



Module One: Lesson Plan

2016 Page & Johnson Legacy Scholar Grant

Carolyn Kim, Ph.D., APR

Understanding Ethics & The Profession

Introduction: Some would argue that public relations professionals are tasked with “doing the right thing.” But what is the *right* thing? The study of ethics helps identify the process public relations professionals use in order to make decisions about what course of action is the right one to take.

There is a rich history of scholarship that explores ethics. To provide greater context in understanding the unique application within public relations, it is helpful to have a brief overview of major areas of thought. This lesson will briefly introduce some key elements to understanding ethics.

Normative Ethics: This lesson covers the definition of normative ethics and compare that to applied ethics, or the kind of ethics that is primarily studied within public relations scholarship. Students will also be briefly introduced to key ethical constructs such utilitarian ethics, deontological ethics and virtue ethics in order to provide a cognitive foundation for how ethical theories end up *applied* in ethical situations for public relations.

Key Concept: Students should be able to recognize key concepts in ethical theory both in applied and normative ethics.

Discussion Question One: Out of the three major area within normative ethics (utilitarian, deontological, and virtue) which do you believe provides the strongest foundation for applied ethics in public relations and why?

Obligations of the Profession: With the overview of ethics in general, the ethical obligation of public relations as a profession takes on more depth. This section of the lesson will address reasons that ethical behavior is intrinsically required within public relations. The first part in this section addresses the role of public relations in society as an advocate for clients and a trusted source of counsel. In light of this role, there are expectations of ethical behaviors by practitioners. Next, this section covers how this role can be considered a profession. The characteristics of the profession indicate that public relations practitioners contribute to the good in society, and thus also have an ethical obligation to the public.

Key Concept: Student should be able to explain the ethical obligations that stem from the profession of public relations both toward clients and the public. Students should also be able to define why public relations qualifies as a profession, resulting in ethical expectations from clients and the public.

Discussion Question Two: What are the primary obligations of public relations professionals to clients, publics, and the profession?

Associations and Codes of Conducts: The conclusion of this section will address ways in which public relations as a profession has attempted to develop stronger ethical standards. This will include identifying several professional associations within the profession and codes of conduct that have been developed.

Key Concept: Students should be able to recognize the role of professional associations and the purpose of codes of conduct.

Discussion Question Three: Understanding the limitations of codes of ethics and associations within public relations, do you believe it is reasonable to assume there will be a universal code of conduct that will apply to all public relations professionals?

Suggested Reading: The following texts provide additional insight to the class focus and may be helpful to assign as supplemental reading.

Fitzpatrick, K. & Gauthier, C. (2001). "Toward a Professional Responsibility Theory of Public Relations Ethics." *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 16 (2-3), pp. 193-212.

Kruckeberg, D. (1993). Universal ethics code: Both possible and feasible. *Public Relations Review*, 19(1), pp. 21-31.

Moyer, J. (2011, Jan. 7). "Ethics and Public Relations." *Institute for Public Relations*. Retrieved from: <http://www.instituteforpr.org/ethics-and-public-relations/>