

Shuraine Ramlal
CMN – Ethics in Public Communication
Professor Schoenberg
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tita4shur@msn.com

Ethics and Responsible Advocacy

Imagine being a part of a business that always does the right thing, in the eyes of society. Being the public relations practitioner, imagine abiding by the 'Code of Ethics' which "set the industry standard for the professional practice of public relations" (prsa.org). Being involved in such a situation, and acting in such a manner, shows what responsible advocacy in public relations is all about. Advocacy is defined as "the act of speaking or writing in favor of an issue by providing public recommendation and support" (Karnes & Lewis, 1997). Responsible advocacy is about "serving the public interest by acting as responsible advocates for those we represent. We provide a voice in the marketplace of ideas, facts, and viewpoints to aid informed public debate" (prsa.org). Being ethical is a way in which to do this. For instance, being honest, being knowledgeable, being loyal, being objective, and being fair to everyone involved. Therefore, responsible advocacy is integral in all communication fields, including public relations.

To begin with, being ethical is one of the key concepts that lead to responsible advocacy. Not just having ethics, but practicing them. As previously stated, practicing ethics includes making decisions honestly, loyally, and to the best of a person's ability. It defines what is good for society, what is bad for society, what is right for society, and what is wrong for society. According to the PRSA Member Code of Ethics, "these values are the fundamental beliefs that guide our behaviors and decision-making process...professional values are vital to the integrity of the profession as a whole" (prsa.org). For the profession as a whole to be ethical, however, the leaders must also be ethical.

The responsible advocacy theory of public relations states that the most effective way to practice public relations ethics, responsible advocacy, is through the ideal of professional responsibility. This, developed by Kathy Fitzpatrick and Candace Gauthier, means that the practitioners “greatest need for ethical guidance is in the reconciling of their conflicting roles of professional advocate and social conscience” (Class notes). It also means that “public relations professionals’ best serve society by serving the special interest of his or her client or employer” and even though loyalty is always to the client, there is also a responsibility to the public (Class notes). Three principles define the foundation for what responsible advocacy in public relations stands for. They are “the comparison of harms and benefits,” “Respect for Persons,” and “Distributive Justice” (Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, p.207, 2001). The “Comparison of Harms and Benefits” simply means that harms should be avoided and benefits rewarded. “Respect for Persons” means that all people should be treated with respect and dignity. Finally, “Distributive Justice” means that rewards and punishments should be distributed fairly and evenly.

Responsible advocacy in public relations is by far the proper theory to follow when a person is training to be, or already is, a public relations practitioner. There are numerous reasons for this. Being a responsible advocate involves appropriate decision making skills. When issues are not extremely complex, then a person is able to make decisions based on instincts. When an issue is complex, however, decisions should be made by using a logical process. For instance, the first step is to define the situation, identify internal and external factors that may influence a decision, identify key values, identify the parties who will be affected by the decision and define the practitioner’s obligation, select ethical principles, and finally, make a decision that is justifiable.

An example of this is the cry for public relations advocacy in gifted education. The article, “Public Relations: A Necessary Tool for Advocacy in Gifted Education,” discusses how “gifted children are often misunderstood, the victims of damaging myths and stereotypes...which can mean public resistance to funding for gifted education” (Frances & Karnes, 1997). If a responsible practitioner were hired to perform the job needed by schools with gifted children – to help gifted children programs and help restore the image of gifted children – responsible advocacy would force the public relations professional to make wise decisions that would not only affect the schools and the children, but also the stakeholders. The first step would be to define the issue, which has already been defined. Decisions would need to be made about getting the media involved so that the public would be more informed about gifted children, wanting them to donate more of their money and their time. The people involved, the school and the children, would benefit as well as the external factor, the public. The key factors are to tell the truth to the public and to deal fairly with the school and its children. Strategies to best support the client would also need to be taken into consideration. The next step is to determine the obligation to the public, the media, and most importantly, the school. The article summarizes the importance of responsible advocacy best when it states that “advocates for children need to be involved in positive public relations on a continuing basis. In times of educational reform, it is even more essential to build a foundation of general understanding about gifted children and their educational needs” (Frances & Karnes, 1997).

Some people argue that some of the concepts of responsible advocacy in public relations fall short. For example, it relies too much on decision making and choices. It

also places too much responsibility on the people in charge. Those people argue that other “ethical” theories of public relations are better suited for practitioners to make better decisions. The attorney/adversary model being one. This theory argues that professional advocates act the same way an attorney does when he or she represents his or her client. Another model, the enlightened self-interest states that businesses do good when they have good ethics. The problem with this is that ethics is about doing good for others, not just for one’s self. The community, communitarian, social responsibility theory focuses on instituting policies without a self-interested motive. The problem with this is that it is too idealistic. The partisan value v. mutual value theory primary focus in public relations is where the partisan and mutual values intersect, but it places mutual values above partisan values, something that responsible advocacy does not do. These “theories of public relations ethics make significant contributions to our understanding of the ethical challenges encountered in the practice of public relations...each falls short of providing a universally accepted philosophy on which standards of ethical public relations practice might be based” (Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, p.201, 2001).

Responsible advocacy recognizes that it is a choice for public relations practitioners to be ethical or not, which is why it is important to give guidance and spell out decision making guidelines, so that practitioners would be responsible. Therefore, be able to provide for their clients, and to the public, to the best of their abilities. A responsible, professional advocate requires “advanced intellectual training, mastery of technical subject matter, the exercise of skilled and responsible judgment” (Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, p.202, 2001).

To conclude, “90% of American workers say they ‘expect their employers to do what is right, not just what is profitable” (Hatcher, 2002). This shows how ethics has become central part of modern society, and therefore should be taken seriously, which is one of the positive aspects of responsible advocacy. With three principles for public relations professionals to follow, and a detailed process on how to make decisions, responsible advocacy definitely means being responsible, being ethical, and being fair, to clients and also to stakeholders. It is the best theory and the best way to practice public relations because it gives a voice to the voiceless and it requires intelligent professionalism.

Work Cited

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