



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In all organizations, the process of communication involves several essential elements: communicators (message senders and receivers), messages, channels (media) and context; thus, these elements are the fundamental sources or loci of ethical concerns in business communication. Simply defined, ethics means attention to the moral aspect of organizational decision making: whether actions are right, wrong, worthy of respect, uphold duty or perceived to benefit a greater good. Ethics are generally based on values or deeply held belief systems of what behavior is laudable and what behavior is unacceptable. The current literature review and empirical research has focused on these elements, and we will provide an encapsulated overview of the results of this study.

Public relations professionals engage in the strategic management of core communication processes of their business. These professional communicators are presumed to carry the primary ethical or moral responsibilities in business communication. According to this study, there are several characteristics of communicators and their organizations that affect business communication ethics; major ones include critical thinking skills, interpersonal communication competence and skills, rationalization and justification, employee communication rights and expectations, level of intellect, education, training, knowledge, other demographic background information like gender and age, and treatment of audiences. Many respondents suggested that there are several characteristics of messages that influence business communication ethics, including:

- ▶ Strategic ambiguity and equivocation.
- ▶ Credibility.
- ▶ Honesty.
- ▶ Dishonesty.
- ▶ Deception.
- ▶ Silence (what's not communicated).
- ▶ Impression management message strategies such as social desirability motivations and outguessing, rhetorical techniques/acts, language choice, readability of the message and bias in language (e.g., sexism, racial slurs and sexual harassment).

Ethical concerns in media were centered on e-mail and computer-mediated communication (e.g., changing relationships, fragility and ownership of data, use, abuse, and misuse), the availability of different types of media to handle ethical issues and questions, and the use of formal versus informal communication channels. Finally, while limited in terms of empirical research, our findings regarding contextual ethical issues in business communication were focused on such relational environments as power, authority, role and status; written codes of ethics; culture; ethics (communication) climate; and new communication environments that have emerged due to advances in information/communication technology.

METHODOLOGY / Quantitative data were collected with the help of IABC. IABC issued a call for participation to its approximately 13,000 members worldwide. Members were asked to take a survey concerning ethical issues and concerns related to public relations, and then forward on the invitation to other professionals in public relations, resulting in a snowball sample of international scope. IABC members responded to ethics-related questions on a web site run by the University of Houston (which was linked to the IABC web site). The final sample size was 1,827 individuals, with an overall response rate of 17.6 percent.

Qualitative data were collected by researchers in North America, New Zealand, Israel and Australia. Qualitative data were added to the quantitative data in order to augment the survey and add depth and understanding to survey data and responses. The explanation and context provided for by qualitative data allows the research team to more fully understand and explain findings. The researchers conducted focus groups, in-depth interviews and elite interviews. The qualitative research was used to explore in depth the causative reasons behind trends we found in our quantitative research.

RESPONDENT PROFILE / Respondents to our survey were largely veteran senior-level public relations practitioners, the majority of whom had more than 10 years of work experience, were over 35 years old and were college-educated. Approximately 73 percent were female, and 26 percent were male. Over 70 percent of the respondents reported studying ethics or receiving ethics training not at all, or just at a cursory level. Respondents chose corporate communication as the name that most closely resembles their departmental or organizational work unit most often (n = 540, 29.6%), followed by communications (n = 384, 21.0%), marketing communication(s) (n = 306, 16.8%), public relations (n = 168, 9.2%) and public affairs (n = 134, 7.3%).

Participants for the qualitative portion of this research were identified largely through personal contacts, volunteer recruitment from IABC and PRSA chapters, and snowball sampling as a result of participants referring other public relations professionals to the survey. The elite interviewees were recruited mostly through personal contacts of senior team members. Qualitative data were noted, transcribed and coded for emergent patterns. Specifically illustrative verbatim quotes are used to explain the findings of the survey research when appropriate. Most of the respondents and participants in this research requested anonymity.

