UNIT 01-003: Public Affairs and Ethics

Required Readings:

- Effective Public Relations: Ch 5, pp 143-177
- PRSA Code of Ethics 2000 (also on Reference CD)
- Joint Publication 3-61, Ch II (also on Reference CD)
- On Deadline: Ch 7

Supplemental Reference Material:

None

Method of Evaluation:

Material presented during this unit of instruction will be demonstrated during practical application throughout the course.

Click here for your note taker.

Assignments:

None

Unit Introduction

The public affairs community has tried for some time to measure the effectiveness of its profession. In the late 1990s, the Public Relations Society of America conducted what they considered the first ever National Credibility Index. The survey gathered information about the 50 most credible professions in America. Public affairs practitioners rank near the bottom, just above talk show host.

Yet, we are the ones trusted to talk to the media. Your credibility and trust are all you have. If your words aren't considered trustworthy then the public will not believe in nor support your organization.

Objective

- Use ethical principals in public affairs

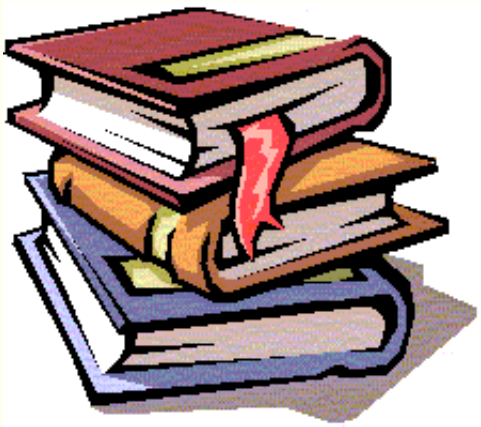
Unit Overview

In this unit of instruction, we will examine the following topics:

- What is Ethics?
- Whose standards apply?
- Major characteristics of professionals
- Ethical foundations
- Core content areas of study
- DOD Principles of Information
- Five principles for ethically proactive public relations

The goal of this unit is to help you understand your role as a public affairs officer. You are NOT a "spin doctor" or deceiver. You must be honest and trustworthy and practice the highest standards of ethical conduct. Your actions should never knowingly result in adverse consequences for others.

What is Ethics?



Merriam Webster provides a concise definition.

Ethics: Pronunciation: 'e-thiks

Function: noun

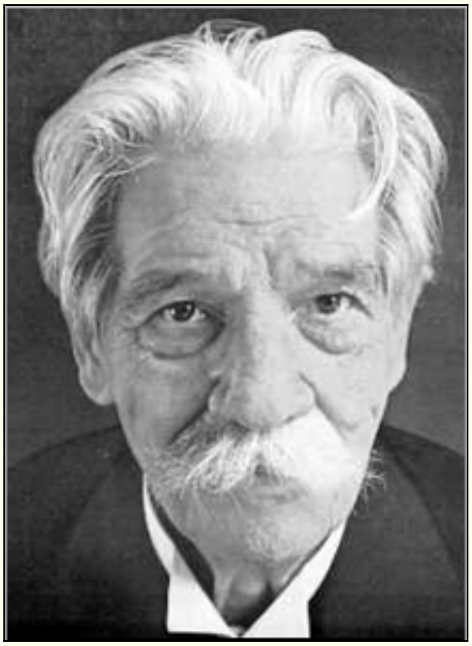
Etymology: Middle English ethik, from Middle French ethique, from Latin ethice, from Greek EthikE, from Ethikos

1. plural but singular or plural in construction : the discipline dealing with what is good and bad and with moral duty and obligation

2. a: a set of moral principles or values **b:** a theory or system of moral value **c:** plural but singular or plural in construction: the principles of conduct governing an individual or a group **d:** a guiding philosophy

