analyses. Finally, practical guidelines for dealing with ethics will be offered, followed by an annotated bibliography with suggestions for further reading.

### **Defining Ethics**

The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy explains: "The field of ethics, also called moral philosophy, involves systematizing, defending, and recommending concepts of right and wrong behavior" (<http://www.iep.utm.edu/e/ethics.htm>). Definitions of ethics normally have in common the elements of requiring some form of systematic analysis, distinguishing right from wrong, and determining the nature of what should be valued. In the public relations discipline, ethics includes values such as honesty, openness, loyalty, fair-mindedness, respect, integrity, and forthright communication. This definition of public relations ethics goes far beyond the olden days of "flacking for space" or spinning some persuasive message, but this view is not shared by everyone.

### **Is There Such a Thing as Public Relations Ethics?**

Current research supports a historical trend of associating public relations with all things unethical – lying, spin-doctoring, and even espionage. Many critics argue that there can be no ethical public relations because the practice itself is akin to manipulation and propaganda. An unfortunate belief among many journalists, policy makers, and laymen is the belief that the term 'public relations ethics' is an oxymoron: either an unreal possibility, or smoke and mirrors to hide deception.

Groups like the Center for Public Integrity criticize the public relations industry for a lack of ethics, counting the influence of public relations and lobbying as one of the primary threats to truthful journalism. Other groups like Corporate Watch (<http://www.corporatewatch.org.uk/?lid=1>) are less restrained in their criticism and consider public relations firms and professionals as deliberately unethical:

There is a considerable body of evidence emerging to suggest that modern public relations practices are having a very significant deleterious impact on the democratic

process ... by giving vested interests the opportunity to deliberately obfuscate, deceive, and derail public debate on key issues the public relations industry reduces society's capacity to respond effectively to key social, environmental and political challenges. (<http://www.corporatewatch.org.uk/?lid=1570>)

Are these critiques justified and warranted? Adding fuel to the fire are the actions of some public relations firms themselves. One of the most notable headlines was the representation of "Citizens for a Free Kuwait" by well-known public relations firm Hill and Knowlton, who created false testimony delivered to the Congressional Human Rights Caucus (<http://www.corporatewatch.org.uk/?lid=377>). News broke later that the Kuwaiti government sponsored this front group in order to convince the US to enter the 1992 Gulf War. Critics (Stauber & Rampton, 1995) charge that Hill and Knowlton was successful in this effort because of its disregard for ethics. In the wake of this controversy, one Hill & Knowlton executive notoriously reminded staff: "We'd represent Satan if he paid" (<http://backissues.cjrarchives.org/year/92/5/pr.asp>).

Amid the scandal caused by the lack of honest and open communication during numerous corporate crises, such as Enron (Bowen & Heath, 2005), and the ethical blunders of public relations firms themselves, public relations faces an identity crisis. Is ethical public relations even possible? Are public relations professionals really "the 'invisible men' who control our political debates and public opinion, twisting reality and protecting the powerful from scrutiny" as charged by P.R. Watch (<http://www.prwatch.org/cmd/prwatch.html>) and similar groups?

### **Evolution of Public Relations Ethics**

In the US, early public relations practices introduced many ethical concerns because the press agency (J. E. Grunig & Hunt, 1984) approach prevalent then emphasized hyperbole, sensationalism, and often lacked truth. The so-called "father of public relations," Edward Bernays, called this time period of 1850-1905 "the public be damned era" (Cutlip et al., 2006). Press agents were concerned with generating publicity at almost any cost, and this approach engendered the unethical reputation of modern-day public relations. Ethics as a consideration entered the development of modern practice in about 1906, with prominent practitioner Ivy Lee's declaration of principles. His declaration moved the practice into "the public be informed" era with his emphasis on telling the truth and providing accurate information.

One of the earliest public relations executives to argue for the role of acting as an ethical counsel to management was John W. Hill (Heath & Bowen, 2002). Hill had a very developed philosophy of corporate responsibility and issue management, and this recent analysis found that ethics pervaded both his work as executive counsel and his books about public relations (Hill, 1958, 1963). Hill's grasp of the interaction between ethics, issues management, and "far-reaching effects of corporate policy" (Hill, 1958, p. 16) made him not only one of the most successful practitioners of his century. John W. Hill was a progenitor of what scholars called public relations as the "corporate conscience" (Ryan & Martinson, 1983, p. 22).

As the civil unrest of the 1960s called both government and businesses to a higher level of accountability, their communication functions responded with the creation of more open, ethical, and socially responsible forms of public relations. The function of issues management (Chase, 1976) began to advise executives on ethically responsible policy decisions, and symmetrical public relations (J. E. Grunig & Hunt, 1984) began to incorporate the desires of publics for more fair and balanced decision making. Although research (Bivins, 1989; Pratt & Rentner, 1989) showed that scant attention was given to ethics in major public relations textbooks before this time, the last decade has shown an improvement. This interest in teaching and discussing public relations ethics is good news, especially for new practitioners so that they do not inadvertently limit their prospects for promotion. As newer data (discussed below) reveals, job promotion options may be constrained for practitioners who do not know ethics or feel prepared to advise on ethical dilemmas.

Despite the strides made in modern public relations toward becoming ethical advisors in management, the field holds “a tarnished history” in the words of one scholar (Parsons, 2004, p. 5). Like any young profession, the historical development of public relations shows a progression toward more self-aware and ethical models of communication. By reviewing this development, the historically negative reputation of public relations, as well as its potential for encouraging ethical communication, we can see the maturation of the profession from one engaged in simple dissemination of information to one involved in the creation of ethical communication.

### **Current State of Ethics in Public Relations: Codes of Ethics**

The current state of ethics in public relations practice depends heavily on codes of ethics held by the major professional associations. Membership in these groups is voluntary, meaning that one is not required to belong to such an association in order to practice public relations. Members agree to abide by a code of ethics that is written for the entire group. Some codes of ethics are written in terms that forbid a list of certain activities; other codes of ethics espouse a set of ethical principles which should be followed. Whether written in positive or negative terms, most of the professional associations in public relations have a code of ethics.

- For example, refer to the ethics codes of a few of the major public relations associations: the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management (<http://www.globalpr.org/knowledge/ethics/protocol.asp>),
- the International Public Relations Association (IPRA) Code of Athens (<http://www.ipra.org/detail.asp?articleid=22>) ,
- the European Public Relations Confederation, also endorsing the Code of Athens along with its own code and the Code of Lisbon (<http://www.cerp.org/codes/european.asp>),
- the Public Relations Institute of Australia (<http://www.pria.com.au/aboutus/cid/32/parent/0/t/aboutus>)
- the Public Relations Society of America (<http://www.prssa.org/downloads/codeofethics.pdf> ),

- the International Association of Business Communicators (<http://www.iabc.com/about/code.htm>),
- the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (<http://www.cipr.co.uk/direct/about.asp?v1=who>)
- or the Arthur W. Page Society of senior-level public relations executives. ([http://www.awpagesociety.com/site/resources/page\\_principles/](http://www.awpagesociety.com/site/resources/page_principles/))

These codes of ethics offered as examples above do not vary greatly by country but by the professional organization; some codes strive to offer guidance of a practical, professional nature toward agency practitioners (such as PRSA), while other codes attempt to identify general moral principles of ethical behavior, such as the focus on dignity, respect, and human rights, as seen in the IPRA and CERP endorsements of the Code of Athens. Professions often develop codes of ethics, and an online collection of more than 850 can be found at the Illinois Institute of Technology (<http://ethics.iit.edu/codes/Introduction.html>).