As we will discuss in subsequent chapters, qualitative data shed light on some international differences among participants that were not as readily apparent in survey data due to the complexity associated with worldwide data collection. Many of the elite interview comments are from senior-level corporate public relations executives. Focus group participants ranged from entry-level practitioners through those retired from the profession after a long career, providing for a good range of comments based on age and experience level. We found differences in how public relations practitioners view ethical communication based on their age and experience levels. Pragmatic and budgetary concerns limited the number

of focus groups that could be conducted in different cultures; therefore, funding in future studies will continue to be an important factor in learning as much as possible about ethical decision making in public relations.

SURVEY FINDINGS / Survey findings might reflect a North American or Western bias due to large IABC membership in those areas and to the survey instrument being written in English. Universal generalizations should not be drawn, but the research findings should be suggestive of the attitudes and beliefs of IABC members across many countries. The questions asked often shape the results of research, and the questions in this survey were necessarily brief so that we could generate a large enough response rate to gain a true snapshot of the ethical attitudes of IABC members and public relations practitioners around the world. Finally, the researchers suggest conducting future research that can be coded and analyzed by country or geographic region to allow for comparisons among cultures and economic systems with regard to the ethical values held by public relations professionals. Our response rate is within acceptable limits, but might indicate a self-selection bias in which those sensitive to ethical matters completed the survey, and those considering ethics of little importance did not. In that case, the challenge facing those who want to engage the profession in a discussion of ethics is perhaps even greater than these findings suggest.

Public relations practitioners agreed or strongly agreed to all items (1 through 7) that addressed public relations practitioners' roles dealing with ethical concerns and issues in organizations/management (overall mean = 3.88, SD = .58 on a five-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" [1] to "strongly agree" [5]). They agreed most strongly to two items: (a) ethics considerations are a vital part of executive decision making (mean = 4.61, SD = .64) and (b) public relations practitioners should advise management on ethical matters (mean = 4.12, SD = .81). Further, factor analysis on role items identified two dimensions or types of roles for public relations practitioners: conscience counselor (general preparations, expectations and practices of conscience ethics counseling for the management/organization) and core values manager (dealing with value-related ethical issues and concerns).

Respondents typically perceived that their organizations maintain a clear standard, are open about ethical conduct, and encourage conversations about ethical matters and issues— i.e., healthy, open, ethical communication climate (mean = 3.55, SD = .94). Public relations practitioners also reported that they generally agreed that their organizational ethics values were of a "positive nature" (mean = 3.80, SD = .80).

Additional, largely inferential, explorative analyses have been conducted involving background information, role expectations, ethics climates and ethics values. They are reported in detail in the chapters that follow. In the opinion of the research team, the most important finding is that there are two ethical roles for public relations professionals to perform, not just one, as we previously assumed. Our factor analyses identified a clear distinction between the two ethical roles available to a public relations practitioner. They are, as identified above,

the conscience counselor and the core values manager. We selected these names because the factor loadings were clear and consistent with the activities required of each manager.

The conscience counselor is responsible for expectations of ethical behavior and providing ethical analysis to the management of the organization. The core values manager is responsible for identifying the values of the organization, dealing with values-related ethical issues, and perpetuating the reputation and values of the organization with its publics. We believe that these two ethics roles are distinct, although they might be performed by the same practitioner in some organizations. The enormity of this finding is reinforced by the idea that ethics is an ongoing organizational process that is complex enough to warrant different roles as different facets of ethics and values are examined on a continual basis. We believe that there are enough ethical questions in business communication to warrant two different foci for the analysis and resolution of moral dilemmas. Both the conscience counselor and the core values manager believe that ethical considerations are a vitally important part of public relations and communication both internally and externally. These roles will be examined in more detail later in this report.

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS / Our qualitative research found that many public relations practitioners do perform the role of ethics counsel, acting as the ethical conscience of their organizations, or of core values manager, reminding management of what values the organization stands for and incorporating those into communication. However, the most disturbing findings in our project were also generated by the qualitative data. We found a sharp and radical divide between public relations practitioners on matters of ethics. The sharp divide uncovered in this research is between two basic belief systems: those who believe public relations should act as an ethical conscience or counsel in an organization and those who believe public relations should not be involved in deciding matters of ethics. Participants in both interviews and focus groups appeared to be split relatively evenly between these two categories, with almost no “moderate” opinions. However, public relations practitioners outside the U.S. reported an even greater reluctance to engage in ethics counsel than did practitioners from the U.S. The vehemence and entrenched nature of each side of this debate is indicative of a strong rift within the field.