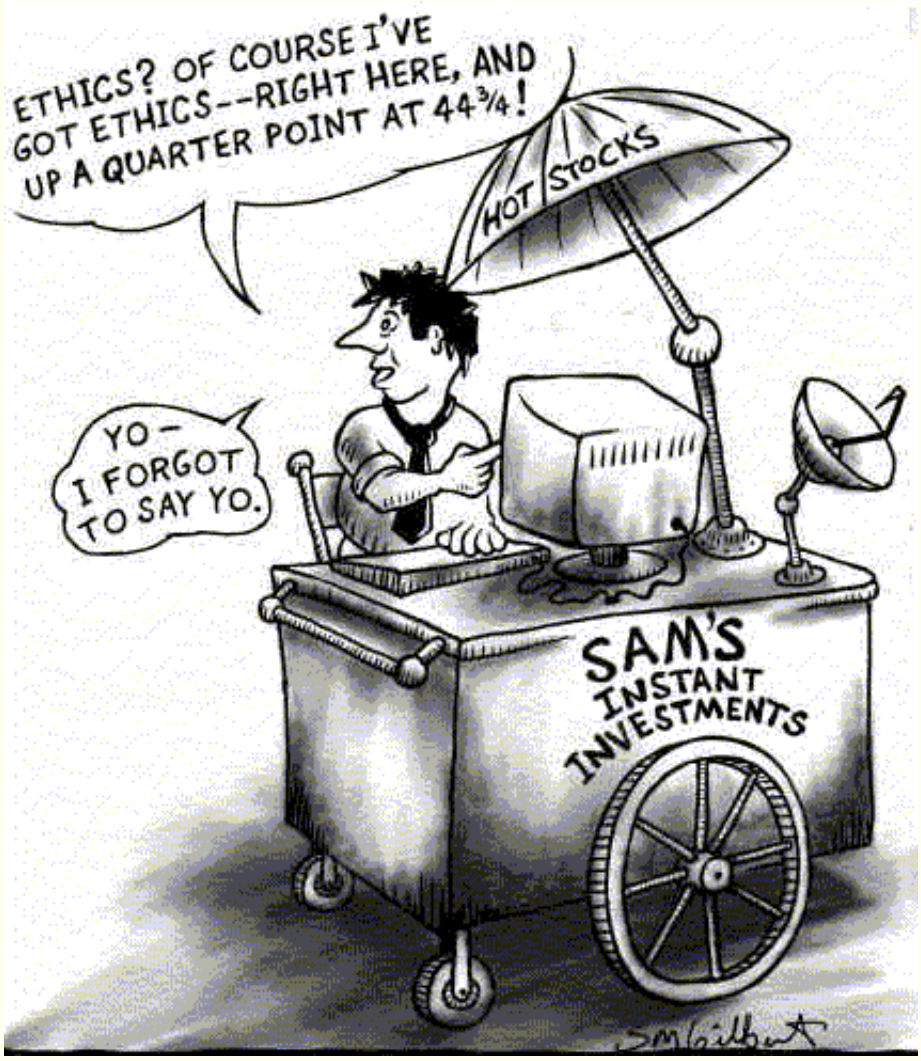
What is Ethics?

From your reading (Chapter five pp. 143-177, Effective Public Relations, Eighth Edition) 1952 Nobel Peace Prize winning philosopher, physician, and humanitarian, **Dr. Albert Schweitzer**, offers us another definition:



“Ethics is the name we give to our concern for good behavior. We feel an obligation to consider not only our personal well-being, but also that of others and of human society as whole.”

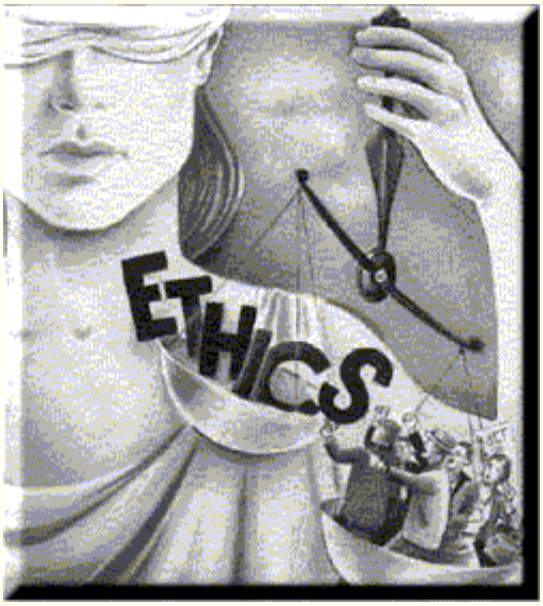
What is Ethics?



