

## Everyday Ethics

*This text is taken from the book*

***Le temps des relations publiques***

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The public relations practitioner often intervenes in difficult situations, where equally legitimate but contradictory interests are pitted against one another and cannot coexist without a minimum of compromise on both sides. Imagine a controversial project to build a factory. The plant will be built or it won't be. However, if it is, is it possible to provide better protection for the quality of life of the neighbourhood and for the environment? To reserve jobs for the local population? To compensate by providing cultural or recreational facilities? To limit the hours of operation of noisy equipment? To plant trees or to create parks? This kind of compromise is the result of negotiation between stakeholders where public relations plays a central role.

It is important to remember that the primary responsibility of the practitioner is to work for their employer or client with a stakeholder communication approach that is as open as possible. Reality will quickly create significant obstacles, usually stemming from the ignorance or bad faith of either party. Ignorance can be corrected by an information process that takes into account possible conflicts of values, as discussed above.

Bad faith poses difficulties of another kind. It is sometimes based on fear of the other, especially when there is a power imbalance between the parties; the weaker party may refuse to open up for fear of making themselves vulnerable. Patiently building a relationship of trust will remedy this. But bad faith is sometimes based on unacceptable behaviour: a frantic search for profit or success at any cost; a predatory cynicism based on superior force; an extreme ideological position which borders on dogmatism; or an outright absence of morality. Very often, the real

motives for bad faith are not immediately apparent, nor is the solution. Practitioners must see to the interests of their employers, but they must also protect their moral integrity and the ethics of their profession.

When the situation gets tough and the blows get harder and harder, it is tempting to give in to the "dark side" and adopt questionable tactics, solely on the basis of their effectiveness. It is a trap that must be resisted. Because short-term gains based on unethical means inevitably result in a weakening of the bond of trust in the long term; we will prevail today, but then the other party will build stronger defenses and communication will become even more difficult than before. In a situation where the other party's resistance is based on fear and ignorance, we would then have confirmed that party's worst prejudices, validating their will to obstruct. In a situation where the other party's resistance is based on unacceptable behaviours such as those described in the preceding paragraph, we will then have squandered the major asset of our own reputation in the face of public opinion, weakening our cause.

The path is not always clear. The real motivations are often hidden, the facts available incomplete, the time insufficient for discussion. How should we navigate in this fog? How do we know what to do? It is possible to find our way by using the very nature of public relations as our compass: its objective is always to encourage constructive dialogue.

We have described the fundamental social utility of public relations as that of *creating dialogue*. It can therefore be said, in general, that deeds leading to dialogue are desirable while those that block dialogue are unethical.

No real dialogue is possible without a minimum of trust and respect between the parties. Trust and respect do not presuppose that the parties agree; rather, they are based on the certainty that the other party is sincere and transparent, whether we agree with them or not. It also rests on the feeling of having been heard and understood, even in circumstances where there is no possible agreement at the end of the dialogue. On this basis, let us propose the following definition:

**In public relations, a decision, a deed, an action, a position, are ethical insofar as they pursue the achievement of a legitimate end without damaging the bond of trust which links an organization to its stakeholders.**

The notion of legitimate end needs to be deepened. The Collins Dictionary defines the word legitimate in various ways, two of which are of particular interest to us. The first is "acceptable according to the law"; we are talking about legitimate authority. But we have all experienced situations that offend our moral sense, even if they are legal. Thus, a legitimately elected government has sufficient authority to decide in its areas of jurisdiction. It may, if it so decides, expropriate for the purposes of public works, for example the construction of a road. But if presented without context and on the sole basis of legal power, this decision will be perceived as arbitrary and will cause a deep sense of injustice on the part of the expropriated persons, as well as in the general public. Another definition then comes into play, taken from Collins, which appeals to our moral sense is *legitimate*, defined as "reasonable and justified". The expropriating government must justify its decision by a higher reason, for example, the fact that the new road cannot take another route and that it is necessary to ensure the good of the community. It is by putting forward these arguments in the context of a public debate that the government will establish the true legitimacy of its expropriation in the face of public opinion.

