

Rebuilding Corporate Trust and Integrity: The crucial role of the communicator

by James E. Lukaszewski, ABC, APR, Fellow PRSA, CCEP

This article is a preview of Jim Lukaszewski's next IABC web-based teleseminar, "Rebuilding Corporate Trust and Integrity: The crucial role of the communicator," on Wednesday, 17 December 2008, from 12:00 to 1:30 p.m. EST. Please visit www.krm.com/IABC to find out more about the program and to register.

As we enter yet another cycle of corporate scandal—now on a global scale—we see a business and organizational leadership environment that is increasingly dominated by public disappointment and suffering, media disclosures, governmental confusion, looming government prosecution, and aggressive and growing compliance and conduct regulation. This is all because business leaders, as well as other leaders, have neglected their responsibility to build and rebuild integrity as a workplace principle, a guiding force in the workplace. Public and employee trust of these organizations are directly linked to integrity.

One also has to ask the question: Where were all of the communicators from Wall Street, Main Street and in between, as the current economic crisis developed?

The public relations profession continuously suffers from schizophrenia. On one hand, we want to be at the table, making decisions and guiding strategy with the boss in good times and bad. Many of us see ourselves as the guiding conscience of our organizations. So far the record for the profession in either arena is mixed. There have been some successes, some strikeouts, some absolute no hitters and some MIA.

As we will soon see, state legislators, Congress, parliaments and other legislative bodies outside the U.S. will pass hundreds of new laws imposing extensive compliance requirements and an ever-increasing stack of regulations, restrictions and oversight requirements in addition to mandated and self-imposed monitoring of the organizations that are blamed for economic meltdown. Yet, virtually none of these measures will restore public, investor, employee or customer trust. The restoration of trust will only take place when the most essential ingredient of ethical behavior is addressed openly and vigorously: integrity.

In the process of writing this article, I attended a meeting for communicators primarily involved in financial communication—those from banks, Wall Street and very large businesses. The banking communicators were busy explaining how difficult it was going to be to figure out how to resolve the mess in the mortgage markets and elsewhere. As they muttered and meandered through things clearly too complicated for simple folks to understand, I raised my hand and said,

“From the public’s perspective, only three things are necessary to resolve the banking crisis. The first is restoration of trust through the leadership of one or more individuals in whom the public have faith and whom, perhaps, these organizations fear a little bit. The second is that all of the financial organizations and institutions that failed need to begin begging for increased regulation, as they apologize and take responsibility for the horrendous damage they have caused so many individuals, families and businesses. Third, many people will have to go to prison as a result of their actions, even though we know that much of what happened was unregulated and, therefore, was thought to be unpunishable.”

I concluded by saying, “Make no mistake, all of the industries and organizations that take public tax dollars will be subjected to a level of transparency that will expose many practices and business activities as questionable. How prepared are you, as communicators at the top of these organizations, to begin guiding management through the tremendous exposure, potential embarrassment and potential humiliation that may occur over the next several years?”

Communicators can, if they choose, play a vital role in restoring trust. Lawyers aggressively examine corporate compliance with codes of conduct. That's where the monitoring takes place; the police also play a significant role in the detection, deterrence and disclosure of infractions. The communicator’s work is to facilitate integrity. Together, communication advisors and attorneys can help leaders act out the principles of integrity that will guide and instruct the organization.

A compliant organization is one where codes of conduct are observed and respected, where inspiration and motivation from leadership and management drive a desire to work with integrity in an ethical organization.

Restoring trust and maintaining an environment of integrity occurs in an organization along two powerful tracks: the principles that guide daily processes and decision making, and uncompromising vigilance. Here are some examples of ethical principles:

- **Integrity:** Our intention is to do the right thing at every opportunity, and especially when there are serious choices to be made.
- **Constructive aspirations:** We can justify and explain everything we seek to achieve and accomplish.
- **Commitment to compliance and good conduct:** We are a compliant organization that builds trust through everyone with whom we deal with.
- **Recognition:** We admire, respect and learn from those who display integrity.
- **Vigilance in upholding principles and priorities:** We are the keepers of each others' integrity.
- **Everyone must be committed to integrity:** We have learned that, when integrity is missing, bad things happen, rapidly.

Uncompromising vigilance means to clearly define, emphasize and relentlessly enforce organizational values and beliefs. Integrity can only grow when there is an unconditional commitment to prevent, detect, deter, or expose and learn from those activities that run counter to the ethics of the organization.

Integrity is about setting guidelines in three areas: work, behavior and relationships. These are areas that public relations practitioners can dig into and provide extraordinary language and message leadership to their organizations.

The problem is, and will continue to be, that many bosses think integrity is “sissy stuff.” Years ago, after one of my clients pled guilty to quite a number of felonies, the client, their lawyers and I were meeting to discuss the implementation of the plea agreement they'd settled on. After I finished commenting on the compliance and integrity programs that were required, the CEO looked at me and said, “Lukaszewski, whenever you're around it feels a lot like Sunday school.” I looked him in the eye and said, “Tom, when somebody has pled guilty to as many felonies as your company has, it seems to me a little Sunday school might be useful.” He didn't laugh. He was gone in less than a year. Having integrity means standing up for what's right. It means that an organization must unlearn inappropriate behaviors. It means learning how to handle ethical dilemmas and difficult issues. Integrity also teaches how to bring out the best in an organization—the best people, the best products, the best relationships, the best work and the best practices.

Leaders set the tone for integrity in organizations, mostly through what they say, how they behave and, to some degree, what they write. Each of these elements relies on communication and, quite often, the availability of a skilled communicator to help.

If there ever was a growth area for public relations—one in which most of us absolutely, positively fit—it is this third crucial aspect of ethical development: integrity—behaving with honor and expecting everyone else to do the same. If there's one lesson these difficult times teach us it is that without corporate integrity, bad things will happen and the damage can be devastating.

If you'd like to examine this topic in more depth, and explore how you might expand your knowledge in this arena, here are some useful places to visit:

- The Ethics and Compliance Officers Association, www.ecoa.org
- Ethics Resource Center, www.ethics.org
- *Ethikos Magazine*, www.singerpubs.com/ethikos
- The Institute for Global Ethics, www.globalethics.org
- Josephson Institute of Ethics, www.josephsoninstitute.org/jilinks.htm
- www.prsa.org (To find the Public Relations Society of America's Code of Ethics, Click on, “About Us,” and scroll to, “Ethics.”)
- www.iabc.com (To find the International Association of Business Communicators' Code of Ethics, Click on, “About IABC,” and then, “Code of Ethics.”)
- www.globalalliancepr.org (To find the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management's ethics project, Click on, “GA Projects,” and then, “Ethical PR.”)
- Compliance training and certification, www.integrity-interactive.com
- Stier Anderson, L.L.C. (Corporate Integrity Law), www.stier.com
- Compliance Systems Legal Group, www.cslg.com
- Compliance training and certification, www.eyeonintegrity.com