That resource is a wonderful place to start if you are beginning to write or revise a code of ethics for your organization or a client. When implemented with good intent, codes of ethics can be useful tools for developing an organizational culture supporting ethical decision making. Public relations codes of ethics generally hold as cross-cultural and universal moral principles the concepts of honesty, fairness, and not harming others.

Although codes of ethics can be developed which satisfy universal conditions or principles (Kruckeberg, 1993), they have been critiqued by scholars (Parkinson, 2001; Wright, 1993) for falling short of the ideals espoused in the codes, or even in being internally contradictory. Practitioners often state that codes of ethics are too vague to be useful in their own careers or that they do not give enough specific guidance to be anything other than rudimentary (Bowen et al., 2006). Research found that some practitioners say they see a code of ethics once and then do not refer to it or read it again (Bowen, 2002a).

Most codes of ethics provide no enforcement monitoring or recourse for their infringement, leaving them impotent other than the occasional revocation of association membership. These problems with codes of ethics are not new and they are not limited to the field of public relations. Some scholars (Kruckeberg, 2000) of public relations argue that if practitioners are ethical then no enforcement is needed for the codes of ethics. Other scholars (Bowen, 2004a; Parkinson, 2001) go further, arguing that a simple ethics statement is all that is necessary because good intention is a more stringent guideline than a code of ethics. This debate mirrors the rationale of Plato, as quoted in Parsons (2004): “Good people do not need laws to tell them to act responsibly, while bad people will find a way around the laws” (p. 67).

Given the criticisms against codes of ethics, public relations scholars have worked to create other methods of understanding, analyzing, and managing ethical dilemmas. These approaches are based on varying schools of thought from philosophy to sociology.

### **Findings of Current Research on Public Relations Ethics**

Suspicion of corporations, corporate executives, and a general mistrust of business in the minds of the public grew in two waves. The first of these was the late 1960's in which issues management was formed in reaction to these pressures as a process in which corporations could better understand, anticipate, and proactively manage issues of public concern. The second wave of heightened mistrust was in the late 1990's to early 2000s, as a reaction to huge corporate scandals such as that of Enron. As thousands of former-Enron employees lost their retirement funds in the collapse, Enron executives maintained in the news media that they had done nothing wrong. Yet, as facts emerged, ethical transgressions of the public trust were unearthed and criminal charges against many top executives were filed; later convictions followed (for more discussion of this case, see Bowen & Heath (2005) or Sims & Brinkman (2003). The shockwaves following Enron, and other scandals of this period such as Tyco and WorldCom, resulted in new demands for ethical responsibility and corporate governance. One result was the implementation of the 2002 Sarbanes-Oxley Act in which the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) required new standards of financial compliance and record keeping. From these cases and the new legislation, a renewed concern for corporate ethics, compliance, regulation, governance, transparency, and honest financial reporting procedures resulted. Many of these issues are the domain of the public relations function, and all of them are communicated about by the public relations function.

Research conducted recently by the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) Research Foundation (<http://www.iabc.com/rf/>) studied public relations ethics and reported survey results from 1,827 IABC members and other professional communicators worldwide (Bowen & Heath, 2006). The study (Bowen et al., 2006) revealed a number of surprising and interesting findings in public relations ethics. Public relations practitioners around the world reported that 65% of them have regular access to the "dominant coalition" or the decision-making executive level of their organizations, or the Chief Officers level sometimes called the "C-suite". This finding is good news that public relations managers are involved in ethical advising at the highest levels of their organizations, and often are involved in the strategic management and planning process, as well. Of that 65% who said they had access to the dominant coalition, 30 % said that they report directly to the CEO of their organization, with the remaining 35% of that group reporting to a C-level executive.

Reporting directly to the CEO is the best possible case because the top communicator does not have to rely on others to convey their advice and perspective to the CEO, who is the final decision maker. These numbers mean that public relations professionals are being heard at the highest levels of organizations, and are having input at the strategic management and planning level. Public relations professionals can have a real impact on organizational decision making and a real impact on the ethical decisions made in the C-suite. To use the words of one public relations executive in this study (Bowen et al., 2006), "We are there--where the rubber meets the road."

With this relatively new and higher level of responsibility, public relations executives must understand far more than media relations. To advise the top level of an organization,

professional communicators must become conversant with issues management, risk and crisis management, leadership, organizational culture and policy, and ethics. Decisions at the higher levels of the organizational system almost invariably include an ethical component. Do the benefits outweigh the risks if we take a product with a mixed safety record to market? Should we do business in countries where bribery or child labor is a common practice? From matters of external publics and multinational relationships to product standards or internal relationships with employee publics—all pose ethical challenges. These challenges are matters not only of policy but also of communication. IABC grant research (Bowen et al., 2006) showed that, although a large number of public relations practitioners reported that they do advise their CEO (30%) or senior management (35%), another 35% of public relations professionals who say they have no access to the dominant coalition of their organizations. These practitioners are implementing the strategic decisions of others rather than making their own contributions in the areas of organization strategy, issues management, or – on ethics. Public relations cannot contribute to organizational effectiveness without offering input on the views of strategic publics to executive management—nor can it advise on the ethical issues and dilemmas that stand to damage organization-public relationships, diminish credibility, and tarnish reputation.

Counseling senior management on ethical decisions is happening in practice, and perhaps more widely than one might estimate. Almost half (49.9%) of the IABC (Bowen et al., 2006) sample reported that they counsel their senior management on ethical decisions, indicating the managements are realizing the value of incorporating a strategic communication perspective in their decisions, or of potentially incorporating the views, ideas, or values of publics into organizational policy. Forward-thinking organizations are already implementing this strategy, so that public relations professionals who aspire to higher management roles must now pay attention to ethics, ethical advisement, and how to analyze ethical dilemmas. Of our sample, 68% said that they felt well-prepared to counsel management on ethical dilemmas, confirming that public relations practitioners do see themselves in a “corporate conscience” role.

### **Ethics Study and Training: Troubling Findings**

A few of the IABC study’s findings on ethics also warrant concern for those on an upwardly-mobile career path. The majority of participants reported that they had little if any academic training or study of ethics. 30% said they had no academic ethics study of any kind, and another 40% of the practitioners in the study said they had “a few lectures or reading on ethics,” as shown in the pie chart below. These figures mean that 70% of the professional communicators we surveyed could be ill-prepared to face an ethical dilemma if they have had no professional experience with ethics to support them. Practitioners who advise on ethics reported that what they have learned about ethical issues comes from professional experience rather than academic study. Professional experience with ethics has to be earned over time, and younger practitioners are at a disadvantage when faced with a dilemma, often having little prior experience with such situations. These professionals might make mistakes even with the best of intentions due to unforeseen consequences or duties.