It is through dialogue and not on the basis of authority that legitimacy is established. We come back to our philosophers; if the process is ethical, so will the result be. Thus, the ethical nature of a public relations approach can be verified if it has the following characteristics:

- It is based on a relationship of trust and openness between the practitioner and their employer or client;
- It includes and respects all verifiable, objective known facts;
- It is based on a state-of-the-art, recognized methodology, which makes it possible to identify the interests of the client and to identify the stakeholders and their legitimate interests;
- It uses proven mechanisms of listening, analysis, communication, evaluation;
- It always remains respectful of people;
- It leaves stakeholders with the feeling of having been not only heard but understood, and of having received an adequate response;
- It uses strategies whose objective is to inform and clarify the issues, rather than concealing or confusing them;

- It is likely to inspire respect and trust, even between parties who are destined not to get along;
- It does not use deceptive methods such as astroturfing.

To this list of "positive" characteristics, we can add a list of prohibitions identified by Patricia J. Parsons to avoid the risk of creating propaganda:

- Avoid false, fabricated, misrepresented, distorted or irrelevant evidence to support your point of view.
- Avoid intentionally specious, unsupported or illogical reasoning.
- Avoid trying to divert the public's attention by using such approaches as smear campaigns, or evoking intense emotions such as bigotry, God or the devil.
- Avoid asking your public to link your idea to emotion-laden values, motives or goals to which it is not really related.
- Don't conceal your real purpose (or the real supporters of your cause).
- Don't oversimplify complex situations into simplistic, two-valued either/or polar views or choices.
- Avoid taking on the role of advocate for something in which you yourself do not believe.

We must also learn to rely on our own moral sense. It is one thing to defend a difficult case impersonally before the media. Would you be comfortable doing so with your family, your friends? If the answer is "no", it indicates one of two things: either your knowledge of the facts is insufficient and you are not yourself convinced of the case that you will have to defend publicly, in which case you will then be an unconvincing spokesperson; or, you know the facts very well, but they hurt your own moral sense. Here also, you will be an unconvincing or, even worse, a dishonest spokesperson.

One observation emerges: ethics are built on a daily basis. They must permeate each stage, each operation, each message. They must become second nature, show through in our attitudes and behaviours and thus, condition all of our interactions with stakeholders, building trust and enabling dialogue. In fact, if all the guidelines listed here are observed on a daily basis, we would nip in the bud any ethical problems related to specific actions or to an inadequate methodology, or to the behaviour of the practitioner.

There remain the problems linked to conflicting purposes: is it better to build the plant, or to protect the environment? We dealt with this above when the issue of truth was discussed, where we saw that it is sometimes necessary to accept living with the ambiguity of an unresolved conflict of values rather than to seek a quick solution. You have to know how to take the time to reflect and discuss, the time to let ideas mature and positions evolve. When the conflict is deep, this time is counted in months and years, not days. Unfortunately, we live in a world where this is not always possible. To help us in these really difficult situations where nothing seems obvious, there are methodological tools that are good to know. The Potter Box, for example, a means to which we alluded earlier. There are other approaches of this nature, which all follow more or less the same path of clarifying the options, the values, the consequences of the different possible choices.<sup>2</sup> It should be stressed, however, that these tools are imperfect and that they should never be used to justify a difficult decision by themselves; their primary use is to allow us to deepen our thinking until our own moral sense dictates a conclusion.

The very nature of ethical conflicts between two purposes, especially when there is insufficient time for discussion, means that most of the time, no decision is completely satisfactory. Each possible choice has an unpleasant consequence for one of the parties, as well as a favourable consequence for another. No approach guarantees a result. There is nothing mechanical about ethics; a good approach opens up possibilities, but these will lead nowhere if the parties do not communicate in good faith with the intention of arriving at the best possible settlement.

In conclusion, ethics lead to authenticity and foster efficiency, because no position is tenable in the long term if it is not based on the solid foundations that we have identified: a thorough knowledge of the facts, and a sense of the consistency and the correctness of our position relative to the facts as well as to our values. It is a hundred times more important to have a coherent position with which we are morally comfortable than to adopt a popular position which we know to be weak in logic, simply to win a round of debate. Because what is coherent today will always remain so, while what is popular today may very well no longer be so tomorrow.

Thus conceived, ethics underpin our professionalism and are an important means - in fact, the only means - of ensuring the confidence and respect of the media and the public without which no dialogue is possible.

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<sup>2</sup> Among other references, the 3rd edition of Patricia Parsons' book, *Ethics in Public Relations*, gives a good overview of the tools and methods available. Yannick Farmer and Guy Versailles also propose a decision-making model for ethical conflicts in the chapter devoted to ethics in public relations of the manual *Introduction aux relations publiques* published by les Presses de l'Université du Québec in 2018 (available only in French).

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