

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

Communicating Across the Divide

A national nonprofit focused on environmental advocacy is preparing a public campaign urging bipartisan support for clean energy legislation. The PR team has crafted messaging that emphasizes job creation and economic benefits to appeal to conservative lawmakers, while also highlighting climate justice for progressive audiences. However, a board member insists on removing all references to racial and social equity, arguing that such language will alienate conservative donors and damage bipartisan efforts. Meanwhile, several staff members express concern that erasing these references would betray the organization's mission and communities they serve. The PR director must decide how to communicate the campaign's goals without compromising core values or jeopardizing political traction.

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

The conflict centers on whether to prioritize inclusive, mission-driven messaging about climate justice or to strip such language to avoid alienating politically conservative stakeholders, raising questions of integrity, transparency, and fairness.

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

Internal pressures include the board's desire for broader political appeal and potential funding impacts. External factors include public trust, media framing, and the organization's reputation with marginalized communities.

Political context also plays a role: the prevailing federal, state, and local political climate may shape how terms like *climate justice*, *equity*, or *social impact* are perceived by different stakeholders. The PR director may need to balance communicating inclusively with avoiding language that could alienate key audiences or invite political backlash, while ensuring the message remains truthful and aligned with the organization's mission. In a charged political environment, striking this balance can be critical to the organization's long-term sustainability and bipartisan effectiveness.

3. Identify key values.

- **Honesty:** The PR director has a duty to present the organization's goals and values truthfully. Removing language about climate justice to appeal to one side of the political spectrum risks misrepresenting the organization's mission and the real-world impacts of environmental issues. Upholding honesty ensures that communications are not misleading and remain grounded in factual, inclusive realities.

- **Advocacy:** As a public relations professional, the director is responsible for giving voice to the mission of the organization and the communities it serves. This includes advocating for equitable

environmental policies and ensuring that the voices of marginalized groups affected by climate change are represented, even if those views are politically uncomfortable for some audiences.

- **Fairness:** Fairness calls for balanced representation of all stakeholders and a commitment to ensuring that no group is silenced or overlooked. Omitting racial and social equity considerations would marginalize communities already disproportionately affected by environmental harm. A fair communication strategy reflects all perspectives, not just those deemed politically safe.
- **Loyalty (to mission and stakeholders):** Loyalty requires balancing the interests of donors and political stakeholders with a deep commitment to the organization's founding mission and values. The PR director must ensure that communications stay aligned with the organization's long-term purpose, even when short-term compromises seem expedient.

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

- **Conservative donors/lawmakers:** Obligation to communicate clearly and respectfully.
- **Communities affected by environmental injustice:** Obligation to represent their interests and experiences truthfully.
- **Staff and mission-aligned stakeholders:** Obligation to uphold the organization's stated values.
- **Public/media:** Obligation to present accurate, transparent messaging that fosters informed discourse.

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

- **Free Flow of Information**
Altering or omitting key aspects of the campaign message (such as climate justice concerns) to appeal to certain political groups would compromise the accuracy and completeness of the information. Upholding this provision means communicating the full scope of the issue, including racial and social dimensions, to foster public understanding and informed decision-making.
- **Disclosure of Information**
The pressure to remove references to social equity could lead to misleading messaging about the organization's true mission and work. This provision obligates the PR practitioner to ensure that the campaign does not omit critical truths or misrepresent the organization's core principles and stakeholder concerns.
- **Enhancing the Profession**
Bending to political pressures by excluding key aspects of the organization's work could erode public trust in the profession. Choosing to communicate ethically, inclusively, and

transparently reinforces credibility and models ethical standards for the field, especially in politically divisive times.

6. Make a decision and justify.

The PR director should retain inclusive language in the campaign, while strategically emphasizing shared values like economic opportunity. This approach respects the organization's mission and affected communities without alienating broader audiences. Upholding transparency and honesty ensures long-term credibility and supports ethical communication even in divisive contexts.