

**Public Relations Society of America**  
Board of Ethics and Professional Standards  
Code of Ethics Case Study Series

**A “Deepfake” Apology?**

After a scandal, a corporation releases a video of its CEO apologizing. It goes viral on social media. Some viewers are commenting that the video looks like a “deepfake” (fabricated using AI). As the corporation’s Director of Public Relations, you know the CEO was not in the office at the time the video was created and released, but the CEO insists to you that the video is genuine and, even if it’s not, he would have said the same thing whether in person or in “deepfake” format. He would like your help in pushing back against the comments on social media.

**1. Define the specific ethical issue and/or conflict.**

The core ethical issue is **deception**. The PR Director knows the video is likely a deepfake, but the CEO insists it's genuine, or at least the message is. This presents a conflict between:

- **Truthfulness and Honesty:** A core principle of ethical PR is to be truthful and transparent with the public. Pushing back against deepfake accusations would be actively perpetuating a lie.
- **Loyalty to the Client (CEO):** The PR Director has a responsibility to represent their client and follow their directives. However, this loyalty shouldn't extend to unethical or illegal behavior.
- **Reputation Management:** While pushing back against the accusations might offer short-term protection for the CEO and company, if the truth comes out later (which is likely), the damage to reputation and trust will be far greater.
- **Professional Integrity:** The PR Director's personal and professional reputation is on the line. Participating in deception could jeopardize their career and credibility.

**2. Identify internal/external factors that may influence the decision.**

**Internal Factors:**

- **CEO's Stance:** The CEO's insistence that the video is genuine (or the message is) puts pressure on the PR Director. However, this doesn't absolve the PR Director of their ethical obligations.
- **Company Culture:** If the company has a history of prioritizing profits over ethics or tolerating questionable behavior, it might be more challenging for the PR Director to object.
- **Personal Values and Ethics:** The PR Director's own moral compass will play a significant role.
- **Fear of Job Loss:** Challenging the CEO or refusing to participate in the deception could lead to termination.

**External Factors:**

- **Media Scrutiny:** The intense media attention surrounding the deepfake accusations puts pressure on the company to respond. How the media portrays the situation will significantly impact public perception.
- **Public Opinion:** Public sentiment, especially on social media, can be volatile. A negative public reaction could lead to boycotts, protests, and damage to the company's brand.
- **Social Media Dynamics:** The speed and reach of information (and misinformation) on social media make it difficult to control the narrative. Comments and shares can amplify the deepfake accusations and fuel public outrage.
- **Legal Ramifications:** While there might not be specific laws against deepfakes, depending on the nature of the scandal and the deception, there could be legal implications for the company and the PR Director.

### 3. Identify key values.

**Honesty:** This is absolutely central. The PR Director knows the video is likely a deepfake, creating a direct conflict with the value of honesty. Even if the CEO insists the *message* is genuine, the *presentation* is deceptive, violating the core principle of honest communication.

**Advocacy:** While PR professionals are advocates for their clients, advocacy should be ethical and responsible.

Advocating for a client does *not* extend to defending or perpetuating deception. In this case, the PR Director's advocacy for the CEO is in direct conflict with their ethical duty to be honest.

**Loyalty:** Loyalty to the client is important, but it is *not* absolute. Loyalty cannot extend to shielding or supporting unethical behavior. The PRSA code makes it clear that ethical considerations supersede client loyalty when it comes to honesty and integrity.

**Independence:** The CEO is trying to dictate the narrative ("push back against comments"). The PR Director needs independence to provide objective counsel, which might include advising *against* the CEO's wishes. They need to be able to say "no" to unethical requests.

### 4. Identify the parties who will be affected by the decision and define the public relations professional's obligation to each.

#### 1. The Public:

- They are the intended recipients of the communication and risk being deceived by the deepfake. Their trust in the company and potentially in corporate communication in general is at stake.
- The paramount obligation is to be truthful and transparent. The PR Director should prioritize providing accurate information and avoiding any action that could mislead or manipulate the public. This aligns with the PRSA values of honesty and fairness.