Using one of the rigorous, analytical means of ethical analysis available in moral philosophy allows decisions to be articulated to the media and others in defensible terms. Further, those who had no ethics study could be unintentionally limiting their career opportunities or their suitability to be promoted into senior management. The qualitative data in this study revealed that practitioners saw advising on ethical dilemmas as a main route to higher levels of responsibility within their organizations.

Source: IABC Research Foundation

The finding that little or no ethics training or study is held by public relations practitioners with a university education is not a new concern. The Commission on Public Relations Education, a group of experts who periodically examine public relations curricula and recommend modifications, recognized the dearth of ethics study in their 2006 report (see: <http://www.commpred.org/report/>). The group recommended the following actions at universities and colleges offering courses or majors in public relations:

- A consideration of ethics should pervade all content of public relations professional education.

- If a curriculum cannot accommodate a dedicated ethics course, short one-hour courses or mini-seminars can provide a meaningful ethics forum for undergraduates. (p. 4)

The commission noted a need to elevate in importance “Particular issues and trends in the public relations field such as ethics and transparency” (p. 43) in undergraduate education. These experts argued that an education in public relations “can provide a body of knowledge about the process of ethical decision-making that can help students not only to recognize ethical dilemmas but to use appropriate critical thinking skills to help resolve those dilemmas in a way that results in an ethical outcome”

([http://www.commpred.org/report/2006\\_Report\\_of\\_the\\_Commission\\_on\\_Public\\_Relations\\_Education.pdf](http://www.commpred.org/report/2006_Report_of_the_Commission_on_Public_Relations_Education.pdf), p. 22).

Public relations professionals need both experience managing ethical issues and academic study of ethics. Studying ethics helps practitioners to advance professionally and to make defensible judgments in the eyes of publics. Not preparing young practitioners to deal with ethics disadvantages them in their career aspirations and harms the reputation of the public relations profession itself.

In the IABC study, participants reported little on-the-job ethics training, professional seminars, or continuing education workshops. 65% received no ethics training from an employer, although our data showed that when practitioners report to senior or top level vice presidents they received more additional ethics training than when reporting to others. Of the 35% reporting some ethics training, the data from this study also reveals that a proportionally greater number of men (43%) received training once hired than did their female counterparts (32%). In summary, 50% of the IABC sample maintained that they regularly counsel management on ethical decisions, yet about 70% of the sample have never studied ethics and about 65% have no on-the-job ethics training.

The deficit in communication professionals who are thoroughly versed in ethics may pose potential problems. Filling a necessary demand based on professional experience alone leaves the communication professional open to failures to reasoning or oversights in analysis which could be guarded against through formal ethics training or study. Those who do not have training in ethical decision making may be unfamiliar with alternate modes of analyses that could yield valuable input into the strategic decision-making process. A lack of credibility results both for individual communication professionals and for the public relations practice itself. Errors of omission in the analysis of an ethical dilemma result from a lack of training rather than a lack of ethical intention on the part of public relation counsel. Logical and consistent analyses allow a defensible argument to be made and the media or publics can understand the decision-making process of the organization. Rational decisions are easier to explain and defend to publics, and although they may not agree they can usually understand. Therefore, attention to astute and rigorous ethical analysis is essential not only for individual practitioners or the public relations profession but also for organizational effectiveness in achieving long-term financial success.

### **Pushing the Frontiers in Public Relations Ethics**

To answer the demand for ethics training from the professional front, training in ethical decision making is being offered by some employers, universities, and professional associations. Only recently have public relations scholars incorporated a substantial amount of moral philosophy into the body of knowledge we know as communication. The inclusion of this scholarly literature in our own field can powerfully extend the ethical reasoning capabilities of public relations professionals. These approaches, which are reviewed below, offer substantive ethical guidelines for analyzing dilemmas.

### **Dialogical Ethics versus Advocacy Ethics**

Dialogue as a philosophy began in ancient Greece, with the classical argumentation of philosophers such as Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates. Dialogue is a natural inclusion in any discussion of ethics because some scholars (J. E. Grunig, 2001; Habermas, 1984) argue that dialogue is inherently ethical. They see dialogue as ethical because it engages in a give and take discussion of public relations issues with the chance for all interested parties to have input. The discussion is ultimately supposed to arrive at truth or to reveal the underlying truth to which the parties can agree. Ideas are evaluated on merit alone rather than on a positional basis. It should be noted that this distinction is a fine one that separates advocacy from dialogue – true dialogue argues based on merits until truth is reached. Advocacy argues positionally, meaning according to the arguments from the side of the client or employer, rather than from any or all sides. The advocate's position may or may not be aligned with truth, but it starts with a bias in the discussion and thus fails the test of being truly ethical. A dialogue can potentially reach a truth that could be negative to an employer or client simply based on meritorious arguments, and is seen as ethical since it does not favor any one party over the views of others.

Public relations scholars such as Heath (2006) see dialogue as the way in which a good organization engages in open communication with its publics. The virtue or good character of the organization is maintained through its efforts to communicate with



publics, discussing issues in a dialogue of give and take. This “wrangle in the marketplace” (Heath, 2001) results in the best ideas rising to the top, regardless of their origin. Heath (2006) explained, “What was needed. . . was not more articulate advocates, but advocates who had achieved higher standards of corporate responsibility” (p. 72). This higher standard is to engage in dialogue for the sake of achieving an understanding of the truth, and truth can arise from any perspective. One note to keep in mind is that dialogue must be entered into with good intentions; Kent and Taylor (2002) wisely noted that “If one partner subverts the dialogic process through manipulation, disconfirmation, or exclusion, then the end result will not be dialogic” (p. 24).

Pearson (1989a) explored the concept of dialogue as an ethical basis for public relations. He thought that public relations was best defined as “the management of interpersonal dialectic” (Pearson, 1989b, p. 177) emphasizing the personal relationship maintenance and building functions of public relations with members of publics. An entire strain of research (Ledingham & Bruning, 2001, 2000) has found that relationship building functions are the most crucial aspect of public relations, and Pearson’s link to the usefulness of dialogue in doing that makes perfect sense. Dialogue is best seen as an ongoing process of seeking understanding and relationship, with the potential to resolve ethical dilemmas through a mutual creation of truth. Kent and Taylor (2002) offer an extensive list of factors to consider in engaging in the process of dialogue, and it is an invaluable resource for public relations professionals seeking to build that process into the communication of their organization.

Most people who think of public relations as advocacy would not agree with the dialogical position because they believe that the organization can best define facts related to an issue and persuade publics to understand or agree with those interpretations (Pfau & Wan, 2006). These scholars (Fitzpatrick & Bronstein, 2006; Miller, 1989; Peters, 1987) agree that the advocate role of public relations is similar to that of an attorney, in which Pfau and Wan pointed out that “persuasion plays an integral role” (p. 102). However, this approach lacks authenticity because it emphasizes one-sided persuasion and does not allow for the validity of contrary facts emerging outside the organization or from other publics.

