# Professional Codes of Ethics

Many professions create and expect their members to operate under a code of ethics specific to their field. Professions design and implement these codes in hope that they will ensure that their members’ professional actions follow traditional ethical guidelines. But what are professional codes of ethics, and where do they come from? This lesson helps students understand the context for professional codes of ethics so as to more clearly see these codes’ roots in a profession’s values.

**Values and Ideals – The Cultural Building Blocks of Ethical Codes**

This lesson defines and describes the differences between values, ideals, and principles and shows how these concepts are culturally located. Examples provided show how a culture’s values and ideals influence its principles, or guidelines for behavior.

Key Concept: Students should understand how values and ideals influence principles and accepted behavior in a culture.

Discussion Question One: Identify values and ideals that your culture holds important. How do these influence your standards for appropriate ways to act (principles)?

**Codes, Policies and Laws – Formalizing a System of Ethics**

This lesson shows how policies are formalized into codes, policies, and laws. It differentiates between the three based on their level of formality and structure as well as the extent to which violators are punished for their behavior.

Key Concept: Students should be familiar with the ways that a culture’s principles for accepted behavior are formalized into codes, policies, and laws.

Discussion Question Two: Give an example of a policy enacted by your university to guide student behavior. How is this policy influenced by the values and ideals of the university’s culture?

**A (Brief) History of Codes of Ethics**

This lesson gives a background to the use of formalized codes of ethics in business, starting in the 1980s. It shows the evolution of ethical codes and gives two examples to show how codes of ethics are often highly situational.

Key Concept: Students should understand that current codes of ethics reflect their industry or context and that such codes have evolved in purpose and format over time.

Discussion Question Three: How do you think changes in business over time might be reflected in the codes of ethics that guide behavior?

**Roles and Responsibilities of Codes of Ethics**

This lesson talks about the role that ethical codes play in professional behavior. It shows students how a code of ethics can be useful to a profession and the importance of all involved parties understanding the role that the code is intended to play.

Key Concept: Students should be able to describe the value that a code of ethics holds for a profession and the necessary conditions for ethical codes to function as intended.

Discussion Question Four: Of the provided metaphors for the role of the code of ethics (rule-book, signpost, mirror, magnifying glass, shield, smoke detector, fire alarm, or club), which do you think best describes the ideal role of a code of ethics for a profession?

**Shortcomings of Codes of Ethics**

This lesson describes the potential negatives that can arise from utilization of a code of ethics. It suggests that ethical training, rather than codes, is best suited to promoting ethical behavior in a profession.

Key Concept: Students should understand where a code of ethics might have a negative effect on or be insufficient to generate ethical behavior in a profession.

Discussion Question Five: Do you believe that codes of ethics can help promote ethical behavior in a profession? Why or why not? Under what circumstances can these codes be effective, and under what circumstances might they be ineffective?

**Suggested Readings**

Brien, A. (1998). Professional ethics and the culture of trust. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *17*(4), 391–409.

Davis, M. (1991). Thinking like an engineer: The place of a code of ethics in the practice of a profession. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 150–167.

Schwartz, M. (2001). The nature of the relationship between corporate codes of ethics and behaviour. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *32*(3), 247–262.

# The PRSA Code of Ethics

The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) created its first code of ethics in 1950, and over the years, the code has changed considerably, often influenced by the context of modern culture and particular trends within the field. This lesson provides a history of the PRSA Code of Ethics and examines it in its current format. Finally, this lesson suggests to students how they can use the PRSA Code of Ethics as a tool when they are working as communication professionals.

**History of the PRSA Code of Ethics**

This lesson provides a history of the PRSA Code of Ethics from its beginning in 1950 through its current iteration, passed in 2000. It explains the professional and regulatory forces that guided its evolution and shows the many forms that this code of ethics has taken over time.

Key Concept: Students will learn the history of the PRSA Code of Ethics from its initial format in 1950 through revisions in 1954, 1959, 1977, and 1988.

Discussion Question One: What forces have influenced the changes in the PRSA Code of Ethics over its lifetime? Which, in your mind, has been most significant?

**Developing PRSA’s 2000 (current) Code of Ethics**

This lesson describes the process of creating the 2000 PRSA Code of Ethics, the code that currently applies to practitioners in the field. It also discusses the motivation behind the decision to remove the element of enforcement from the Code.

Key Concept: Students will understand the process undertaken to produce the current PRSA Code of Ethics as well as the motivation for certain elements of the Code, such as the removal of enforcement mechanisms.

Discussion Question Two: The current PRSA Code of Ethics was developed using a “crowdsourcing”-style process that involved a number of different stakeholders. What are the advantages and disadvantages of such a process? Would you recommend that a process like this be used for developing a code of ethics?

**Features of the PRSA Code of Ethics**

This lesson outlines the tripartite format of the current PRSA Code of Ethics, comprised of a preamble, statement of professional values, and six code provisions of conduct. It provides descriptions of the sections and shows how they relate to each other and the overall purpose of the Code.

Key Concept: Students will understand the format of the PRSA Code of Ethics and have a basic understanding of the content that can be found in each of its three parts (preamble, professional values, and code provisions of conduct).

Discussion Question Three: Which of the three parts of the PRSA Code of Ethics best reflects its aspirational nature and why?

**Applying the PRSA Code of Ethics**

This lesson gives students an understanding of how the PRSA Code of Ethics can be used as a tool that provides ethical guidelines for behavior in professional situations. It shows them how to look first for direct parallels to the Code’s example situations and, lacking that, how they can use the Code’s listing of professional values to suggest appropriate ethical behavior.

Key Concept: Students should be able to use the PRSA Code of Ethics as a helpful guide in making decisions about ethical behavior in public relations practice.

Discussion Question Four: Of the three parts of the PRSA Code of Ethics – the preamble, the professional values, and the code provisions of conduct – which is the most useful to practitioners seeking guidance on how they can behave ethically in a professional situation?

**Works Cited & Resources**

Fitzpatrick, K. R. (2002a). Evolving Standards in Public Relations: A Historical Examination of PRSA’s Codes of Ethics. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, *17*(2), 89–110.

Fitzpatrick, K. R. (2002b). From Enforcement to Education: The Development of PRSA’s Member Code of Ethics 2000. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, *17*(2), 111–135.

Public Relations Society of America. (2000). PRSA Code of Ethics. https://www.prsa.org/aboutprsa/ethics/codeenglish