

## ***A Practical Guide to Ethics in Public Relations***

Reviewed by  
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*A Practical Guide to Ethics in Public Relations*  
Authors: Regina M. Luttrell and Jamie Ward  
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The Commission on Public Relations Education's (2018) *Fast Forward* report recommended colleges and universities require an ethics course for undergraduate public relations majors distinct from media law and media ethics classes. A year later, the *Ethics Education Report* (Bortree et al., 2019) proposed learning outcomes and topics that a stand-alone public relations ethics course should cover.

Although the *Ethics Education Report* (Bortree et al., 2019) doesn't list Luttrell and Ward's book as a recommended text, *A Practical Guide to Ethics in Public Relations* covers most proposed topics, including decision-making approaches, ethics codes, loyalties, digital challenges, corporate social responsibility, and crisis communication. It also addresses the Report's 10 learning outcomes such as the ability to create a personal ethics code, analyze competing duties, identify ethical problems, and defend ethical decisions.

There's another reason to pick up the appropriately named *A Practical Guide to Ethics in Public Relations*.

Textbooks very often are passive vehicles for pushing content. Luttrell and Ward take a different approach, incorporating brief cases within each chapter to help students become active readers who answer

questions and apply concepts as they go.

Eight of the nine chapters begin with a public relations ethics expert Q&A. The four women and four men answer the same seven questions about needed ethical skills, potential for competing loyalties and other dilemmas, and what ethical challenges entry-level practitioners should anticipate. Although there is a gender balance, other elements of diversity are not as evident.

The first two chapters provide ethics foundations and theories for use in the profession. In Chapter 1, the authors define ethics and professional values and show how public relations has evolved from manipulative spin to a profession that generally values public service more than self-service. They also describe philosophical approaches including utilitarianism, categorical imperatives, libertarianism, and virtue ethics that can guide reason-based decision-making. Readers are encouraged to develop a personal code of ethics and “see where your beliefs fit with other ethical theorists” (p. 21).

Chapter 2 introduces readers to ethics codes for public relations and the allied fields of marketing and journalism and poses a series of questions for code comparison. The authors further point out that code provisions can compete and do not provide *the* answer to the types of ethical dilemmas public relations practitioners face.

Chapters 3-8 each tackle a PRSA Code of Ethics professional value: advocacy, honesty, expertise, independence, loyalty, and fairness. Finally, chapter 9 includes five award-winning Arthur W. Page Society Competition case studies for discussion and analysis. All chapters discuss the ethical implications and complexities of social media use.

Interspersed in the chapters are familiar ethical decision-making models: the Potter Box, the TARES Test, Sherry Baker’s five baselines for ethical advocacy, Ruth Edgett’s 10 criteria for desirable advocacy, and Frank Navran’s six-step model.

Luttrell and Ward also introduce their own PURE ethical decision-making model, designed to help entry-level practitioners “apply a multitude of theories and easily assess outcomes” (p. 59). Decision-makers begin by identifying personal and organizational **Principles**, followed by an assurance that these principles are also **Universal** standards. Third, practitioners should value the **Rights** of the client as well as stakeholders. Lastly, they must ethically justify the recommended **End Result**. They utilize the PURE model to guide case assessments throughout the text.

While many cases are obviously right vs. wrong situations (e.g., Hill & Knowlton’s misinformation campaign to garner public support for the 1990s Iraq War and Justine Sacco’s racist tweet), others reflect real-world dilemmas: whether to be a ghostwriter, Germany’s campaign to lead pedophiles to treatment, and the challenges PAO Paula Pedene faced blowing the whistle on Phoenix VA leaders.

One area to expand is public relations’ ethical responsibilities surrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion—a content topic recommended in the *Ethics Education Report* (Bortree et al., 2019). Additionally, the Commission’s *Diversity and Inclusion Report* (2019) highlights the need to “incorporate discussion of racial and gender differences in the public relations industry in all major courses” (p. 3). Articles and studies refer to our profession’s ongoing challenge to include diverse voices (e.g., Johnson, 2018; Landis, 2019; “Millennials,” n.d.; Muturi & Zhu, 2019; Simpson, 2018), so textbooks that explicitly encourage these conversations will better prepare students for their future in public relations.

*A Practical Guide to Ethics in Public Relations* is not devoid of diversity and inclusion content, however. Chapter 9 lists ethics resource links to the National Black Public Relations Association and Hispanic Public Relations Association, and Chapter 2 includes ethics codes from the Chartered Institute of Public Relations in the United Kingdom and the

Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa. Case study 3 in chapter 9 presents the Starbucks Race Together Initiative.

There are areas where diversity references could be expanded. For example, the discussion of Rawls' veil of ignorance refers to the gender wage gap; factoring in gaps (wage and otherwise) facing people of color, those with disabilities, LGBTQ+ individuals, among others, would strengthen essential discussions and lay foundations to build a more-diverse profession. The discussion of the Flint Water Crisis could include practitioners' obligations to discuss institutional biases and power inequality. Similarly, the Justine Sacco case provides her perspectives but doesn't invite expert comment on larger racial and professional implications.

Additionally, it will be important for instructors to delineate Kohlberg's stages of moral development from ethical approaches of Mill, Kant, and others. While we may choose to make a decision based on consequences or duties, we do not get to select our stage of moral development. Additionally, Kohlberg's approach should be counterbalanced with Carol Gilligan's ethics of care to address potential gender differences.

In all, however, this is a valuable addition to a rather small pool of public relations ethics textbooks. Its active reading approach with plenty of case examples makes it appropriate for college undergraduates who have taken at least an introductory public relations course. And, importantly, it's affordable.

Keeping ethical obligations at the forefront of public relations practice is paramount to the success of the newest generation of professionals. *A Practical Guide to Ethics in Public Relations* gives students a leg up not only to prepare them for individual success but also to contribute to the collective realization of public relations as an ethically sound profession.

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