A common perception was that public relations practitioners do not need to advise the dominant coalition or others on ethics because such considerations fall under the domain of the legal department: “I don’t want to be responsible for ethics—let the legal folks worry about that.” One theme that emerged from the data was that an analysis of ethics is not necessary if the organization follows legal requirements and seeks to do no harm. Participants explained that they “did not need to think about ethics” explicitly or on a systematic basis because they believed that being a good person would carry over into their business decisions. For example, one senior public relations executive said, “It’s simple stuff. Fundamentally you’re either a good person or you’re not.”

Many participants noted the selective nature of invitations to strategic planning meetings or requests from the CEO for ethics counsel. For instance, one practitioner said, “We are supposed to provide input, but it seems they want advice in a limited manner—I go to them—not inviting you to come to them.” A common complaint was that public relations was not involved in strategic decision making, but was then told to communicate about the decision that others made to publics outside the organization—a decision in which public relations had no involvement.

Many participants indicated that their input on matters of ethics was not normally sought by the dominant coalition. From this lack of action, they reasoned that counsel on ethical dilemmas or core values was not a part of their responsibilities or normal duties. For instance, one public relations manager explained, “I am not often expected or called on to provide counsel based on values. So I don’t.” Some practitioners reported that intra-organizational politics played a role in who had access to the dominant coalition and strategic planning meetings: “Struggles between departments exist. I gave them advice—and the CEO agreed in private, but then marketing wouldn’t go for it because of competition.” As argued by the “Excellence” study researchers (2002), access to the dominant coalition is a must for public relations to contribute at a strategic level to organizational efficacy. This research found that access and inclusion are also necessary in order for public relations professionals to act as an organization’s ethical conscience.

On the other side of the divide, many participants in this research made the argument that ethics and reputation concerns go hand-in-hand, making ethical counsel a natural activity in public relations. Because ethical concerns and reputation—in the view of these participants—were linked together, it was only natural that many of them began to act as ethical consciences or ethics counsels in their organizations. Often, this progression was later in their careers and proceeded at what one participant called “the pace of cold molasses.”

Many participants confirmed that they held a regular and expected role in advising management on ethics. For instance, one senior-level practitioner 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. I just issued our first social responsibility report.” Another participant noted that the role of ethical counselor, adviser or ethical conscience is rarely named as such, but that it is common for the CEO to ask what publics and media might think of a decision. A public relations manager explained, “I do ethics stuff all the time—they just don’t call it that.”

Other communicators saw their responsibility of representing publics to management and vice versa as an ethical or moral duty. Insisting that ethical analysis and effective relationships were linked, one executive maintained, “The essence of ethical thinking results from considering our responsibility to key publics. How will what we do affect them?” Another professional communicator explained, “We hold to certain standards—that all publics need information and have a right to know.”

Counter to what the practitioners against an ethical role noted, those who were in favor of acting as an ethical conscience were not afraid of confrontation with legal counsel. Public relations practitioners in this study reported a concern with the limited view a legal analysis often took when discussing matters of ethics. Many asserted that public relations practitioners are taking the role of ethics counsel more commonly in this age of transparency.

The well-being of both organizations and publics could be enhanced through both academic study and professional attention to public relations managers performing either the role of ethical conscience or core values manager. Unfortunately, a state of neglect exists in terms of education, preparation, training and support for these roles. Even more lacking is support among many public relations practitioners. Perhaps if all PR professionals received coordinated ethical training, they would be able to use the same vocabulary to discuss these admittedly difficult abstract concepts.

TWO PRACTITIONERS REFLECT ON THE STUDY: BALANCING THEORY AND REALITY IN ETHICAL PUBLIC RELATIONS / Professors in this research argue persuasively that public relations practitioners must be committed to enhancing public discourse regarding ethics. As public relations practitioners, we envision a public relations profession that is respected by clients and the public. However, if that is to occur, a majority of us must commit to ethical norms. It is essential to the practice of public relations that PR practitioners recognize their role in defining reality and, in doing so, adhere to ethical standards. It is important for society that those ethical norms be implemented daily in specific situations, detailed practice, particular cases and actual locations.