Advocacy can sometimes be difficult because it can confuse loyalty to the client or employer with loyalty to the truth. For instance, a long-term ethical approach might be to help the client change or improve operations to ensure future viability, but this perspective can be overlooked in favor of short-term success or loyalty to management’s interpretation of issues. Although some advocates maintain that an ethically responsible approach is enough (Fitzpatrick & Bronstein, 2006) many executive-level practitioners explain that they need more powerful means of analyses in terms of ethical issue resolution (Bowen, 2002b, 2006). Alternate views see public relations as the organization’s objective or balanced advisory voice in strategic management, as discussed below.

### **Strategic Management Approaches to Ethics**

Strategic management seeks to maximize organizational efficiency and profitability by making decisions that consistently strive toward that goal. Public relations executives acting as strategy advisors and ethics counselors to senior management is a role that is supported in research findings regarding the practice and in theory. How they can implement this responsibility ethically and with reasoned approaches has been studied from various strategic management perspectives.

J. E. Grunig (1992b) proposed that linkages with publics could be used to facilitate organizational decision making in a balanced, symmetrical manner. Grunig's idea of symmetry is that organizations accomplish more of their long term goals when they integrate some of what publics want, meaning that management engages in an ongoing relationship of give-and-take with publics. Grunig and his colleagues (Dozier, L. A. Grunig, & J. E. Grunig, 1995; L. A. Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002) in this line of research maintained that symmetrical communication is inherently ethical. They elucidated: "The two-way symmetrical model avoids the problem of ethical relativism because it defines ethics as a process of public relations rather than an outcome" (J. E. Grunig & L. A. Grunig, 1992, p. 308).

These researchers (J. E. Grunig & L. A. Grunig, 1996) maintained that a strategic management approach is consistent with teleological moral philosophy, commonly known as utilitarianism, because of its emphasis on consequences. Both utilitarian philosophy and relationships with publics are seen in terms of their consequences and potential outcomes. In utilitarianism the ethical decision is defined as that which maximizes positive consequences and minimizes negative outcomes. In the utilitarian approach to ethics, a weighing of potential decisions and their likely consequences is the ethical analysis used to determine right or wrong. Strategic management also attempts to predict potential consequences of management decisions and thus is a natural fit with utilitarian ethics.

Also based on the strategic management approach, Bivins (1992) developed a systems model for ethical decision making. General systems theory views the organization as an open and interdependent system dependent on interactions with its environment for survival. Publics are viewed as a vital part of the environment providing information inputs and feedback to management. He argued that maintaining a process of ethical decision making in management could help the organization have successful interactions with its environment. As a routine part of the management system, ethical considerations could receive more thorough and common examination than when left to chance. Along similar lines, Tilley (2005) encouraged including ethical standards in the strategic management of public relations campaigns including "formalizing ethics as part of campaign measurement" (p. 317).

Building on a strategic management paradigm, Bowen's (2004a) research sought to strengthen ethical analyses by incorporating deontological philosophy into public relations. She linked this philosophical approach to Grunig's research on two-way symmetrical communication described above. Deontological moral philosophy, based on the work of German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) seeks to discover

underlying moral principles upon which any rational decision maker would make the same choice. According to the useful Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy (<http://www.iep.utm.edu/k/kantmeta.htm>), “Deontology is the study of duty” and deems ethical only acts with a purely good motive. It is a valuable addition to the knowledge of a public relations professional because it yields more rational, defensible, and enduring decisions than less-rigorous analyses. To implement a deontological analysis of public relations ethics one must attempt to be as autonomous, unbiased and objective as possible. Potential decisions must be examined from all angles. Research (C. B. Pratt, Im, & Montague, 1994) shows that public relations professionals employ this form of analysis more frequently as they advance to higher levels in their careers. For a good overview of implementing deontology see (Bowen, 2008).

### **Practical Recommendations and Guidelines for Practitioners**

This review of current, cutting-edge, and historical research in public relations ethics is worth little if public relations professionals do not implement ethical analyses in their daily practice. We can contribute to more socially responsible and credible organizations, but only if we take the steps necessary to make our voices heard in the dominant coalition. Public relations professionals should be the ones to alert senior management when ethical issues arise. Public relations counselors should also know the values of both internal and external publics, and use these in astute analyses and ultimate resolutions of ethical dilemmas. At any level of one’s career it is never too early or too late to implement the following guidelines:

1. The first thing to be concluded from studying ethical cases is that communication professionals must pay attention to ethics before they desperately need it. Once a crisis of conflicting ethics or high media interest befalls the organization it is too late to begin searching for ethical guidance. Professional communicators must be conversant with the value systems of their organizations before these values are publicly called into question. Advising the dominant coalition requires great attention to research, input, organization values, knowledge of the values of strategic publics, potential consequences, and an ability to apply rigorous forms of ethical analyses. Public relations professionals should begin studying ethics now, before you “must” address a problem, and as soon as possible. To do so will not only improve the decisions made in your public relations department but also will allow and encourage advancement in your career. You will find an annotated bibliography at the end of this article, after its references, which can guide you in further reading on public relations ethics.
2. Know your own values. Taking a thorough and systematic look at the values you hold and espouse as a person and a public relations practitioner will help you when you are “under the gun” being pressured by a supervisor, client, or someone else. Listing the most important qualities of an admired person or mentor is a productive exercise, as well as listing the values that you hold most dear. Researchers (Ladkin, 2006) call this exercise “attending to one’s own values” and it is important to help you articulate your beliefs and reasoning, as well as stand your ground when your reasoning is challenged. Matching your own values to those espoused by your employer or client

means that you have a solid relationship on which to build your professional practice. Otherwise, you might have to become an “activist” for ethics in your organization or seek employment in an environment more congruent with your own values (Berger & Reber, 2006).

3. Spot and discuss ethical issues. Issues management (Heath, 1997), as the primary function that seeks out and resolves problems before they become crises, is an area with a natural propensity to identify perplexing ethical situations. Public relations professionals should study the academic research and best practices of issues management to best prepare themselves to engage ethical issues. Research (Bowen, 2002b) has found that identifying issues that will become ethical problems is one of the most challenging aspects of issues management. Failing to identify an ethical issue before it is acted upon can result in costly failures for the organization, both in terms of operational cost in the resulting loss of reputation as an ethical organization. Being hyper-vigilant on the early identification of ethical issues allows more time for their analysis, research, discussion, and resolution than does waiting until one is identified by a public or by the media. Early identification also allows the organization to take a proactive stance to defining and managing the issue, rather than a reactionary stance when it is defined by others. Additionally, self-vigilant awareness of such issues is the ethically responsible approach for an organization, showing a willingness to resolve problematic issues as a responsible organization and morally good intentions.
4. Time and time again research finds that organizational culture has a significant impact on ethical analyses and decision making (Bowen, 2004b; Goodpaster, 2007; Sims, 1994; Sims & Brinkman, 2003). Public relations professionals should identify the underlying values in the organization’s mission statement, code of ethics, or other policy document. You should identify the approach in ethics closest to existing organizational values. Those mentioning the greater good, benefit of society, or consequences of operating are most likely utilitarian. Statements echoing duty, justice, fairness, responsibility, or intention are deontological. Identifying these core values of the organization is key in instilling a more widely ethical organizational culture. They also indicate the means of ethical analysis that will be most effective in resolving dilemmas for management since it is congruent with the values of the organization. The public relations function can encourage ethical debate and consideration through the organization by using internal communication to focus on these issues. Leaders should strive to display and act on ethical values (Berger & Reber, 2006; Goodpaster, 2007). Research (Bowen, 2004b) in this area shows that in order to foster excellence in ethics, the internal communications of the public relations function should teach employees what is to be considered when confronting and ethical dilemma, reward ethical behavior, encourage the defining of issues in ethical terms, and encourage an atmosphere of open ethical debate. Confronting management with evidence that an organizational culture supporting ethics averts disasters of the Enron variety might garner rekindled support for an organizational ethics initiative.

