PRSA Public Relations Society of America

Instructor's Guide: Use of Influence Strategies to Provide Ethics Counsel

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Lessons from the PRSA Educators Academy & Arthur W. Page Center for Ethics and Integrity in Public Communication

Rationale:

Ethical decision making is foundational to effective public relations. However, speaking up to more senior leaders when an ethical concern arises can be quite intimidating, especially for young professionals. Doing so in an offensive manner can lead to damage to one's career and relationships with colleagues and result in consequences such as loss of job, demotion, and other forms of retaliation. At the same time, failure to speak up also can result in damage to the organization's reputation as well as your own personal reputation. This lesson will introduce students to the techniques used effectively by senior executives, such as the members of the PRSA College of Fellows. The students will then apply those techniques through the use of sample case studies.

Learning Objectives:

1. Students will be able to identify and apply specific techniques that they can use to raise ethical concerns.
2. Students will be introduced to gender differences in choice of influence tactics and should be encouraged to discuss how diversity may impact our interactions with others.
3. Students should be encouraged to use role play to practice using these various techniques and develop confidence in their abilities to use the approaches.

Overview:

Professors should begin class by discussing what ethics are and why they are important to public relations practice. The discussion then moves to examining the role of public relations as an ethical conscience. Some resources that provide insight into the debate regarding this role include Bowen, 2008, and Neill & Drumwright, 2012.

Several scholars have discussed potential barriers to ethics counsel. For recent survey research see Neill & Weaver, 2017, & Neill, 2016.

Next, the lecture shifts to a discussion on influence and available resources. Finally, the core focus of the lecture will be examining the various influence tactics that can be used to provide ethics counsel. Additional insight on each of the tactics is listed below:

- **Use of Case Studies** – it will be helpful to discuss where case studies can be located. Of course, news stories are always great sources of unethical behavior. Examples also can be found on the PRSA website and through conversations with mentors and colleagues.
- **Use of Research** – this technique can involve both primary and secondary research to better understand the issue. This is a good opportunity to reinforce previous class lessons regarding research in public relations generally.
- **Legitimacy Appeals** – this technique can involve referring to the company's policies, core values, and codes of ethics
- **Recruiting Allies/Coalition Members** – this approach involves raises your concerns to a trusted colleague and then either going together to raise the concern or letting someone

else raise the concern for you. The second approach usually involves someone in a more senior position such as your boss. It should be noted that this technique was preferred by women who mentioned that they were often outnumbered by men in the boardroom. Coalitions are a more complex approach and may merit a separate class discussion.

- **Asking Questions/Listening/ Dialogue** – this tactic involves simply asking questions to understand where someone is coming from and then listening to their responses to help you better formulate a response.
- **Citing Personal Experiences** – this approach is somewhat self-explanatory as it involves citing examples of when you personally have faced similar situations and sharing what worked or didn't work.
- **Pressure** – this technique is typically used in connection with allies or coalition members and involves being assertive and persistent in raising the issue.
- **Emotional Appeals** – this tactic involves appealing to the emotions of the person you're attempting to persuade or can involve the emotional concerns of stakeholders.
- **Raising the Concerns from the Perspective of Key Stakeholders/Serving as a Devil's Advocate** – this technique involves representing the concerns of some other party. Shahinpoor and Matt (2007) pointed out that the person taking on this role does not have to disclose his or her personal views, and doesn't necessarily have to agree with the views of these stakeholders.
- **Direct Approach** – this approach is somewhat self-explanatory as it involves directly confronting someone about the issue. It is often used when something is considered highly objectionable.
- **Use of scenarios/ alternatives/solutions** – this approach takes some time to research and develop as you have to fully explore the issue and potential impact, as well as identify other viable options.
- **Headline Test** – this tactic simply involves having someone attempt to visualize what the potential media story headline might be in order to consider the media consequences of a decision.
- **Use of Internal Anonymous Reporting Systems** – Some companies and organizations have online forms or hotlines for reporting ethical concerns. Students should be cautioned that these systems are not always safe to use and that they should learn how those systems works in their companies and organizations. For example, if the CEO is the one engaged in unethical behavior and the ethics committee reports to him/her, they may have to identify other means for reporting the concern.
- **Rocking the Boat/Whistleblowing** – Redding (1985) defined a boat-rocker as someone "who expresses dissent – in a direct straight-forward manner – *within*" the organization" (p. 246). A whistleblower "voices his or her protest to people *outside* the organization" (Redding, 1985, p. 246). These approaches are used as a last resort when other approaches fail to produce ethical behavior.