Plainly stated, having **ethics is deciding what is right and wrong, then choosing to do what is right.** This ability defines your character and is generally based on a body of moral principles and acceptable rules of conduct.

Whose Standards Apply?

What standards should you use when you have to make a tough decision? Do you follow community standards or professional standards? Perhaps you use the views of a friend or maybe you make your choice based on what you learned from your parents. You may even use your own standards based on your personal experience or what has generally worked for you in the past.



Choosing standards to apply may sound easy to answer but history is littered with negative outcomes that suggest doing the right thing is a hard thing to do. Too many people have learned the hard way that haphazardly applying “situational ethics” or group standards to solve complex issues often results in catastrophic failures.

Whose Standards Apply?

Knowing how to consistently make the right choice is further complicated since many concepts associated with ethics and ethical behaviors have been vigorously debated for thousands of years. Who has the right to say what is or is not ethical? Are your ethical beliefs all relative to your individual socialization and the way you were raised? Are there higher standards of excellence that apply to everyone?

Whose Standards Apply?

Although the discussion exceeds the scope of this unit, your success in public affairs will depend a great deal on how clearly and consistently you can see and make the right calls

To this end, you must clearly define and apply ethical standards of conduct that will get you closest to the truth. You need to understand the ethical views of your country, your organization, your commander, and the greater community you serve. You need to exhaustively prepare to do the right thing. You need to be ready to make the right choice whenever the situation arises.

Five Major Characteristics of Professionals

Professors James E. Grunig and Todd Hunt in their Managing Public Relations textbook identified from their research five commonly mentioned characteristics of professionals:

- **A set of professional values.** Serving others is more important than your own economic gain or military service.

- **Membership in strong professional organizations.** Belonging to your military service, the officer core, the Public Relations Society of America

- **Adherence to professional norms.** The military's "Code of Conduct" or core beliefs like: duty, honor, integrity, and service.

- **An intellectual tradition and established body of knowledge.** A unique, well-established body of knowledge that includes: Joint Publications/Service Pubs/DOD Pubs and principles of information.

- **Technical skills acquired through professional training.** Defense Information School and other service schools that teach technical skills, such as Advanced Civil Schooling and Training With Industry.

Ethical Foundations

Your Effective Public Relations textbook identifies six areas of ethical foundations:

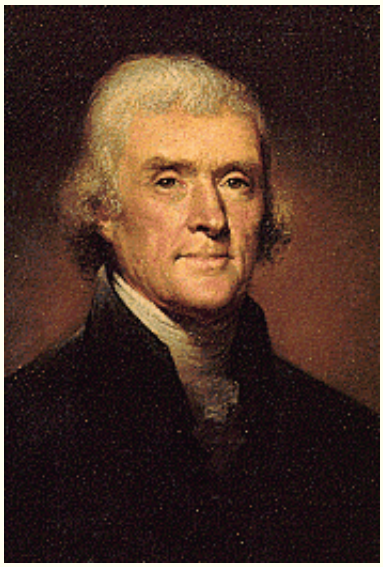
- Professional Ethics
- The Imperative of Trust
- Professional Privilege
- Social Responsibility
- Positives of Socially Responsible Public Relations
- Negatives of Socially Responsible Public Relations

Ethical Foundations

Professional Ethics

Your professional conduct should be based on what are generally considered virtuous motives, monitored and assessed against established codes of conduct, and enforced through concrete interpretation for those who deviate from accepted standards of performance.

Ethical Foundations



Imperative of Trust

You are entrusted to be professional with information because you have access to a great wealth of knowledge. The professional is trusted with information and access. In turn, you must entrust yourself and your possessions to the professional. In this way you enter a fiduciary relationship.

Ethical Foundations

Professional Privilege

As a public affairs officer you will hold positions of **privilege** within your organization and because of the value and trust inherent in this fiduciary relationship. You must uphold the honor, values, and obligations of your profession.