5. Educating decision makers in the organization, specifically the CEO and dominant coalition, of the abilities of the public relations function to engage in ethical advisement by using issues management, research, relationships with publics, and conflict resolution should be one of the primary responsibilities of communication executives. Most chief executives originate from financial or engineering backgrounds, and no little or nothing about the capabilities of public relations beyond media relations. So, it is the responsibility of the public relations practitioner to educate him or her about the many ways that public relations can contribute to the success of the organization, including solving and preventing ethical dilemmas. Educating the CEO and other dominant coalition members in the organization is one of the primary routes through which practitioners in the IABC study said they achieved membership in the strategic decision making core. Therefore, this recommendation also serves to empower the public relations function within an organization and to foster high-level career access for practitioners.
6. Engage in systematic and analytical means of contemplating ethical dilemmas. The use of moral philosophy lends rigorous, systematic, and consistent methods of ethical analyses and decisions in public relations. The measurement or “yard stick” for what is value or good in the organization should be carefully defined before engaging in ethical analyses. Mission statements are often the best guide to what is valued, rewarded, or sought. A mission statement is normally the best place to begin defining the ethical values present in the organization. These ethical values can then be explicated in the form of an ethics statement, a code of conduct, an ethics code, a credo, or other codified policies. To enhance the consistency of organizational policies, issue resolutions, and increase the longevity of managerial decisions, ethical analyses should always begin with the core values stated in the organization’s mission. Ethical counsel of the dominant coalition often requires what ethicists call ‘moral courage’ (Parks, 1993) in the sense that you must be willing to argue for your analysis even when it is unpopular with other organizational functions. Even if your solution is not implemented, the counsel of public relations will be respected and sought in the future. Unpopular solutions to ethical dilemmas often prove their wisdom over the course of time, as well. Offering consistent reliable analyses is one way to enhance both personal credibility and that of the public relations function within the organization.

## **Conclusion**

The ability to engage in ethical reasoning in public relations is growing in demand, in responsibility, and in importance. Academic research, university and continuing education, and professional practice are all attending more than ever to matters of ethics. The public relations function stands at a critical and defining juncture: whether to become an ethics counselor to top management or to remain outside the realm of the strategic decision making core. How we choose to respond to the crisis of trust among our publics will define the public relations of the future.

Although it is true that no single person or function can be the entire “ethical conscience” of an organization, the public relations function is ideally informed to counsel top

management about ethical issues. Public relations professionals know the values of key publics involved with ethical dilemmas, and can conduct rigorous ethical analyses to guide the policies of their organizations, as well as in communications with publics and the news media. Careful and consistent ethical analyses facilitate trust, which enhances the building and maintenance of relationships – after all, that is the ultimate purpose of the public relations function.

### **Author Note**

This article was funded by the Institute for Public Relations. I would like to thank the Institute for Public Relations and to specifically thank President & CEO Frank E. Ovaatt, Jr., for his support and encouragement of ethics research.

### **RESOURCES**

Beck, L. W. (1963). Foreword. In L. W. Beck (Ed.), [Immanuel Kant's Lectures on Ethics \(pp. ix-xiv\). Indianapolis: Hackett.](#)

Beiser, F. C. (1992). Kant's intellectual development: 1746-1781. In P. Guyer (Ed.), [The Cambridge companion to Kant \(pp. 26-61\). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.](#)

Bivins, T. H. (1980). [Ethical implications of the relationship of purpose to role and function in public relations. Journal of Business Ethics, January, 65-73.](#)

Bivins, T. H. (1989). [Are public relations texts covering ethics adequately? Journal of Mass Media Ethics, 4\(1\), 39-52.](#)

Bivins, T. H. (1992). [A systems model for ethical decision making in public relations. Public Relations Review, 18\(4\), 365-383.](#)

Black, J., Steele, B., & Barney, R. (1995). [Doing ethics in journalism: A handbook with case studies. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.](#)

Borowski, P. J. (1998). [Manager-employee relationships: Guided by Kant's categorical imperative or by Dilbert's business principle. Journal of Business Ethics, 17, 1623-1632.](#)

Bowen, S. A. (2000). [A theory of ethical issues management: Contributions of Kantian deontology to public relations' ethics and decision making. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Maryland, College Park, MD.](#)

Bowen, S. A. (2001, May). [A theory of ethical issues management: Expansion of the tenth generic principle of public relations excellence. Paper presented at the meeting of the International Communication Association, Washington.](#)

Buzzanell, P. M. (1994). [Gaining a voice: Feminist organizational communication theorizing. Management Communication Quarterly, 7\(4\), 339-383.](#)

Cavanaugh, G. F., & McGovern, A. F. (1988). [Ethical dilemmas in the modern corporation](#). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Chase, W. H. (1977). Public issue management: The new science. *Public Relations Journal*, 33, 25-26.

Chase, W. H. (1984). [Issue management: Origins of the future](#). Stamford, CT: Issue Action Publications.

Cheney, G. (1983). [The rhetoric of identification and the study of organizational communication](#). *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 69, 143-158.

Cheney, G., & Vibbert, S. L. (1987). Corporate discourse: Public relations and issue management. In F. M. Jablin & L. L. Putnam & K. H. Roberts & L. W. Porter (Eds.), [Handbook of organizational communication: An interdisciplinary perspective](#) (pp. 165-194). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Christians, C. G., Fackler, M., Rotzoll, K. B., & McKee, K. B. (2001). [Media ethics: Cases and moral reasoning](#) (6th ed.). New York: Longman.

Christians, C. G., & Traber, M. (Eds.). (1997). [Communication ethics and universal values](#). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Curtin, P. A., & Boynton, L. A. (2001). Ethics in public relations: Theory and practice. In R. L. Heath (Ed.), [Handbook of public relations](#) (pp. 411-422). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Day, L. A. (1991). [Ethics in media communications: Cases and controversies](#). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

De George, R. T. (1995). *Business ethics* (4th ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

De George, R. T. (1999). [Business ethics](#) (5th ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Dozier, D. M., Grunig, L. A., & Grunig, J. E. (1995). [Manager's guide to excellence in public relations and communication management](#). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Eisenberg, E. M., & Riley, P. (2001). Organizational culture. In F. M. Jablin & L. L. Putnam (Eds.), [The new handbook of organizational communication: Advances in theory, research, and methods](#) (pp. 291-322). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Falcione, R. L., Sussman, L., & Herden, R. P. (1987). Communication climate in organizations. In F. M. Jablin & L. L. Putnam & K. H. Roberts & L. W. Porter (Eds.),



[Handbook of organizational communication: An interdisciplinary perspective \(pp. 195-227\). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.](#)

