

*BOOK REVIEW*

**PR Women with Influence: Breaking Through the  
Ethical and Leadership Challenges**

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*PR Women with Influence: Breaking Through the Ethical and Leadership Challenges* addresses the dearth of research regarding leadership development and ethical leadership among women public relations professionals—and the challenges and opportunities surrounding such. Over four distinct sections, the book assesses the landscape of extant literature regarding women, public relations, leadership, and influence. The book also highlights findings from both quantitative and qualitative inquiry and maps out an ecosystem for supporting women leaders in public relations. The mixed method approach strengthens the book, which is well organized and easy to read. The scope of the book, which examines the intersections of leadership, gender, and ethics, is novel.

**Content**

In the first section, the authors review extant literature and acknowledge the longstanding power—and gender-based issues of the

public relations profession. Despite majority status and strong leadership competencies, for example, women remain underrepresented in leadership positions across the profession. Moreover, women of color are especially absent from the public relations field and in leadership roles. To address the issues identified, the authors propose five research questions exploring: 1) women public relations professionals' perceptions of attitudinal, structural, and social barriers to leadership advancement; 2) women public relations professionals' perceptions of factors contributing to the underrepresentation of women in leadership; 3) women public relations professionals' definitions regarding influence in their leadership paths; 4) women public relations professionals' perceptions of professional and family responsibilities; and, 5) women public relations professionals' perceptions regarding mentoring and leadership advancement.

Additionally, the authors outline the research design and methods that guide the book. They substantially describe the two-phase approach to the research design, involving both a survey (n=512) and in-depth interviews with 51 women who identify as public relations professionals. The demographic profiles of participants are detailed well and the make-up of participants in the study reflects that of the public relations discipline.

The second section presents the results of the authors' national survey on women public relations professionals' leadership and ethical challenges. The first of two chapters in this section addressed situational barriers to women's leadership advancement. Of note, the authors found that workplace structures, double standards regarding domestic roles and professional demands, and societal attitudes regarding women professionals were the three most common barriers cited by respondents. Exploring situational barriers among women of color, results indicated that they faced additional race-based stereotypes, occupational stereotypes, and inhospitable organizational cultures. Looking to the next three years in the industry, respondents indicated that they hope for greater improvements to

work-life balance, increased women as role models in high-level positions, and increased mentors advocating for their advancement.

The second chapter in this section addressed perceptions of ethical leadership among survey respondents. Results indicated that women public relations professionals perceive influential leadership as being seen as a trusted advisor, having career advancement opportunities, and holding a voice to which colleagues listen. Strategies perceived to best garner influence and support ethical counsel among women public relations professionals included:

- inviting questions and dialogue
- using legitimacy appeals
- providing scenarios to illustrate potential consequences or alternatives to a situation
- utilizing research to support counsel

Regarding ethical principles and leadership, survey respondents ranked communications leaders as most ethical when they conduct their life in an ethical manner, set an example for how to do things ethically, make fair and ethical decisions, and discuss ethics and values with employees, among other actions.

The final chapter synthesized the national survey results, which addressed women's leadership development and participation opportunities in public relations. Respondents cited that on-the-job training programs to increase competencies, internal leadership and development programs, external leadership and development programs, working with a mentor, and engagement in formal leadership education were important resources necessary in organizations to support women's leadership growth. The authors suggested that organizations help women's leadership potential by encouraging their participation in professional organizations, cultivating more inclusive work environments, and fostering more diverse leadership teams.

Complementing the findings from the national survey, the book's third section details findings from in-depth conversations with 51 women leaders in public relations in mid- and senior-level positions. Findings suggest that women leaders in public relations defined influence as "being a trusted advisor, practicing thought leadership, being a subject matter expert, and exerting a voice that executives listen to, and gaining the respect of other leaders" (p. 129). Leadership challenges cited by women interviewees often differed from their male counterparts. For example, interview findings illustrated how women cited enduring stereotypical gendered expectations regarding their workplace behaviors and a lack of acknowledgement, visibility, or support in spaces dominated by men. Additionally, race posed a barrier to the advancement of African American, Latina, and Asian American professionals, as they faced forms of pigeonholing, discrimination, and invisibility. Women leaders in public relations also defined ethical leadership with references to integrity, transparency, honesty, respect, moral courage, and fairness. To provide ethical counsel, participants discussed strategies such as utilizing research or case studies, providing scenarios, playing devil's advocate, recruiting allies for support, taking part in dialogue, and sharing personal experiences. Women professionals found mentoring and support networks to be vital to ethical leadership.

The book concludes with a fourth section that offers a summary of the research findings and proposes a path for future research. In particular, the authors suggest that additional research must be conducted: a) to address global perspectives regarding women and leadership in public relations, b) to strengthen intersectional approaches to researching leadership and women in public relations, c) to understand mentoring and its role in professional development, and d) to describe and expand notions of ethical leadership.

### **Contribution to Public Relations Education**

Through a detailed analysis of their survey and interview findings, Meng and Neill offer a glimpse into the gendered and raced realities of the public relations profession. Their book contributes to public relations education by highlighting the need for ethics and leadership-based support, training, mentoring, and education for public relations students and professionals alike. From this book, public relations educators will gain an understanding of the ethical and leadership values that are important to seasoned professionals in public relations, but also gain an awareness of the various cultural and structural barriers that still disadvantage women professionals from achieving greater leadership potential. Educators may wish to integrate practices detailed in the book into their own teaching by offering mentoring opportunities, supplementary learning opportunities, and frank dialogue about ethical competencies and barriers to leadership still affecting women in public relations.

### **Critique**

I applaud the authors on this extensive research undertaking, which advances our understanding of the public relations profession at the intersections of gender, leadership, and ethics. However, in order to strengthen this study and future scholarship on the topic, I recommend more integration of insights from feminist theory, critical race theory, and queer theory and more attention to the vast, intersecting avowed and ascribed identities that factor into women's leadership and advancement. This study and future scholarship exploring women, leadership, and ethics must acknowledge and explore sexual identity in public relations, for example. Inclusion of the lived experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) women are necessary for a richer, deeper understanding of public relations work and professional advancement. Extant literature has long acknowledged the bigotry, tokenism, discrimination, exclusion, and prevention of workplace advancement for LGBTQ individuals (e.g. Tindall, 2013; Tindall & Waters, 2012;

Waters, 2013). How does heteronormativity embedded in public relations practices, structures, and discourses contribute to lack of advancement, mentoring, and leadership potential for the vast spectrum of women-identifying individuals in public relations?

### **Audience**

This book would appeal most to and contribute to U.S.-based public relations scholars and educators. The reading is also relevant for scholars in the adjacent fields of management, marketing, or integrated communications. Because this is a niche area of research and practice, it is most appropriate as reading for graduate-level or professional-level public relations courses, such as Public Relations Management or Gender in Communication.

*PR Women with Influence: Breaking Through the Ethical and Leadership Challenges* complements *Gaining Influence in Public Relations: The Role of Resistance in Practice* by Berger & Reber (2006) and offers a necessary deeper dive into the leadership and influence experiences of women in public relations. Additionally, the book complements Fitzpatrick & Bronstein's (2006) *Ethics in Public Relations: Responsible Advocacy*.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Meng and Neill's book offers a necessary and timely empirical snapshot of the intersection of women, leadership, and ethical counsel in public relations. The study was extensive and well structured. The flow of the book and presentation of the findings was well organized and clearly written. It makes a solid addition to the libraries of public relations scholars, professionals and students and serves as an important springboard for future debate and research.

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