Class Activity:

To achieve the above learning objectives, students will be asked to review one of the case studies provided and then identify which provisions from the PRSA code of ethics may apply to the scenario. The students should then select one of the influence strategies mentioned in the lecture to use to raise their concern and provide justification for why they chose that particular approach.

Additional Resources:

Berger, B. K., & Reber, B. H. (2006). *Gaining influence in public relations: the role of resistance in practice*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Bowen, S. A. (2008). A state of neglect: Public relations as 'corporate conscience' or ethics counsel. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 20, 271–296.

Neill, M.S. & Barnes, A. (2018). *Public Relations Ethics: Senior PR Pros Tell Us How to Speak Up and Keep Your Job*, New York: Business Expert Press.

Neill, M.S., & Barnes, A. (In Press). The Use of Influence Tactics by Senior Public Relations Executives to Provide Ethics Counsel, *Journal of Media Ethics.*

Neill, M.S., & Barnes, A. (2017). Ethics Counsel in Public Relations Practice: Influence Tactics, Barriers and Consequences. Paper presented at the PRSA Educators Academy Super

Saturday Conference, Boston, MA.
Neill, M. S., & Weaver, N. (2017) Silent & unprepared: Most millennial practitioners have not embraced role as ethical conscience. *Public Relations Review*, 43 (2), 337-344. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2017.01.002
Neill, M.S. (2016). "Accredited vs. non-accredited: How accreditation impacts perceptions and readiness to provide ethics counsel," *Public Relations Review, 42,* 856-866.
Neill, M.S., & Drumwright, M.E. (2012). PR professionals as organizational conscience, *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, *27 (4*), 220-234.
PRSA Code of Ethics: http://apps.prsa.org/AboutPRSA/Ethics/CodeEnglish/#Preamble
Redding, W. C. (1985). Rocking boats, blowing whistles, and teaching speech communication, *Communication Education*, 34 (3), 245-258.

Use of Influence Strategies to Provide Ethics Counsel

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THE ARTHUR W. PAGE CENTER
for integrity in public communication

The Basics

Ethics - "a systematic attempt to make sense of our individual and social moral experience, to determine the rules that ought to govern human conduct, the values worth pursuing, and the character traits deserving development in life" (DeGeorge, 2009, p. 13).

In practice, **ethical decision making** "involves making rational choices between what is good and bad, between what is morally justifiable action and what is not" (Patterson & Wilkins, 2005, p. 4).

Ethics in Public Relations

Anthony D'Angelo, 2017 Chair-Elect for the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), said ethics are essential :

"As the late Patrick Jackson wisely noted, the currency of public relations is relationships. I think, essential to that currency, in order to make it work, the bedrock has to be trust … built on an ethical foundation and once trust is broken, you can't have effective public relations, nor can you have an effective organization. So it's really a central, important, grave responsibility."

Ethics in Public Relations

Public Relations' role as an ethical conscience:

"a lack of impulsiveness, care in mapping out alternatives and consequences….and awareness of and concern for the effects of one's decision and policies on others" (Goodpaster & Matthews, 1982, p.134).

Ethics in Public Relations

Public Relations' role as an ethical conscience:

- Tied to our issues management and reputation management roles
- Involves considering the concerns of various stakeholders and potential impact to the company/organization's reputation when making decisions

Challenges in Providing Ethics Counsel

- Lack of training in ethics or business (e.g. don't know how to read financial reports)
- Access to information and decision makers
- Speaking truth to power - Fear of losing job, demotion, or other forms of retaliation

Being Influential

Power has been defined as “getting things done, or getting others to do them” and influence is “the process through which power is actually used or realized” (Berger & Reber, 2006, p. 3-4; Pfeffer, 1992).

Influence means “having a voice” or “being listened to”, and “the ability to convince others of your point of view” (Berger & Reber, 2006, p. 18).

