

What is responsible advocacy in public relations?

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“Public relations is the practice of social responsibility,” states John Stone’s article, “Public Relations and Public Responsibility” (Stone pg. 31). The best way to practice public relations ethics is through the principle of responsible advocacy. Moral and ethical dilemmas will always arise in public relations, but there are good and bad ways on how to handle these dilemmas. Practicing correct responsible advocacy can be of great use and is a must in ethical situations. Responsible advocacy is a social norm that holds that a social institution is responsible for their behavior (including each individual member’s behavior) and may be held accountable for their misdeeds. This definition is still quite broad. The reason why responsible advocacy is not clearly defined is because being responsible is individually defined. Another problem is that in public relations practices being ethical it is a voluntary choice. There is no legal or universal enforcement of ethics. First, I’d like to discuss what it means to be socially responsible and why it is necessary. Secondly, in Fitzpatrick and Gauthier’s article, “Toward a Professional Responsibility Theory of Public Relations Ethics,” they present three main principles to help guide the theory of professional responsibility in public relations. Finally, I will discuss the method of practicing responsible advocacy according to PRSA’s standards.

It is a PR practitioner’s duty to truly know their institution, give correct awareness about the institution to the public, which is their social responsibility. Genuine social responsibility is taking actions and establishing guidelines that are ethically correct when issues arise. There shouldn’t be any concealed self-centered intention involved. Its basis is values (honesty, avoidance of harm, respect, fairness, etc.) in the allocation of the benefits and problems of society. Social responsibility means that an individual

identifies, acknowledges, and takes action on a common accountability to society. Three types of responsibility that John Stone speaks of in his article, “Public Relations and Public Responsibility,” are *mandatory, assumptive, and discretionary* responsibilities. *Mandatory* responsibilities include such things as environmental harms caused by an organization. In these instances, it is the organization’s responsibility to act immediately to these problems. An example would be when a company is found guilty of dumping chemical wastes. It would be a mandatory responsibility of theirs to clean it up. *Assumptive* responsibility is when a company does not cause a problem, but they are still obliged to resolve the issue. The third type of public responsibility is called *discretionary* responsibility. This is when a company is not responsible for an incident, but they still take responsibility and give support. An example would be a company raising money for breast cancer.

Principles have been proven to be useful when the conflicting responsibilities in moral dilemmas. These principles for responsible advocacy give a suitable basis for how to solve a dilemma. The first principle discusses the comparison of harms and benefits. According to Fitzpatrick and Gauthier, “Harms should be avoided or, at least, minimized, and benefits promoted at the least possible cost in terms of harms” (Fitzpatrick pg. 207). When applying this principle, one must compare and contrast the harms and benefits anticipated from a planned course of action or procedure. All organizations that can be affected must be fairly taken into consideration. Also, the likelihood and significance of the potential problems must be deliberated, in addition to the potential of the projected benefits. This principle also maintains that initiating harm is inferior to providing a benefit. Whatever harm that can be predicted must be minimized to the highest extent

possible. Also, any organizations that are harmed deserve proper explanation. The ethics of the decision maker will truly control if the principle is applied properly.

The second principle state that, “Persons should be treated with respect and dignity” so that their decision-making capabilities, judgments, and actions are maintained (Fitzpatrick pg. 207). Thus, if you give respect you will get respect. This rule proscribes dishonesty, exploitation, and intimidation, because these pressures can hinder the decision-making process.

The third principle states that, “The benefits and burdens of any action or policy should be distributed as fairly as possible” (Fitzpatrick pg. 207). This tenet of justice is based on the importance of fairness. It entails that harms and benefits, be dispersed between the affected groups in a fair manner. An organization should not reap the benefits at the cost of another organization’s impairment, unless there is sufficient validation.

I understand that the enforcement of these principles can be quite an issue. Since a universal code of ethics would be quite difficult to enforce, I feel that all companies should take it upon themselves to enforce their own code of ethics. A great standard for a code of ethics is the PRSA Member Code of Ethics. The code provides a foundation for all PR Practitioners as far as ethical practice in the field of Public Relations, which can produce appropriate responsible advocacy. One of the core values of PRSA is advocacy. The code states that individuals should, “serve the public interest by acting as responsible advocates for those we represent,” and also “provide a voice in the marketplace of ideas, facts, and viewpoints to aid informed public debate” (PRSA code of ethics pg. 7). When faced with an ethical dilemma it must first be defined properly. Secondly, the

internal/external factors that may influence the dilemma should be stated. Next, identify the key values (ex. Loyalty, advocacy, honesty, etc). Next, the parties that will be affected by the decision should be identified along with the practitioner's obligation to each. Then, the ethical principles to guide the decision making process should be chosen. After these steps a decision can be made and justified.

The only way to practice public relations ethics is through the principle of responsible advocacy. Handling ethical dilemmas is the job of a PR practitioner and not only an option. It is their duty to consider multiple publics whenever there is a decision to be made. Taking actions and establishing guidelines that are ethically correct is a PR practitioner's responsibility. Three types of responsibilities that were discussed are *mandatory, assumptive, and discretionary* responsibilities. Another great way to analyze responsible advocacy is through the three principles pointed out in Fitzpatrick and Gauthier's article, "Toward a Professional Responsibility Theory of Public Relations Ethics." The three principles state that pr practitioners hold the social responsibility of comparing harms and benefits, respect for persons, and distributive justice. It is important to recognize that these principles are *prima facie*, meaning they hold true generally unless they conflict with one another. It is up to the decision maker to determine what principle should be used in what circumstance. Lastly, using the method of practicing ethical standards according to PRSA is a significant method that should be used when an ethical dilemma arises. All things considered, practicing correct responsible advocacy should be a priority to all walks of life. Responsible advocacy will benefit our societies, and when our societies benefit we have improved the world.

Works Cited

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