Fearn-Banks, K. (2000). Crisis communication: A review of some best practices. In R. L. Heath (Ed.), [Handbook of public relations \(pp. 479-485\). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.](#)

Flew, A. (1979). [A dictionary of philosophy \(2nd ed.\). New York: St. Martin's Press.](#)

Fritzsche, D. J. (1991). [A model of decision-making incorporating ethical values. Journal of Business Ethics, 2, 291-299.](#)

Gandz, J., & Hayes, N. (1988). [Teaching business ethics. Journal of Business Ethics, 7, 657-669.](#)

Gaunt, P., & Ollenburger, J. (1995). [Issues management revisited: A tool that deserves another look. Public Relations Review, 21\(3\), 199-210.](#)

George, R. J. (1988). [The challenge of preparing ethically responsible managers: Closing the rhetoric-reality gap. Journal of Business Ethics, 7, 715-720.](#)

Gert, B. (1998). [Morality: Its nature and justification. New York: Oxford University Press.](#)

Goldberg, M. (Ed.). (1993). [Against the grain: New approaches to professional ethics. Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International.](#)

Gordon, A. D., Kittross, J. M., & Reuss, C. (1996). [Controversies in media ethics. White Plains, NY: Longman.](#)

Grunig, J. E. (1992a). Communication, public relations, and effective organizations: An overview of the book. In J. E. Grunig (Ed.), [Excellence in public relations and communication management \(pp. 1-30\). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.](#)

Grunig, J. E. (Ed.). (1992b). [Excellence in public relations and communication management. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.](#)

Grunig, J. E. (1999). Origin of the tenth generic principle of excellence.

Grunig, J. E. (2001). Two-way symmetrical public relations: Past, present, and future. In R. L. Heath (Ed.), [Handbook of public relations \(pp. 11-30\). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.](#)

Grunig, J. E., & Grunig, L. A. (1992). Models of public relations and communication. In J. E. Grunig (Ed.), [Excellence in public relations and communication management \(pp. 285-325\). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.](#)

Grunig, J. E., & Grunig, L. A. (1996, May). Implications of symmetry for a theory of ethics and social responsibility in public relations. Paper presented at the meeting of the International Communication Association, Chicago.

Grunig, J. E., & Huang, Y. H. (2000). From organizational effectiveness to relationship indicators: Antecedents of relationships, public relations strategies, and relationship outcomes. In J. Ledingham & S. Bruning (Eds.), [Public relations as relationship management: A relational approach to the study and practice of public relations \(pp. 23-53\).](#) Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Grunig, J. E., & Hunt, T. (1984). [Managing public relations.](#) New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Grunig, J. E., & Repper, F. C. (1992). Strategic management, publics, and issues. In J. E. Grunig (Ed.), [Excellence in public relations and communication management \(pp. 117-157\).](#) Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Grunig, L. A. (1992a). Activism: How it limits the effectiveness of organizations and how excellent public relations departments respond. In J. E. Grunig (Ed.), [Excellence in public relations and communication management \(pp. 503-530\).](#) Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Grunig, L. A. (1992b). Toward the philosophy of public relations. In E. L. Toth & R. L. Heath (Eds.), [Rhetorical and critical approaches to public relations \(pp. 65-91\).](#) Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Grunig, L. A., Toth, E. L., & Hon, L. C. (1999, May). [Feminist values in public relations. Paper presented at the meeting of the International Communication Association, San Francisco.](#)

Habermas, J. (1979). [Moral development and ego identity.](#) In T. McCarthy (Ed.), [Communication and the evolution of society.](#) Boston: Beacon Press.

Habermas, J. (1984). [The theory of communicative action: Reason and the rationalization of society \(T. McCarthy, Trans.\) \( Vol. 1\).](#) Boston: Beacon Press.

Habermas, J. (1987). [The philosophical discourse of modernity \(F. Lawrence, Trans.\).](#) Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Heath, R. L. (1997). [Strategic issues management: Organizations and public policy challenges.](#) Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Heath, R. L., & Cousino, K. R. (1990). [Issues management: End of first decade progress report.](#) *Public Relations Review*, 16(1), 6-18.

- Heath, R. L., & Nelson, R. A. (1986). [Issues management: Corporate public policymaking in an information society](#). Beverly Hills: Sage.
- Hofstede, G. (1980). [Culture's consequences: International differences in work related values](#). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Jaksa, J. A., & Pritchard, M. S. (1994). [Communication ethics: Methods of analysis \(2nd ed.\)](#). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Jones, B. L., & Chase, W. H. (1979). [Managing public policy issues](#). *Public Relations Review*, 5(2), 3-23.
- Jones, C. (1976). Let there be light (with sound analysis). *Harvard Business Review*, 54, May-June.
- Kant, I. (1948). [The groundwork of the metaphysic of morals \(H. J. Paton, Trans.\)](#). New York: Harper Torchbooks. (Original work published 1785)
- Kant, I. (1956). [Critique of pure reason \(N. K. Smith, Trans.\)](#). London: Macmillan. (Original work published 1781)
- Kant, I. (1963). [Lectures on ethics \(L. Infield, Trans.\)](#). Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing. (Original work published 1930)
- Kant, I. (1964). [Groundwork of the metaphysic of morals \(H. J. Paton, Trans.\)](#). New York: Harper & Row. (Original work published 1785)
- Kant, I. (1974). On the old proverb: That may be right in theory but it won't work in practice (E. B. Ashton, Trans.). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. (Original work published 1793)
- Kant, I. (1993). Metaphysical foundations of morals. In C. J. Friedrich (Ed.), [The philosophy of Kant: Immanuel Kant's moral and political writings \(pp. 154-229\)](#). New York: The Modern Library. (Original work published 1785)
- Kant, I. (1994). [The metaphysical principles of virtue \(J. W. Ellington, Trans.\)](#). Indianapolis: Cambridge. (Original work published 1797)
- Kant, I. (1997). [Critique of pure reason \(P. Guyer & A. W. Wood, Trans.\)](#). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1781)
- Knowlton, S. R., & Parsons, P. R. (Eds.). (1994). [The journalist's moral compass: Basic principles](#). Westport, CT: Praeger.