We consider ourselves “typical public relations practitioners” who entered the field not knowing much about those who came before us. We certainly did not envision judging our daily activities within an ethical framework while planning and implementing public relations activities. Neither of us was asked to operate unethically; rather, ethics was something that “just happened.” It was just one of those unstated, understood, commonalities shared with those around us. Not surprisingly, it was by pursuing graduate level studies that it became clear that ethical behavior is a key component of any profession. It is not merely a matter of “representing the client and doing what he wants.” It is “representing the client ethically.”

This research illustrates the existence of the “ethics just happens” attitude—the apparent lack of awareness by public relations practitioners that the true essence of a craft that affects millions of peoples’ reality must include conscious awareness of the ethical standards being applied. The true professional will consciously apply his or her ethical framework to every decision; a mere public relations craftsman will allow her- or himself to be swayed by a client’s ethics, for better or worse. There is a danger of otherwise well-intentioned public relations practitioners falling into problems too deep for them to escape from if due attention is not paid to the ethical details.

Many professions have established ethical standards. Medicine, engineering and journalism are just a few examples. Likewise, professional communicators have ethical standards provided by various communication trade organizations. Yet these same professional communicators tell us they are reluctant to raise ethical issues with their employers or clients—and sometimes admit to participating in activities that made them uncomfortable. Will we just ignore an unrecognized ethical ticking time bomb “until later when we have the time to think about it”?

The problem with ethics, as it stands today for public relations practitioners, is that it is perceived as a “let’s worry about that next year” type of thing. We should be fully conscious of ethical issues on a daily basis and aware that ethics is an inherent element of all those details and ordinary decisions typical public relations practitioners make every day. Because ethics is part of our daily stock in trade, and because those working in public relations, taken as a whole, make daily decisions affecting the reality of millions of people, the respectable and credible public relations practitioner should become a leader in defining ethical realities. And, if we become respectable and credible public relations professionals, we should not be bashful about defining ethical realities for others.

Public relations must become a profession dominated by those with a personal interest in “doing the right thing.” Ethical public relations must be supported by public relations leaders who are respectable and credible. Ethics should not be an ephemeral issue discussed only in scholarly chapters and at sparsely-attended professional development meetings. In the absence of a meaningful attempt to inculcate an awareness of ethical analyses in all areas of public relations, professionalism will be slow to develop in this field. In that case, only the economic marketplace and our clients’ ethics will control the ethical content of our public relations practice—not the best way to control ethical decisions.

The interviews in this study also make it clear that while practitioners’ influence with management on ethical issues may vary somewhat based on their status in the organization, in the end their input on ethics is not wanted or solicited except during crisis situations. Even then, the question seems to be more of a practical nature than an ethical one: How far can we go without angering the public?

Practitioners are sometimes immersed in corporate or organizational behavior that is overtly unethical, but usually in minor ways that are acceptable within the ethical framework of the individual practitioner. These practitioners tell us they have learned to function in a challenging environment by using their own sense of ethics, which means there is no particular consistency in ethical decision making within the communication field. In other words, the perception of what is ethical varies with the person and the situation. This finding does not mean that the formal standards that exist are not the right ones, but it does mean they do not seem to be implemented evenly when ethical challenges arise.

Clearly, the education and training of communication professionals today 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 at the university level. However, that alone would not be enough to change the existing situation without clearly establishing within the hiring organizations that:

- ▶ There really are ethical standards for public communications.
- ▶ Public relations professionals 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, then, is broader than effectively training communication students in communication ethics. It includes the need to let senior managers know that their communication staff members operate within professional ethical standards—like other professions—and that they will respect and adhere to those standards. It also seems clear that existing practitioners who feel they lack a thorough grounding in communication ethics (which, based on this research, would be almost all of them), must rely on communication trade organizations for standardization and reinforcement. Ethical standards must also be communicated within the organization and, in the case of public relations 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.