



The Unquatable Value of Ethics Training

Face to face with a large group of PR professionals, I asked two questions about ethics. One question was far more meaningful than the other. The first question was this: Are you ethical? Every hand went up.

The second question was this: Have you had formal ethics training? About ten hands out of a hundred went up, most of them tentatively. It was the second response that really told the tale.

Here is the sad reality, very few practitioners receive any formalized training on the ethical decision making process. In fact, when researching their book [Trust Inc.](#), my colleagues, Dr. Carol Orsborn, Senior Vice President, Fleishman-Hillard and co-author Judith Rogala found that less than 10 percent of public relations practitioners (at all organizational levels) had ever received any formal training on the ethical decision making process!

As an ethics trainer for the public relations industry, I have learned that for most of us, most of the time, we intend to do the right thing. We think of ourselves as ethical, ergo, the proudly-raised hands.

The issue is that the nature of our work, at this point in time, leaves us constantly multitasking. The constant demands of clients, co-workers, the media and others leave little time for reflection. As a result, we rush through our days in an attempt to extinguish as many fires as possible. This haste impedes our ability to make sound decisions.

Moreover, the fact that we're on the cutting edge of social trends and emerging media on behalf of our clients often puts us in situations where we are breaking new ground, and perhaps, breaking new rules. Because of this, many are left asking, "What are the rules?"

As a result, recent industry headlines have shown that, even in the best of firms, employees are finding that it's not always easy to know what the good, right or even best thing is to do in any given set of circumstances.

One of the things that frustrated me most over the years is the lack of formalized training agencies provide to their staff. For many newcomers, their initiation to the business is sink or swim. Here's your list, here's a release, and here's a phone...see you later.

Those lucky enough to get training get it primarily in media relations, but get very little in the way of business management overall.

Now, think about the fact that many agencies sell "reputation management consulting services," yet they don't take the time to ensure that their own employees are trained in ethics and compliance so as to apply these fundamentals to their own firms.

That said, several large agencies such as [Ketchum](#) are taking the lead to offer practical training on ethics and compliance system wide. However, they are the exception, not the rule.

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In May of 2005, shortly after the Armstrong Williams controversy surfaced, Ketchum took a strong stand in training their entire organization on ethics and compliance. My colleague, Dr. Orsborn, in conjunction with Ketchum's Chief Learning Officer Robert Burnside, CEO Ray Kotcher, and Michael Lasky, Esq., Davis & Gilbert, LLP, developed a highly interactive three-hour workshop titled **Navigating the Changing Communications Landscape: Policies, Contracts & Disclosure; Ethical Decision-Making**.

Ketchum mandated that all employees take the course, which incorporated a module on current communications law, compliance, Trust Inc.'s LEAP ethical decision making process, as well as a number of real world case scenarios that sparked discussion and allowed employees to practically apply the lessons learned in each training module.

As a result, 95 percent of Ketchum's employees reported:

- I have a better comprehension of the ethical decision making process and how to incorporate it into the workday,
- I clearly understand that Ketchum supports my making ethical decisions in my work,
- I understand how to report what I may consider to be ethical violations
- I believe that seeking ethical solutions will make me and my clients more successful in the future, and
- I know where to find standards and policies on how to do my work.

Ketchum didn't stop there. CEO Ray Kotcher has further required that all new hires take the course and that existing employees take a refresher course, online, each year. The company also established a hotline for the anonymous reporting of ethical violations through parent company Omnicom.

Based on Ketchum's experience, Burnside suggests firms ask some basic questions of themselves such as:

- Do you have one point person that has a file of all your contracts?
- When you are working with a satellite media company do you amend their contracts to insist on disclosure?
- Are you/staff members blogging under their real identities?
- On websites your company creates is the sponsor company visible?
- Do you have a system in place for anonymous/confidential reporting of alleged ethical violations?
- Do your employees understand and experience your company's active ethical commitment?
- Do you know how to make an ethical decision?
- Have you reviewed your company's compliance with the Federal Guidelines?

If your firm isn't clear on the answers, it's time to reevaluate your business practices and staff training procedures.

It's also important to note that ethics training pays tangible dividends in terms of client and staff loyalty and agency reputation, not to mention in the event of a legal crisis.

For example, Federal Sentencing Guidelines for Organizations (FSGO) allow Federal judges to impose upon organizations harsh sentences including restitution, remedial orders, community service and substantial fines depending on the offense. However, judges can *substantially* mitigate these penalties if an organization has an effective compliance and ethics training program in place, and promotes an organizational culture that encourages a commitment to compliance with the law.

Yet despite recent industry surveys that show ethics is a priority among practitioners, few agencies are taking a proactive approach to ensuring ethical best practices.

Sadly, our industry talks the talk of ethics, but very few walk the walk.