- Kohlberg, L. (1969). Stage and sequence: The cognitive developmental approach to socialization. In D. A. Goslin (Ed.), [Handbook of socialization theory of research \(pp. 347-480\). Chicago: Rand McNally.](#)
- Kohlberg, L., & Candee, D. (1984). The relationship of moral judgment to moral action. In W. M. Kurtines & L. Gewirtz (Eds.), *Morality, moral behavior, and moral development* (pp. 52-73). New York: Wiley.
- Kohlberg, L., Levine, C., & Hower, A. (1984). Synopses and detailed replies to critics. In L. Kohlberg (Ed.), [The psychology of moral development: The nature and validity of moral stages \(pp. 320-386\). San Francisco: Harper & Row.](#)
- Kruckeberg, D. (1993). [Universal ethics code: Both possible and feasible. Public Relations Review, 19\(1\), 21-31.](#)
- Lauzen, M. M. (1997). Understanding the relations between public relations and issues management. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 9(1), 65-82.
- Lee, B., & Padgett, G. (2000). [Evaluating the effectiveness of a mass media ethics course. Journalism and Mass Communication Educator, 55\(2\), 27-39.](#)
- Leeper, K. A. (1996). [Public relations ethics and comunitarianism: A preliminary investigation. Public Relations Review, 22\(2\), 163-179.](#)
- Martinson, D. L. (1994). Enlightened self-interest fails as an ethical baseline in public relations. [Journal of Mass Media Ethics, 9\(2\), 100-108.](#)
- McCormick, M. (1999). Immanuel Kant: Metaphysics. Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy [Online]. Available: [http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/k/kantmeta.htm.](http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/k/kantmeta.htm)
- McElreath, M. P. (1996). *Managing systematic and ethical public relations campaigns* (2nd ed.). New York: Brown & Benchmark.
- Moore, R. L., Farrar, R. T., & Collins, E. L. (1997). [Advertising and public relations law. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.](#)
- Parkinson, M. (2001). The prsa code of professional standards and member code of ethics: Why they are neither professional or ethical. *Public Relations Quarterly*, Fall, 27-31.
- Paton, H. J. (1967). [The categorical imperative: A study in Kant's moral philosophy. New York: Harper & Row.](#)
- Pearson, R. (1989a). Beyond ethical relativism in public relations: Coorientation, rules, and the idea of communication symmetry. In J. E. Grunig & L. A. Grunig (Eds.), [Public](#)

[relations research annual \(Vol. 1, pp. 67-86\). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.](#)

Pearson, R. (1989b). [A theory of public relations ethics. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Ohio University, Athens.](#)

Pratt, C. B., Im, S. H., & Montague, S. N. (1994). [Investigating the application of Deontology among U.S. public relations practitioners. Journal of Public Relations Research, 6\(4\), 241-266.](#)

Pratt, C. A., & Rentner, T. L. (1989). [What's really being taught about ethical behavior. Public Relations Review, 15\(1\), 53-66.](#)

Pratt, C. B. (1991). [Public relations: The empirical research on practitioner ethics. Journal of Business Ethics, 10, 229-236.](#)

Pratt, C. B. (1994). [Research progress in public relations ethics: An overview. Public Relations Review, 20\(3\), 217-224.](#)

Pratt, C. B. (2000). Issues management: The paradox of the 40-year U.S. tobacco wars. In R. L. Heath (Ed.), [Handbook of public relations \(pp. 335-346\). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.](#)

Scruton, R. (1982). [Kant.](#) Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Seib, P., & Fitzpatrick, K. (1995). [Public relations ethics. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers.](#)

Shockely-Zalabak, P., & Morley, D. D. (1994). [Creating a culture: A longitudinal examination of the influence of management and employee values on communication rule stability and emergence. Human Communication Research, 20, 334-355.](#)

Sims, R. R. (1994). [Ethics and organizational decision making: A call for renewal. Westport, CT: Quorum.](#)

Smircich, L., & Calas, M. B. (1987). Organizational culture: A critical assessment. In F. M. Jablin & L. L. Putnam & K. H. Roberts & L. W. Porter (Eds.), [Handbook of organizational communication: An interdisciplinary perspective \(pp. 228-263\). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.](#)

Sullivan, R. J. (1989). [Immanuel Kant's moral theory. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.](#)

Sullivan, R. J. (1994). [An introduction to Kant's ethics. New York: Cambridge University Press.](#)

Vercic, D., Grunig, L. A., & Grunig, J. E. (1996). Global and specific principles of public relations: Evidence from Slovenia. In H. M. Culbertson & N. Chen (Eds.), [International public relations: A comparative analysis](#) (pp. 31-65). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Wright, D. K. (1985). [Can age predict the moral values of public relations practitioners?](#) *Public Relations Review*, 11(1), 51-60.

Wright, D. K. (1989). [Ethics research in public relations: An overview.](#) *Public Relations Review*, 15(2), 3-5.

Wright, D. K. (1993). [Enforcement dilemma: Voluntary nature of public relations codes.](#) *Public Relations Review*, 19(1), 13-20.

Wright, D. K. (1996). Communication ethics. In M. B. Salwen & D. W. Stacks (Eds.), [An integrated approach to communication theory and research](#) (pp. 519-535). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

[Berger, B. K., & Reber, B. H. \(2006\). Gaining influence in public relations: The role of resistance in practice. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.](#) Berger and Reber's book focuses on power in public relations, but power and public relations are inextricably connected. This book would be a great one to read if you are experiencing resistance from your management or clients on including ethical analyses in organizational decision making. It offers guidance and research on both accruing power and influence as well as how to go a step further and become an "activist" for responsible management in your organization.

[Bivins, T. H. \(1989\). Are public relations texts covering ethics adequately? Journal of Mass Media Ethics, 4\(1\), 39-52.](#) This is a landmark study showing the historical data on how little attention public relations education has focused on ethics. That has changed a bit, but this study was instrumental in forcing a more attentive stance toward ethics in public relations among modern textbooks.

[Bowen, S. A. \(2002b\). Elite executives in issues management: The role of ethical paradigms in decision making. Journal of Public Affairs, 2\(4\), 270-283.](#)

Some of the data on high-level decisions in an organization quoted in this paper was published in this study. It offers wonderful case examples from two worldwide firms of how public relations should interact with the CEO and executive management on ethical issues. The article gives both positive and negative insight into two ethically respected organizations, and offers suggestions and recommendations from each.

[Bowen, S. A. \(2004\). Expansion of ethics as the tenth generic principle of public relations excellence: A Kantian theory and model for managing ethical issues. Journal of Public Relations Research, 16\(1\), 65-92.](#)

This article provides a deontological (duty and principle based) rationale blended with theory from public relations to result in a theory of how ethical issues management can be conducted. It is highly theoretical and academic in nature, but includes a schematic model which is useful in simplifying deontology into a flow chart approach.

[Bowen, S. A. \(2004\). Organizational factors encouraging ethical decision making: An exploration into the case of an exemplar. \*Journal of Business Ethics\*, 52\(4\), 311-324.](#)

This article offers evidence of just how organizational culture and ethical decision making interact, concluding that the exemplary organization studied is doing this correctly. That organization, renowned for its high ethical standards, offers an example of what you should and should not be doing to create a more ethical culture within your own organization. Questions such as “Who should be responsible for ethics” and “Isn’t ethics a personal values choice?” are addressed. This article is a must-read before beginning an ethics initiative.

[Bowen, S. A. \(2005\). A practical model for ethical decision making in issues management and public relations. \*Journal of Public Relations Research\*, 17\(3\), 191-216.](#)

An extremely practical and accessible approach to implementing ethics in an organization. This article, based on deontology, is the second phase of Bowen’s 2004 article on the “Expansion of Ethics” and offers an empirically simplified model for ethical decision making. The model is in flow-chart format and has been tested and improved in its user-friendly elements in 2 global organizations. For those facing a complex ethics issue, this model gives a sound rationale upon which to base choices, make defensible decisions, and thoroughly analyze all the facets of the issue.

