

Public Relations Ethics: Senior PR Pros Tell Us How to Speak Up and Keep Your Job

Book reviewed by
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In an age of misinformation and fake news, the role of public relations professionals increasingly includes guiding organizations toward transparency, integrity, and ethics. In addition, professionals are taking stock of their own personal ethical decision making, as they encounter ethically murky situations in the work world. In the book *Public Relations Ethics: Senior PR Pros Tell Us How to Speak Up and Keep Your Job*, authors Dr. Marlene Neill, APR, assistant professor at Baylor University, and Amy Barnes, APR, associate professor at University of Arkansas, Little Rock, offer advice for today's public relations professionals. The book addresses important questions about providing ethical counsel, leveraging personal influence to persuade leadership's ethical decision making, and deciding when to walk away from a job.

Packed with research and interviews with senior professionals, the book brings together decades of research on public relations ethics and presents it in an accessible way that's useful for practitioners, researchers, and students. Moving from topic to topic, the book offers a map for someone who is building personal influence as an ethics counselor or someone who is currently facing an ethical dilemma. Frequent stories and quotes from the profession give the reader a good sense of how

professionals understand and address ethical issues. It is clear that the authors have spent years in public relations practice and bring that experience, along with their strong research skills, to this topic. Chapters wrap up with a summary of the key points and “Questions to Ponder” that give the reader an opportunity to reflect on their own experiences and how they may match (or not) the experiences shared in the book.

Ethical Principles and Ethics Counsel

The first chapter of the book introduces basic ethical concepts and explains more advanced ethical principles, establishing the purpose and value of the book to public relations. It then argues the need for public relations to be the ethical conscience of the organization, stating that the department’s unique position as a boundary spanner and environmental scanner lends it to this role. However, the authors argue, being an ethical conscience is a challenging position. “This role takes courage as it often involves providing less-than-welcome advice to people who may outrank you” (p. 14). The rest of the book helps instruct readers about how to prepare for and implement this role.

Role of the Ethics Counselor

Having established the need for ethics counsel and argued that public relations is uniquely qualified for the role, the book moves on to answer the next important question: “So what can public relations do to earn respect so that their counsel is valued?” (p. 19). Chapter 2 explains how “power” and “influence” help fuel successful advocacy and how public relations professionals need to have influence in order to act as counselors to senior management. Internal organizational structures and personalities can create barriers to influence in public relations. One of the most important ways to build influence is through building relationships and coalitions as discussed in Chapter 3. As the authors point out, internal collaborations can raise challenges for the ethics counselor, and this chapter offers suggestions for addressing these challenges.

Advice from Senior Professionals

Sometimes the best way to make an ethical decision is to hear what others have done. Chapter 4 allows the voices of senior professionals to guide the reader through the process of building and leveraging influence to advocate for an ethical cause. The professionals share their struggles and the outcomes (good and bad) of their own attempts to offer counsel. In an interesting twist, the chapter also looks at how gender might influence the way public relations professionals engage strategies to influence management. The results of a study of PRSA Fellows and Page Society members found that male and female leaders find different strategies to be more successful. The chapter wraps up by sharing strategies to avoid when offering ethics counsel.

Chapter 5 builds on the advice in Chapter 4, and the authors dig deeper into the issue of leveraging allies and coalitions to advocate for an ethical cause. Insights offered in this chapter aid the readers in understanding the political dynamics of organizational settings. These include suggestions to help identify influencers within an organization and ways to gain access to current coalitions. As the chapter says, “Being politically savvy also means knowing who sits on influential committees and how decisions are made in an organization” (p. 59).

When Ethics Counsel Fails

Chapter 6 begins by making an important observation, “Sometimes ethics counsel falls on deaf ears” (p. 67). What if an ethics counselor implements the strategies recommended in this book but is unable to convince management to reconsider an ethical decision? According to the authors, three options exist: drop the issue, appeal to someone else, or find another job. How to decide which is the best option is the subject of Chapter 6. By offering examples and principles to consider, the authors help the reader clarify the importance of the issue they are addressing and how best to move forward. When should a professional consider rocking

the boat or becoming a whistleblower, as the chapter title suggests?

Practical Advice for Ethics Counselors

So how does a professional prepare to become an ethics counselor? Chapter 7 offers many suggestions, including mentorship and training. The authors argue that one role of ethics counselors is creating an ethical culture in an organization by communicating values, building structures that encourage ethics, and rewarding ethical behavior. Chapter 8 defines ethical culture and explains its value for the organization. In Chapter 9, the authors share practical guidance that would help new public relations professionals perform more successfully in any organizational setting. These nuggets of advice come from senior practitioners and range from “young professionals need to build business literacy” (p. 101) to “leadership involves listening to the concerns of various stakeholders” (p. 112). The book wraps up (Chapter 10) with suggestions for engaging with ethics topics every day. These bits of advice include reviewing codes of ethics, reading case studies and blogs, and talking to others about ethics. This is good advice especially for young professionals, and the last two chapters make this book not only a reference for senior practitioners but also a good source of information for young practitioners alike.

Recommendation

Who can benefit from reading this book? Faculty, including both teachers and researchers, would appreciate this book. At only 140 pages, it could easily be added to a reading list for a graduate or undergraduate course on ethics. The writing is clear, and topics in the book follow logically, allowing those who have not worked in the field to understand the importance of ethics. Researchers will appreciate the way the authors weave together decades of research on public relations ethics and demonstrate how it translates to real-world practice. The book also identifies areas where more research is needed.

I don't think I'm exaggerating when I say all senior public

relations professionals should read this book. In a communication environment ruled by social media, organizations that are caught acting in unethical ways will experience public reprimands with far-reaching consequences. Preventing mistakes like this begins by creating a culture of ethics within the organization that allows employees to raise ethical issues when they see them. This book offers excellent advice to both senior and junior professionals that would help create such an environment.

Overall, this is an excellent, well-researched book, and it presents professional dilemmas and solutions in a way that resonate as authentic. I would strongly recommend this book to students who are preparing for the work world or public relations professionals who want to improve the effectiveness of their ethical counsel.

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