

# Chapter 6

## 6 Ethics in Public Relations

- The role of ethics
- Ethics and behaviours
- Unethical instructions
- Codes of professional conduct
  - BAIE Code of Professional Conduct
- Legal requirements

### Objectives

At the end of the topic, students are able to:

- Understand the role of ethics
- Understand how ethics can mould behaviours
- Understand what are the unethical instructions
- Understand and able to explain about codes of professional conduct
- Understand and able to explain about BAIE code of Professional conduct
- Understand legal requirements

## 6.1 THE ROLE OF ETHICS

Ethics is very important in public relations. This is because a business is more likely to succeed if it is trusted. In the public relations field, credibility is vital. Not only must it be believable but it must be true since PR is about creating knowledge and understanding and this will lead to goodwill and reputation.

PR activities will not work until it is believed. This is different from propaganda, for instance, when people are indoctrinated to accept a certain religious, social or political creed, or advertising which aims to persuade people to make purchases. In PR, public relations practitioners are responsible to produce factual information, accurately and without any comment. The receiver of this information must decide by themselves what to do with it.

## 6.2 ETHICS AND BEHAVIOUR

Ethics basically apply to the way PR practitioners act and behave. In order to become professional, PR practitioners should have personal integrity as with teachers, doctors, or accountants. Public relations practitioners have to do PR for themselves because they will be judged by the way they act and behave. They do not bribe and corrupt, they only give expert advice, publish stories on their merit, not because they entertain journalists; they are the professionals.

## 6.3 UNETHICAL INSTRUCTIONS

Similarly, if the employers or clients ask PR practitioners to do something unethical, they as professional people have the right and strength of their professional code of practice to support the refusal to act unprofessionally. Therefore, professional PR practitioners have to find and seek qualifications and be accredited by the examinations of the Public Relations in their own country.

## 6.4 CODES OF PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT

There are certain international codes such as the admirable Code of Athens of the International Public Relations Association which originated in Athens in 1965 and was modified in Teheran in 1968. The emphasis of this code is on “human rights”. IPRA has members in 70 countries. Therein lies both the code’s strength and weaknesses. Its sentiments are splendid and cannot be disputed, but the tenets of the codes are impossible to administer, and there is no recorded case of an offending member ever having been investigated, let alone penalised. A code of professional conduct is only valuable provided it is effective in regulating the conduct of professional practitioners.

In contrast, the code of Practice of the British Institute of Public Relations is made and seen to work. When a person is elected to membership, he or she undertakes to uphold the code.



#### **6.4.1 The IPR Codes of Professional Conduct reads as follows:**

##### **6.4.1.1 Conduct towards the practice of public relations**

A member shall:

- Have a positive duty to observe the highest standards in the practice of public relations and to deal fairly and honestly with employers and clients (past and present), fellow members and professionals, the public relations profession, other professions, suppliers, intermediaries, the media of communications, employees and above all, the public
- Be aware of, understand and observe this Code, any amendment to it, and any other codes which shall be incorporated into it; remain up to date with the content and recommendations of any guidance or practice as expressed in such guidance or practice papers.
- Uphold this Code and cooperate with fellow members to enforce decisions on any matter arising from its application. A member who knowingly causes his or her staff to act in a manner inconsistent with this Code is party to such action and shall be deemed to be in breach of this Code. Staff employed by a Member who acts in a manner inconsistent with this Code should be disciplined by the Member.

A Member shall not:

- Engage in any practice or misconduct in any manner detrimental to the reputation of the Institute or the reputation and interests of the public relations profession.



#### 6.4.1.2 Conduct towards the public, the media and other professions

A member shall:

- Conduct his or her professional activities with proper regard to the public interest.
- Be positive at all times to respect the truth and shall not disseminate false or misleading information knowingly or recklessly, and take proper care to check all information prior to its dissemination.
- Have a duty to ensure that the actual interest of any organization with which he or she may be professionally concerned is adequately declared.
- When working in association with other professionals identify and respect the codes of those professions.
- Respect any statutory or regulatory codes laid down by any other authorities which are relevant to the actions of his or her employer or client, or taken on behalf of an employer or client.
- Ensure that the names of all directors, executives, and retained advisers of his or her employers or company who hold public office, are members of either House of Parliament, Local Authorities or any statutory organization or body, are recorded in the IPR Register.
- Honour confidences received or given the course of professional activities.
- Neither propose nor undertake, or cause any professional activity. Neither propose nor undertake, or cause an employer or client to propose or undertake, any action which would be an improper influence on government, legislation, holders of public office, or members of any statutory body or organization, or the media of communication.



