



Module One: Lesson Plan

Lesson Two

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Ethics, Trust & Decision Making

Introduction: What are the consequences of ethical choices or lapses? This question has profound implications within the profession. To address this, the second lesson in this module will address the focus of ethical behavior by introducing topics such as fiduciary responsibility of public relations professionals, the role of ethics in building trust within relationships and the concept of public relations of being a voice of conscience within organizations. Addressing consequences of ethical lapses, the lesson will cover the implications for the practice of public relations as it provides counsel to the C-suite, the impact to the professional reputation of public relations, and damage to public trust when professionals do not fulfill ethical obligations.

Beyond simply understanding what ethics are and how the industry has attempted to develop ethical conduct among professionals, it is vital that students understand the inherent link between the essence of public relations and ethical behavior. In order to accomplish this, this lesson will explore key facets to the process of public relations and the link to ethics.

Trust In Relationships: Public relations professionals have been considered to have a fiduciary responsibility to advocate for their client, providing a voice in the marketplace of ideas. This kind of relationship depends on leadership recognizing that the public relations professional is loyal and trustworthy with confidences. In addition, the public anticipates that public relations professionals can function as a voice of conscience for organizational leadership, providing recommendations on ethical behavior that will directly impact key stakeholders. This expectation is why publics can trust that the public relations professional is committed to mutually beneficial relationships and not just serving at the will of the client without regard to key stakeholders.

Key Concept: Students will be able to compare and contrast the ways that public relations professionals have ethical obligations both to publics and clients. In addition, they will be able to articulate the role of ethical decision making as a key factor in trust building for any relationship that public relations professionals seek to maintain.

Discussion Question One: What is the impact to the role of a public relations professional when trust is lost either with a client or the public?

Ethical Decision-Making Models: After understanding the role of ethical decision making, this lesson will briefly introduce some models that public relations professionals have been encouraged to apply in situations in order to arrive at ethical conclusions. The recommended models will be Bowen's model of strategic decision-making, the TARES model for ethical persuasion, and Potter's Box for ethical decisions.

Key Concept: Students will be able to identify three models of public relations decision making to arrive at ethical decisions and explain why these models have been developed.

Discussion Question Two: What is the value of having different decision-making models available for public relations professionals?

State of Ethics in Public Relations: Finally, this lesson will conclude with an overview of what has been observed about public relations professionals and their approach to ethics. This will address several key areas. The first area to address will be the seeming gap in preparation for ethical decision-making that is present among professionals. Next, the lesson will explore the reasons why professionals may feel unable to make ethical decisions or to provide an ethical voice. Finally, it will conclude with a review of the necessity

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for public relations professionals to be equipped and confident in providing ethical voice in order to maintain the professional role that public relations has in society.

Key Concept: Students will be able to identify the struggles among public relations professionals when attempting to be a voice of conscience or to make ethical decisions in the workplace. They will also be able to discuss the implications for the industry, clients and publics if professionals abdicate this ethical counsel function in society.

Discussion Question Three: What things should public relations professionals do in order to be prepared to have a strong ethical voice in organizations?

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

Bowen, S.A. (2004). A State of Neglect: Public Relations as 'Corporate Conscience' or Ethical Counsel. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 20, pp. 271-296.

Curtin, P. A., Gallicano, T. and Matthew, K. (2011). Millennials' Approaches to ethical decision making: A survey of young public relations agency employees. *Public Relations Journal*, 5(2), 1-22.

Neill, M. S. and Drumwright, M. E. (2012). "PR Professionals as Organizational Conscience." *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 27 (4), pp. 220-234.