[Bowen, S. A. \(2006\). Autonomy in communication: Inclusion in strategic management and ethical decision-making, a comparative case analysis. \*Journal of Communication Management\*, 10\(4\), 330-352.](#)

This article provides compelling arguments for decision-making autonomy in public relations, both from data and from theory. It is helpful reading for understanding the objective nature of ethical decisions while using real-world, management-based arguments. Public relations practitioners in departments without direct access to the CEO or reporting to other organizational functions such as marketing or human resources absolutely must read this article to understand how their ethical impact is constrained and to learn what they can do to change that situation for the better.

[Bowen, S. A., & Heath, R. L. \(2006\). Under the microscope: Ethics in business. \*Communication world\*, 23\(1\), 34-36.](#)

A short and simple professionally-oriented overview of the IABC grant and some findings regarding ethics in public relations. A very fast read with user-friendly terminology, it explains a few of the most important findings of the IABC ethics research.

[Bowen, S. A., Heath, R. L., Lee, J., Painter, G., Agraz, F. J., McKie, D., et al. \(2006\). The business of truth: A guide to ethical communication. San Francisco, CA: International Association of Business Communicators.](#)



Although this study must be purchased, it is an extremely worthwhile investment for any organization beginning or renewing an ethics program. It offers both theory and data to support its recommendations. Also included are tools such as diagnostic survey you can use to measure ethics in your organization, complete results of the IABC study, and several ethics training session Power Points which can be used to train people on ethics and ethical decision making.

[Fitzpatrick, K., & Bronstein, C. \(Eds.\). \(2006\). \*Ethics in public relations: Responsible advocacy\*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.](#)

This edited book contains chapters written by some of the top scholars in public relations, each addressing a different component of advocacy and if an advocacy approach is used, what would be the requirements for it to be ethical? Topics include risk management, activism, strategic communication, feminism and diversity, and public affairs. Chapters are heavily based in current public relations theory and research, but often include implications for practice. A more advanced text than most others, you should probably save this for reading once you have completed a few more basic books since its argumentation sometimes assumes prior knowledge of public relations ethics or research in that area.

[Goodpaster, K. E. \(2007\). \*Conscience and corporate culture\*: Blackwell.](#)

Goodpaster is an eminent scholar in the area of business ethics, who has written many of the most important publications in the field. In this new book, he examines the ideas of corporate responsibility, social good, and ethics. Although not specific to public relations, this interesting book is very helpful to anyone who is working to improve an organization's culture with regard to supporting ethics. As Goodpaster is a true master of the rationale for corporate responsibility, this is also a good read if your organization has managements who consider ethics less important than profit.

[Heath, R. L. \(2006\). A rhetorical theory approach to issues management. In C. Botan & V. Hazleton \(Eds.\), \*Public Relations Theory II\* \(pp. 63-99\). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Assoc.](#) Heath provides a thorough conception of the idea of a corporation "communicating well" as an ethical obligation. Although this chapter does not focus on ethics, it provides a strong rationale for the reasons to communicate when others would like to say "No comment."

[Heath, R. L., & Bowen, S. A. \(2002\). The public relations philosophy of John W. Hill: Bricks in the foundation of issues management. \*Journal of Public Affairs\*, 2\(4\), 230-246.](#)

This article makes interesting reading for anyone looking for a 'mentor' in their public relations career. Many quotes directly from Hill and his writings are examined in the context of Hill's counseling top management and his commitment to a strong ethical responsibility and advising function in public relations.

[Kent, M. L., & Taylor, M. \(2002\). Toward a dialogic theory of public relations. \*Public Relations Review\*, 28\(1\), 21-37.](#) This is an exemplary article for providing recommendations for opening a dialogue between organizations and publics. Ethics is

both an underlying assumption and discussed in the rationale for dialogue, as well as how to maintain balanced power relations once a dialogue is started.

Kruckeberg, D. (2000). The public relations practitioner's role in practicing strategic ethics. *Public Relations Quarterly*, 45(3), 35-40.

Kruckeberg gives a strong rationale of how the communication function should be involved in ethics, why it is essential to communicate ethically with publics, and how these elements are the cornerstones of effective public relations practice.

Parkinson, M. (2001). The prsa code of professional standards and member code of ethics: Why they are neither professional or ethical. *Public Relations Quarterly*, 46(3), 27-31.

This article is good reading for all those in professional associations to encourage them to think beyond the recommendations offered in codes of ethics. Parkinson points out that often these codes become useless and discusses the flaws that make them so. Through his superb reasoning we see the problems which we should make sure to consider when resolving ethical dilemmas.

[Parks, S. D. \(1993\). Professional ethics, moral courage, and the limits of personal virtue. In B. Darling-Smith \(Ed.\), Can virtue be taught? Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.](#)

This edited book is pure applied philosophy. Although it might not seem relevant to public relations at first glance, it provides in-dept discussion of concepts such as leadership, character, honesty, and moral courage. It is recommended reading for those in senior or executive positions in order to help them become stronger ethical counselors to management.

[Parsons, P. J. \(2004\). Ethics in public relations: A guide to best practice. London: Kogan Page.](#)

This book takes a basic look at public relations ethics through a history of public relations as a professional pursuit, truth telling, trust, rights, respect, and the issue of propaganda versus persuasion. It uses many modern cases and examples to illustrate concepts, and is a good beginning overview of ethics in public relations practice. There are some brief but practical checklists and simple diagrams for helping to evaluate one's own ethics. It is written in a conversational manner and includes many interesting or humorous examples to make it entertaining yet useful reading.

Ryan, M., & Martinson, D. L. (1983). The pr officer as corporate conscience. *Public Relations Quarterly*, 28(2), 20-23.

Ryan and Martinson coined the term "public relations as corporate conscience" in this landmark article. This is a short article, containing some data and opinion from the authors.

[Seib, P., & Fitzpatrick, K. \(1995\). Public relations ethics. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers.](#)

The work by these two authors (a professor/attorney combination) takes a legalistic look of public relations work and media relations ethics. An appendix containing the major

codes of ethics in public relations is a strength of this book. Although a bit dated, this book is a good historical reference and is highly focused on codes of ethics and professionalism, as well as litigation and the governmental process in public relations.

[Stauber, J., & Rampton, S. \(1995\). Toxic sludge is good for you: Lies, damn lies, and the public relations industry. Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press.](#) This book takes a scathing look at public relations ethics, discussing numerous scandals and transgressions. Although the facts are here, they are interpreted with hyperbole. This work is useful to those seeking reasoning for why ethics should be a part of public relations to identify the problems that result when we ignore ethics.

[Tilley, E. \(2005\). The ethics pyramid: Making ethics unavoidable in the public relations process. Journal of Mass Media Ethics, 20\(4\), 305-320.](#) This article combines ethical decision making frameworks from several approaches into one simple ethics pyramid. Although it does not offer the rigor of traditional philosophical analyses, it is useful when confronting fast or uncomplicated ethical issues, or designing a simple overview.

[Wright, D. K. \(1993\). Enforcement dilemma: Voluntary nature of public relations codes. Public Relations Review, 19\(1\), 13-20.](#) This article takes a look at public relations codes of ethics. It describes the common problems of codes of ethics and making them useful in practice. This work is useful to those seeking an alternative to a code of ethics, such as ethics statements or policies. It is also helpful for those with a code of ethics to identify the problems one should guard against.