Social Responsibility

You also have a social obligation to serve society and fulfill the expectations of moral obligations. It means you must conduct yourself ethically because you are accountable to the American people and to larger society as a whole.

Ethical Foundations

Positives of Socially Responsible Public Relations

The public affairs career field improves professional practices by codifying and enforcing ethical conduct and standards of performance. Public affairs professionals stress the need for public approval by serving the public interest. They do this by making sure all points of views get articulated in the public forum. Since we serve a segmented, scattered society we must learn to use communication and mediation to replace misinformation. The ultimate goal is to provide a balanced view that benefits the society we serve, as well as our organization. You should always strive to help social systems adapt to the changing needs and environments

Ethical Foundations

Negative aspects of Socially Responsible Public Relations

In addition to focusing on the positive aspects of your job, you should guard against becoming a negative force in society. Do not use your position to gain advantages for and promote special interests at the cost of the public's well being. Do not clutter the already choked channels of communication with cynicism and credibility gaps or with the debris of pseudo-events and phony phrases that confuse rather than clarify.

Core Content

To help you polish your skills we will touch on the five core content areas during this course. Our intent is to give you a strong foundation that will allow you to be a successful public affairs officer. Like the spokes on a wheel, each of the five core content areas provides strength to the whole. By mastering each of the areas, you will become a valued and effective communicator.

Core Content Areas of Study

The **five core content areas** of study are:

1. Principles, practices and the theory of public relations
2. Public relations techniques
3. Public relations research for planning and evaluation
4. Public relations strategy and implementation
5. Supervisory public relations experience

Core Content Areas of Study

1. Principles, Practices and Theory

This lesson has already touched on some of the theories, managerial tasks and ethical responsibilities that can help you become an effective public affairs professional. **It is the beginning area of content study that will give you a beginning base of knowledge.** However, completely mastering the principles, practices and theories associated with your career will take a lifetime of learning. Your ultimate success will be directly proportional to the amount of time that you spend internalizing and building on this core content area. It is key to your success.

Core Content Areas of Study

2. Public Relations Techniques

The second core content area **hones your public affairs skills.** This content area will teach you to improve your writing and message dissemination skills. In addition, this area features specific lessons on how to effectively deal with media networks. **Public Relations Techniques will expose you to multiple tools and techniques you can use to accomplish your daily tacks.**

Core Content Areas of Study

3. Public Relations Research for Planning and Evaluation

The third core content area is designed **to help you learn how to use research to identify and solve problems.** You will be taught to recognize your publics, define communication strategies and determine appropriate actions. You will be shown how to assess program results. This area **includes both fact-finding and evaluative research methods used in public relations decision making.**

Core Content Areas of Study

4. Public Relations Strategy and Implementation

The fourth core content area of study employs **case-method and campaign-planning approaches** to give students experiences in program planning, managerial analysis, and program administration. You will **learn to apply decision theory and management theories** to public relations strategic planning.

Core Content Areas of Study

5. Supervisory Public Relations Experience

The fifth core content area of study provides **hands-on experience in an internship, practicum, or cooperative education setting.** Although you will need to extensively build on this core area after you complete this course, your DINFOS training experience will culminate with a Field Training Exercise (FTX) that will give you the chance to demonstrate your understanding of the first four content areas of study. If you do well in the exercise, you will be ready to continue your work in core content area five when you move to your next assignment.

DOD Principles of Information

The two leading professional organizations for public affairs practitioners are the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and The International Association of Business Communicators. Each professional association has ethical standards established to guide practitioners in making the right decisions.

In comparison, the DOD Principles of Information are similar to the PRSA code but the DOD Principles of Information are designed to support the mission of DOD Public Affairs. The DOD principles help expedite the flow of accurate and timely information about the activities of the U.S. Joint Forces to the public and the internal audiences. (JP3-61). There are five Department of Defense Principles of Information that you must follow.

DOD Principles of Information

Principle 1: Information will be made fully available unless release is precluded by current and valid security requirements.

You must make information available to your publics unless there is a valid restriction on its release due to a valid and current security classification

DOD Principles of Information

Principle 2: A free flow of general and military information will be made available without censorship or propaganda to the men and women and families of the U.S. Armed Forces.