#### 2. The CEO:

- The CEO's reputation is on the line, and their wishes are a factor.
- The PR professional's obligation is to provide counsel and strategic communication advice. However, the PR Director's obligation is not to blindly follow orders, but to

provide *ethical* and *effective* counsel. This includes explaining the risks and potential damage of using a deepfake, even if the CEO disagrees.

3. The Company (Corporation):

- The company's reputation, brand, and potentially its stock price are at risk.
- The PR obligation is to act in the long-term best interests of the company. While short-term crisis management is a factor, the PR Director should emphasize that deceptive tactics will likely backfire and cause greater damage in the long run.

4. The PR Profession:

- The use of deceptive tactics reflects negatively on the entire profession, eroding public trust in PR practitioners.
- It is the PR professional's job to uphold the ethical standards of the profession. This includes adhering to codes of ethics (like the PRSA Code) and acting in a way that enhances the credibility and reputation of PR.

5. The PR Director Personally:

- Their personal reputation and career are at stake.
- They have a responsibility to themselves to make decisions they can defend and that align with the PRSA values.

6. Employees of the Company:

- Employee morale and trust in leadership could be affected by the scandal and the company's handling of it.
- The PR professional should consider the impact on employees and strive to maintain open and honest internal communication.

7. Investors/Shareholders:

- Investors rely on accurate information to make decisions. Deception can lead to financial losses and diminished trust.
- The PR professional should ensure transparency and provide accurate information relevant to their investment decisions.

8. Media:

- The media plays a crucial role in disseminating information to the public.
- The PR professional should be responsive, accurate, and transparent in dealings with the media. While not obligated to give away confidential information, the PR Director should strive to build trust with media contacts through honest and open communication.

**5. Select ethical principles to guide the decision-making process. Core principles of the PRSA Code effecting this decision are:**

**Free Flow of Information:**

- **Intent:** Protecting and advancing the free flow of accurate and truthful information is essential to serving the public interest

**Disclosure of Information:**

- **Intent:** Open communication fosters informed decision-making in a democratic society.
- **Relevant Provision:** "A member shall be honest and accurate in all communications." This directly addresses the deepfake issue. Even if the CEO insists the message is accurate, the *presentation* is deceptive, which violates this provision.

**Enhancing the Profession:**

- **Intent:** PR professionals should work to strengthen the profession's reputation.

- **Relevant Provision:** "A member shall adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth." This reinforces the importance of honesty in communication.

## 6. Make a decision and justify.

Based on the PRSA Code of Ethics, the PR professional should handle the deepfake CEO apology situation by prioritizing honesty, transparency, and the long-term best interests of both the client (CEO and company) and the public.

### 1. Counsel the CEO:

- **Ethical Obligation:** The PR professional's first step is to engage in ethical counsel with the CEO. Clearly explain the ethical implications of using a deepfake, emphasizing that even if the message is something the CEO *would* say, the deceptive *presentation* is dishonest and violates PRSA's core values and code provisions.
- **Potential Repercussions:** Outline the potential negative consequences: damage to reputation, loss of public trust, legal risks (if the deepfake involves fraud or defamation), and harm to the company's brand.
- **Alternative Strategies:** Propose alternative communication strategies that are honest and transparent. This might include a genuine video message from the CEO (even if it's delayed), a press release, a public statement, or a combination of approaches.

### 2. Refuse to Participate in Deception:

- **Ethical Stance:** If the CEO insists on using the deepfake despite the PR professional's counsel, the PR professional should refuse to participate in the deception. They should clearly communicate that they cannot ethically endorse or support the use of fabricated content.
- **Consider Resignation:** If the CEO's demands persist and the situation becomes untenable, the PR professional should consider resigning from the account. While a difficult decision, it's essential to protect their personal integrity and uphold the ethical standards of the profession.

### 3. Repairing Trust:

- **Acknowledge and Apologize:** If the deception is exposed, the company (and potentially the CEO) must acknowledge the use of the deepfake and issue a sincere apology to the public.
- **Transparency and Accountability:** Commit to full transparency and accountability. Explain how the decision to use the deepfake was made and what steps are being taken to prevent similar situations in the future.
- **Take Corrective Action:** Implement measures to rebuild trust with the public. This might include changes in leadership, revised communication policies, or other actions to demonstrate a commitment to ethical behavior.