Sources of Influence

1) Individual - personal expertise, experience, record of performance, education

2) Structural – position in organization, company policies/procedures, job responsibilities, core values

3) Relational – mentors, social network, allies, coalitions

4) Informational – research, case studies

5) Systemic – industry codes of ethics, PRSA Ethical Standards advisories

Source: Berger & Reber, 2006, p. 82

Techniques to Raise Ethical Concerns

Rational Approaches

- Use of Case Studies
- Use of Research
- Legitimacy Appeals

Relational Approaches

- Recruiting Allies/Coalition Members
- Asking Questions/Listening/ Dialogue

Source: Neill & Barnes, 2017

Techniques to Raise Ethical Concerns

- Citing Personal Experiences
- Pressure
- Emotional Appeals
- Raising the Concerns from the Perspective of Key Stakeholders/Serving as a Devil‘s Advocate
- Direct Approach
- Use of scenarios/ alternatives/solutions
- Headline Test
- Use of Internal Anonymous Reporting Systems

Source: Neill & Barnes, 2017

Techniques to Raise Ethical Concerns

Most preferred by senior executives:

1) Asking Questions/ Listening/Dialogue
2) Legitimacy Appeals (e.g. referring to what is right or lawful and the organization's own core values)
3) Personal experiences

Source: Neill & Barnes, 2017

Preferred Techniques by Gender

Men

1. Case Studies
2. Research/ Legitimacy Appeals (Tie)
3. Allies

Women

1. Legitimacy Appeals/ Allies/ Pressure (3-way tie)
2. Research
3. Case Studies/Personal Experience (Tie)

Source: Neill & Barnes, 2017

Techniques in Practice

Legitimacy Appeals

“I've also used mission, vision, those points in discussions where I'll say…well, Ok, if we do x, y, z, I don't think that's in keeping with our mission, vision, values. I think that those… statements that a company has already adopted can be extremely effective and oftentimes more effective than saying, “I just don't think that's ethical.” If you can say that our value is to always be transparent and does this really meet those values, I think it's an even stronger statement…because you're tying it back to something that a company has already decided they believe in.” - Member of the PRSA College of Fellows

Source: Neill & Barnes, 2017

Techniques in Practice

Asking Questions

“It's engaging in dialogue…you have to start by asking the person … first, what do you think? Or where do you want to go? Where do you want to be or what is it that is bothering you? So if you get a baseline and then you understand the differences between yourself and that person or management …and you know what you have to bridge. So it gives you … a work plan as to how to get to a successful point.” - Member of the PRSA College of Fellows

Source: Neill & Barnes, 2017

Techniques in Practice

Use of Case Studies

“And I think case studies provide a way for you to say, “Hey, I have a concern about this and I started looking into it. And this company I think maybe it was doing something similar.” And almost asking the other person to read the case study and then to tell me how they feel. Because I think that a lot of times you can talk, talk, talk, talk, but if you can show and then wait and then listen, the other person or the other party will see what it is that you're going for and then it's their own idea to change to a more ethical tactic rather than you having to push it on them.” - Member of the PRSA College of Fellows

Source: Neill & Barnes, 2017

Techniques in Practice

Recruiting allies described by a public relations executive working in education:

“This particular individual had a deep seeded distrust of communications people for whatever reason and so be it. But I also figured out very quickly that another person on our staff, another senior member, did have his ear and did have his confidence. And so what I learned to do was when I wanted to get an issue floated and get approval for it, was use this other person to go through…I could still get my job done letting somebody else take the ball, get the credit for it, I don’t care who gets the credit for it as long as we can get the things done” (Neill & Drumwright, 2012).

Techniques in Practice

Headline test – considering potential media consequences

An Australian female public relations described this approach:

“It’s like what do you want the story to be? What’s the good story that you can imagine and the bad story you can imagine. I don’t have to explain it there for them now. They can sit there and think about it. It could go this way. Is that the headline?” (Neill & Drumwright, 2012, p. 227).

Techniques in Practice

Providing Alternatives as described by a male public relations executive working in education:

“I was given basically a script for a speech the superintendent was going to read related to the action we were taking, and I felt like the action we were taking was purely politically driven by forces in the community and wasn’t really necessarily the will of our people or the right thing to do in the situation we were in and so I… did my speech writing job on the one I was given, but also wrote a second version that I felt like was more what we should do and turned those back in and said please take a look at the second version, and the second version is what was done and that was after no other leadership discussion beyond just me offering that and then that’s what was done” (Neill & Drumwright, 2012).

Class exercise

Using one of the case studies, first determine which of the provisions in the PRSA Code of Ethics applies in this scenario: http://apps.prsa.org/AboutPRSA/Ethics/CodeEnglish/#Preamble

Then determine your action plan. Which of the influence tactics would you use to approach more senior leaders and why?

Questions?