

Under the

A new IABC Research Foundation study highlights the need for training in and understanding of ethical issues

by Shannon A. Bowen, Ph.D., and Robert L. Heath, Ph.D.

Ethics. Responsibility. Character. These topics generate considerable public and private debate. Public opinion surveys on honesty and ethics reveal that journalists, advertising personnel and public relations people score near the bottom—alongside used-car salespeople—on such polls. Is this public perception true to reality or a matter of myth?

The IABC Research Foundation initiated a global research

study to advance our understanding of business communication ethics. The results were somewhat surprising, though certainly the topic of ethics has been top-of-mind among communicators for some time.

CW often delves into the issue, as readers—communication professionals—find themselves facing more ethical dilemmas in the workplace. In the May–June 2005 issue, Christine Nyirjesy Bragale, ABC, reviewing *Ethics in Public Relations*, asked, “Is ethical public relations an oxymoron?” “After you read this book,” she concluded, “you won’t have any doubts that the truthful answer is no.”

How organizations define ethics is another matter. In this issue, for example, William Briggs, Ed.D., and Archana Verma discuss corporate social responsibility (CSR) as a way of doing good to earn a favorable reputation and benefit the bottom line (see page 25). CSR discussions usually do not include communication ethics, but they often feature strategic philanthropy. Yet organizational ethics is a guiding principle of CSR, and without that discussion, the consideration of the topic is incomplete.

Some CEOs also fear that paying attention to ethics is “too expensive.” For example, increasing employee benefits or installing costly new equipment to address environmental concerns could increase operating costs. But Robert Dilenschneider and John Salak, writing in the June–July 2003 issue of *CW*, suggest that ethical communicators finish first because they also meet legal standards (in financial reporting) and therefore attract investors. Ethical communicators enjoy a competitive advantage because transparency leads to trust.

PR practitioners say they often advise on matters of ethics—and want to do so—but they frequently butt heads with legal counsel. Seeing the flipside, Daniel Goodwin, in the October–November 2003 issue of *CW*, worries that it is presumptuous to think that communication professionals can be the ethical consciences of organizations. Nevertheless, he writes, they “have a strong role to play in ensuring that a company is able to achieve its

‘Ethics in Business Communication’ results

The IABC Research Foundation surveyed more than 1,800 practitioners from North America, New Zealand, Israel and Australia about their stance on ethics in communication. Some of the key findings:

4.61

Ethics considerations are a vital part of executive decision making.

4.12

Public relations practitioners should advise management on ethical matters.

3.80

Clients and employers take a positive approach to ethics.

3.55

Clients and employers maintain clear standards, are open about ethical conduct, and encourage conversations about ethical matters and issues.

5=strongly agree
1=strongly disagree

Microscope

strategy while remaining true to its values.”

But do we as a profession know the essence of communication ethics? Are we agreed on the role practitioners should play in ethical decision making?

Those were the questions the IABC Research Foundation set out to answer. The Foundation received responses to its ethics survey from 1,827 people, yielding an overall response rate of roughly 17 percent. Qualitative data was collected in North America, New Zealand, Israel and Australia via focus groups and in-depth interviews with senior and middle managers. Respondents were veteran practitioners: The majority had 10 or more years of work experience, were over age 35 and were college-educated; approximately three-quarters were women. Among the responses, more than 70 percent reported studying ethics or receiving ethics training “not at all” or just at a cursory level.

The process of ethics

Communicators agreed or strongly agreed to the seven items that addressed their role dealing with ethical concerns and issues of organizations. They agreed most strongly with two items: that ethics considerations are a vital part of executive decision making, and that communicators should

advise management on ethical matters. (See chart on page 34.) Respondents perceived that their organizations maintain a clear standard, are open about ethical conduct, and encourage conversations about ethical matters and issues (i.e., a healthy, open, ethical communication climate). They also reported that they generally agreed with the “positive nature” of their organizational ethics values.

Using factor analysis, we identified two ethical roles available to communicators: conscience counselor and core values manager. The conscience counselor sets and clarifies the expectations of ethical behavior and provides ethical analysis to management, often counseling management on a case-by-case basis. The core values manager identifies the values of the organization, deals with values-related ethical issues, and perpetuates the reputation and values of the organization.

