



Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Public Relations Review



Full Length Article

Accredited vs. non-accredited: How accreditation impacts perceptions and readiness to provide ethics counsel

Marlene S. Neill (Ph.D., Assistant Professor)

Department of Journalism, Public Relations & New Media, Baylor University, One Bear Place #97353, Waco, TX 76798-7353, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 October 2015
Received in revised form 27 May 2016
Accepted 19 August 2016
Available online xxx

Keywords:

Accreditation
Ethical conscience
Boundary spanning
Public relations

ABSTRACT

Scholars and industry trade public relations have suggested that public relations practitioners should provide ethics counsel and debated the degree to which practitioners accept the role of an ethical conscience. Through survey research with more than 400 educators and practitioners, this study provides evidence that the majority of practitioners and educators believe this is public relations' responsibility. In addition, the results reveal that accredited public relations practitioners are more likely to say they feel prepared to do so, and are more likely to offer ethics counsel than practitioners who are not accredited. The study also provides insights into some of the ethical issues that practitioners are most likely to face, what types of ethics training they have received, and their roles in promoting an ethical workplace.

© 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Public relations scholars and industry leaders have called for practitioners to provide ethical leadership in their organizations for many decades (e.g., [Bivins, 1992](#); [Bowen, 2008, 2009](#); [Fitzpatrick & Gauthier 2001](#); [Fitzpatrick, 1996](#); [Paluszek, 1989](#); [Ryan & Martinson, 1983](#)). However, qualitative research has found what ranges from a “state of neglect” among public relations professionals “in a plethora of areas related to ethical understanding, ethics counsel, and the ability to enact the role of ethical counsel” ([Bowen, 2008, p. 271–272](#)) to senior practitioners who embraced the role of organizational conscience with perceptions of “a fervent duty to the public interest” ([Neill & Drumwright, 2012, p. 220](#)).

More recently, trade publications have questioned the ethics of public relations practitioners asking “are all publicists liars?” ([Willens, 2015](#)) and suggesting that they are “professional manipulators” ([Bowen, 2015](#)). Both of the articles were referencing a qualitative study conducted in South Africa as presented at the International Public Relations Research Symposium, referred to as BledCom, in Slovenia in July of 2015, which included interviews with public relations practitioners who admitted to lying.

Based on these divergent findings, the following questions arise: do public relations practitioners perceive a personal responsibility to provide ethics counsel, how prepared do they perceive they are to provide ethics counsel on public relations issues, how likely are they to provide ethics counsel, and what are the most common issues they are facing? Furthermore, do public relations educators embrace the role of ethical conscience and do they believe recent graduates are prepared to provide ethics counsel? This study addresses these issues through survey research with a national sample of practitioners

E-mail address: Marlene_Neill@baylor.edu

URL: http://mailto:Marlene_Neill@baylor.edu.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2016.08.002>

0363-8111/© 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

who are members of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and educators who are members of PRSA and the Public Relations Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication.

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), and is often based on values, which are “enduring notions of goodness and badness that guide behavior in a variety of contexts,” and are usually resistant to change (Burgoon, 1989, p. 132). Public relations practitioners should consider ethical principles based on fundamental values to help them “judge the rightness of decisions” and to reconcile conflicting duties to the public and their audiences (Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001; p. 201). These principles and values can be based on personal upbringing as well as industry and employer’s codes of ethics (Fitzpatrick, 2002; Halff, 2010; Lee & Cheng, 2011; Wright, 1993).

Scholars have previously identified communication about values and ethics as a core responsibility of employers, because “if people do not hear about ethics and values from the top, it is not clear to employees that ethics and values are important” (Trevino, Hartman, & Brown 2000, p. 135). Consistent with this perspective, ethical leadership is defined as “the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relations, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement and decision-making” (Brown, Trevino, & Harrison, 2005, p. 120). Due to their strong communication skills, public relations practitioners may contribute to ethical leadership in the workplace by promoting internal ethics programs and resources such as the code of conduct, employee training, reward systems and ethics hotlines (McDonald & Nijhof, 1999). Fitzpatrick (1996) suggested that public relations should play a role in ethical leadership and referred to the profession as an “untapped resource in ethics programs” (p. 249). However, following their survey of PRSA members, Lee and Cheng (2012) found what they described as a “lackluster picture of formal, systematic and goal-directed development of activities for improving ethical decision making” (p. 92). In contrast, a recent qualitative study found evidence that public relations practitioners specializing in internal communication contributed to an ethical workplace by creating strategic communication plans and disseminating key messages about ethics and the organization’s core values; some even provided specific examples of times when they provided ethics counsel (Neill, 2016).

Previous research in this domain has examined the characteristics of ethical leaders and how they transfer ethical knowledge (Lee & Cheng, 2011), knowledge about ethics and training among public relations practitioners (Lee & Cheng, 2012), public relations practitioners’ perceptions about providing ethics counsel (Neill & Drumwright, 2012; Bowen, 2008), and public relations’ role in organizational value setting (Sison, 2010). Much of the research regarding public relations’ roles in ethical conscience and ethical leadership has been based on qualitative data such as focus groups or interviews. Through survey research, this study provides additional insights regarding whether or not there is widespread or limited acceptance of ethical leadership in public relations, as well as what factors are most associated with those who embrace this role. For example, Bowen (2008) suggested that age and experience were associated with the role of ethical conscience and recommended that quantitative research be conducted to further examine these factors. Based on the gaps in the literature, the purpose of this study is to examine public relations practitioners’ attitudes toward ethics counsel, their preparedness to offer ethics counsel and how likely they are to do so. Likewise, the study also explores the perceptions of public relations educators toward ethics counsel, and their perceived preparedness of recent graduates to assume this role.

2. Literature review

As a theoretical foundation for this study, previous literature related to public relations’ roles as an ethical conscience and boundary spanner were examined as well as social identity theory in the context of professionalism. Next, previous research regarding ethical leadership in internal communication is reviewed. Finally, an overview of previous findings related to ethics education and professional development programs provided by employers and professional associations are discussed.

2.1. Public relations as ethical conscience

An ethical or organizational conscience has been defined as “a professional who raises concerns when his or her organization’s actions might bring about potential ethical problems leading to troubling consequences for various parties, who may be individuals, groups, organizations. . . both within and outside the organization” (Neill & Drumwright, 2012, p. 221). A conscience involves “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). In support of this role, Fitzpatrick and Gauthier (2001) suggested that public relations practitioners’ greatest loyalty is to their clients, but practitioners should ensure that their employers hear and consider stakeholders’ interests and make efforts to minimize harm. When they do so, public relations practitioners serve as boundary spanners (Aldrich & Herker, 1977) by raising the concerns of key stakeholders when making strategic decisions (Moss, Warnaby, & Newman, 2000). As boundary spanners, public relations practitioners gather information through environmental scanning, and then filter that information by choosing to act on some information, to store other information, or to summarize and interpret the data in communication with senior management (Aldrich & Herker, 1977). The public relations practitioners who do this are providing a crucial service by filtering information, keeping others up to date on opportunities, and warning them of potential crises (Burt, 1992), a form of issues management.

Scholars have examined the role of public relations in providing ethics counsel through both quantitative and qualitative research. Berger and Reber (2006) found that rational persuasion was the most common influence technique (30.98%)

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/4761841>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/4761841>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)