### 6.4.1.3 Conduct towards employers and clients

A member shall:

- Safeguard the confidences of both present and former employers or clients; shall not disclose or use these confidences to the disadvantage or prejudice of such employers or clients, or to the financial advantage of the Member (unless the employer or client has given specific permission for disclosure), except upon the order of a court of law
- Inform an employer or client of any shareholding or financial interest held by that Member or any staff employed by that Member in any company or person whose services he or she recommends
- Be free to accept fees, commissions or other valuable considerations from persons other than an employer or client, if such considerations are disclosed to the employer or client
- Be free to negotiate, or renegotiate, with an employer or client, terms that are a fair reflection of demands of the work involved and take into account factors other than hours worked and the experience involved. These special factors, which are also applied by other professional advisers shall have regard to all the circumstances of the specific situation and in particular to:
  - The complexity of the issue, ease, problem or assignment, and the difficulties associated with its completion
  - The professional or specialized skills required and the degree of responsibility involved
  - The amount of documentation necessary to be perused or prepared, and its importance
  - The place and circumstances where the work is carried out, in whole or in part
  - The scope, scale and value of the task and its importance as an activity, issue, or project to the employer or client

A Member shall not:

- Misuse information regarding his or her employer's or client's business for financial or other gain
- Use inside information for gain. Nor may a member of staff manage or employ a Member directly, trade - in his or her employers' or clients' securities without the prior written permission of the employer or client and of the Member's chief executive or chief financial officer or compliance officer.
- Serve an employer or client under terms and conditions which might impair his or her independence, objectivity or integrity.
- Represent conflicting interests but may represent competing interests with the express consent of the parties concerned
- Guarantee the achievement of results which are beyond the Member's direct capacity to achieve or prevent

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#### **6.4.1.4 Conduct towards colleagues**

A Member shall:

- Adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth, avoiding extravagant claims or unfair comparisons and giving credit for ideas and words borrowed from others
- Be free to represent his or her capabilities and service to any potential employer or client, either on his or her own initiative or at the behest of any client, provided in so doing he or she does not seek to break any existing contract or detract from the reputation or capabilities of any Member already serving that employer or client

A Member shall not:

- Injure the professional reputation or practice of another Member

#### **6.4.1.5 Interpreting the Code**

A Member shall:

- In the interpretation of this Code, the Laws of the Land shall apply.

## 6.5 BAIE CODE OF PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT

The code reads as follows:

(a) **Integrity of communication**

Member shall make every effort not to publish or otherwise disseminate false information

(b) **Confidential information**

Members who are given or obtain information in confidence during the course of their professional duties shall not publish otherwise disclose such information except as required by law

(c) **Injury to other members**

A Member shall not maliciously injure the professional reputation of another member

(d) **Reputation of the profession**

Members shall not conduct themselves in a manner which is likely to be detrimental to the reputation of the Association or the practice of internal corporate communications

(e) **Legal requirements**

Members shall seek to ensure that the communications media for which they are responsible comply with the legal requirements, in particular those concerning copyright, libel, and publishing imprints.

(f) **Breaches of this Code**

If a member has a reason to believe that another member has engaged in practices which are in breach of this Code it shall be his/her duty to inform the Council of the Association, through its current Chairman or Vice-Chairman or the Chief Executive of the Association. Council shall take whatever action is considered appropriate in the circumstances, as specified in the Articles of Association. A member affected by such rulings shall have the right of appeal to the Senate of the Association, in accordance with the Articles of Association.

(g) **Upholding this Code**

A Member shall uphold this Code of Professional Conduct and co-operate with other members in so doing.

## **6.6 LEGAL REQUIREMENTS**

The BAIE lays stress on copyright, libel and publishing imprints, and since BAIE member are publishers these legal matters are very important. An imprint is the identity of the publisher and printer, often printed in small type at the end of a piece of print, which provides legal proof in the event of a dispute

## **6.7 SUMMARY**

Proper attitudes and behaviour is important to the success of a PR practitioner. Ethics is very important in public relations. This is because a business is more likely to be successful if it is trusted. In the public relations field, credibility is vital. Not only must it be believable but it must be true since PR is about creating knowledge and understanding and this will lead to goodwill and reputation. PR activities will not work until it is believed.

Ethics apply particularly to the way PR practitioners behave. Personal integrity becomes a part of their professionalism. It is important for the PR practitioners to do PR for themselves in that they will be judged by the way they behave and act. Most of their time will be spending in giving expert advice; they must not bribe and corrupt; they are responsible for publishing stories on their merit, not because they entertain journalist but because they are professional people.

In some circumstance if employers ask PR practitioners to act or do something that is unethical, they have the right and strength of their professional code of practice to refuse to act unprofessionally.

## 6.8 EXERCISE

### Section A: Short answer questions

1. Why do the ethics of public relations apply particularly to the behaviour of the PR practitioner?
2. What is the procedure for reporting breaches of the IPR Code of Professional Conduct?
3. Explain what clause 3.6 means about the confidentiality of information.
4. Explain the meaning of clause 3.9
5. Why does the BAIE stress 'legal requirements'?