You must ensure balanced, unbiased information reaches the men and women of the Armed Forces so they have the most accurate and complete understanding of the issues.

DOD Principles of Information

Principle 3: Information will not be classified or withheld to protect the government from criticism or embarrassment.

Do not use bogus classifications of information to cover up unfavorable information. Be honest and communicate the bad as well as the good information.

DOD Principles of Information

Principle 4: Information will be withheld only when disclosure would adversely affect national and operations security or threaten the safety or privacy of the men and women of the Armed Forces.

It is permissible for you to withhold information from the public when the information would have a negative impact on national or operational security. You do not want to release information that may result in harm to someone in the Armed Forces.

DOD Principles of Information

Principle 5: The DOD obligation to provide the public with information will require detailed planning to expedite the flow of information to the public.

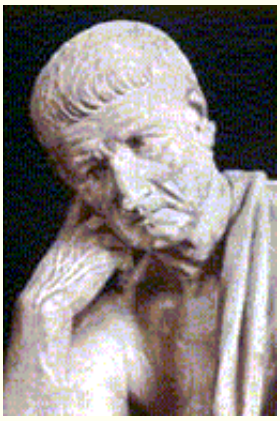
Routinely develop strategic, operational and tactical plans, public affairs guidance, response to queries, and other proactive plans to ensure that the flow of information to the public is efficient.

Ethical Precedents

In addition to following the civilian and Defense Department codes of behavior, consider the codes that people have been living by throughout the centuries. We will now briefly consider several ethical precedents by which people live.

Ethical Precedents

Golden Mean: Aristotle said that virtuous people develop habits of temperance and avoid excess and deficiencies in character; the path they walk is the “golden mean.” Although this is an ideal way, Aristotle assumes that people know the extremes and are capable of considering alternatives; it does not promote a mathematical mean, but a position that is relative to the individual and the situation.



Ethical Precedents

Kant's Categorical Imperative: Suggests you do things in the ways that everyone would do them. For example, you shouldn't lie or steal unless you want everyone to lie and steal. The problem with accepting Kant's imperative as a universal ethical standard is that it assumes that everyone has an inherent sense of right and wrong and a social conscience and assumes that what is right for one is right for all.

Ethical Precedents

John Stewart Mill's Principle of Utility suggests you "seek the greatest good for the greatest number." This sounds great in principle but who determines what is best for society? A far-fetched but illuminating example is considering the fate of the tenth person in a society composed otherwise of nine cannibals.

Ethical Precedents

Judeo-Christian Principle: Asks you to “love your neighbor as you would love yourself.” This is universally acceptable as a workable principle but few follow it consistently. However, most agree that it is the right way to act.

Ethical Precedents

Principle of Reciprocity: Ancient Chinese philosopher Confucius made a reverse statement of the Judeo-Christian principle when he said, “Do not do to others what you would not want others to do to you.” Confucius offers us a principle that contains a built-in fear of retribution. You may decide to do good not because you are good but because your afraid of what might happen if you choose otherwise.

Ethical Precedents

Rawls Rule of Publicity: This principle takes the approach that an act is justified if you can publicly defend it. That is, you should act in a manner that you can publicly stand behind and justify.

Ethical Precedents

Washington Post Rule: Military leaders and their staffs often follow the principle called the Washington Post Rule that says: when considering an action, ask yourself if you are willing to stand up and explain it if it ends up on the cover of the Washington Post.

In Playoffs, Red Sox, Astros Win in Rousing Fashion

The Washington Post

Bush Retains a Slim Lead in Poll

Limited U.N. Role Hinders Iraq Vote

Is Every Memory Worth Keeping?

In Florida, It Begins Anew

Anglicans Chide U.S. Church on Gay Bishop

Why Does the War Keep Chasing Us?

Unit Summary

In this unit, we have talked about:

- What is ethics?
- Whose standards apply?
- Major Characteristics of Professionals
- Ethical Foundations
- Core Content Areas of Study
- DOD Principles of Information
- Ethical Precedents

You now have an understanding of ethical principles that guide public affairs practitioners that will help guide you in making responsible decisions.