These different but sometimes intersecting profiles suggest that ethical decision making is an ongoing process in organizations. Rather than a once-a-year session, ethics is a process of communication and decision making involving a continued commitment to analysis and good will on the part of the organization.

Contrasting views

Not all communicators agree that they should be engaged in organizational ethics decision

making. Indeed, they are sharply divided over two belief systems: Should public relations act as an ethical conscience or counsel, or should it not be involved in deciding matters of ethics? Communicators outside the U.S. reported even greater reluctance to engage in ethics counsel than did American practitioners. The vehemence and entrenched nature of each side of this debate indicates that a strong rift divides the field.

Those who feel no need to advise the management team or others on ethics reasoned that such considerations fell under the domain of the legal department: “I don’t want to be responsible for ethics—let the legal folks worry about that.” Some explained that they “did not need to think about ethics” explicitly and systematically because being an ethical person will carry over into business decisions.

Many respondents revealed they were selectively invited to strategic planning meetings or requested to give the CEO ethics counsel. One said, “We are supposed to provide input, but it seems they want advice in a limited manner.” A common complaint was that public relations was not involved in strategic decision making, but was then told to communicate about those decisions.

One senior-level practitioner

Rather than a once-a-year session, ethics is a process of communication and decision making involving a continued commitment to analysis and good will on the part of the organization.

Countering the position that communicators should not perform an ethical role, those who favor acting as an ethical conscience are not afraid of confrontation with legal counsel.

described his job responsibilities mostly in terms of ethical decisions: “My job is filled with ethical issues—who we are, what we’ve done, what we’d like to do, and what do we want to do in the future.” Another noted that although the CEO may ask communicators what publics and media might think of a decision from an ethical standpoint, that communicator is rarely said to be acting as an official ethical counselor, adviser or conscience of the organization. As the practitioner explained, “I do ethics stuff all the time—they just don’t call it that.”

A better world

On the other side of the divide, many respondents argued that ethics and reputational concerns go hand in hand. When ethical concerns and reputation are linked, communicators are more likely to act as ethical consciences or ethics advisers in their organizations. “The essence of ethical thinking results from considering our responsibility to key publics. How will what we do affect them?” wrote one survey respondent. Another explained: “We hold to certain standards—that all publics need information, and have a right to know.”

Countering the position that communicators should not

perform an ethical role, those who favor acting as an ethical conscience are not afraid of confrontation with legal counsel. Several respondents in this study reported a concern with the conscripted view that legal analysis often takes when discussing ethics, especially in this age of transparency.

Standards practice

Rifts divide the field, and organizational politics are alive and well. Counsel is often based more on earned respect than on systematic decision making. And education on ethical decision making seems lacking. There is danger of otherwise well-intentioned communicators falling into deeper problems if due attention is not paid to ethical details.

The current education and training of communication professionals does not effectively arm them with an understanding of ethical frameworks or with practical information on how to respond to an ethical challenge. A first step would certainly involve more rigorous training in this area. However, that alone would not be enough to change the existing situation without clearly establishing that:

- There really are ethical standards for public communication.
- Communication professionals really will follow those standards.

After all, why should communicators be any different from other professionals who have seen the need for clear ethical standards?

The challenge includes the need to let senior management know their communication staff members operate within professional ethical standards—like other professions—and they will respect and adhere to those standards. Practitioners who feel they lack a thorough grounding in communication ethics must rely on our trade organizations for standardization and reinforcement. Ethical standards must be communicated within the organization and, in the case of PR firms, presented to new clients. Only then will leaders and clients come to rely on their communicators for ethical guidance, counsel and the management of core values. •

about the study

The “Ethics in Business Communication” study was funded by the IABC Research Foundation. The grant team included Shannon A. Bowen, Robert L. Heath, David McKie, Jaesub Lee, Margalit Toledano, and practitioners Francisco Agraz and Graham Painter.

about the authors

Shannon A. Bowen, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of communication at the University of Maryland.

Robert L. Heath, Ph.D., is a professor of communication at the University of Houston (Texas). Both specialize in public relations.

Jaesub Lee, Ph.D., an associate professor of communication at the University of Houston (Texas), contributed the statistical analysis for this article.