

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

**Public Relations Ethics Case Study #6**  
**Looking the Other Way**

You're the director of public relations for a US-based Fortune 500 oil and gas exploration and production company. The company has been drilling deep-water wells in fields with significant oil and gas reserves. It is applying for permits to drill in the Arctic ice fields. It has support among some Congressional leaders and public groups and, at the same time, there is a very visible and sympathetic campaign against permitting the company to drill deep-water wells in this area. You are developing a Q&A for the company's top executives in preparation for critical meetings with uncommitted Congressional leaders and influential journalists who cover the issue closely. During your research, you discover that a company owned and operated deep-water well in a remote area off the coast of Brazil exploded and killed three of a subcontractor's employees six months ago and that another in the Tahiti field has been leaking significant quantities of oil for the past three months. Upper management has not disclosed these incidents, which could derail the company's plans to drill deep-water wells in the Arctic. What do you do?

1. Identify the ethical issues and/or conflicts.
2. Determine internal/external factors likely to influence your decision.
3. Choose key values that apply.
4. Consider parties who will be affected by your decision and evaluate the public relations professional's obligation to each one.
5. Select ethical principles to guide your decision making.
6. Make a decision and offer a brief rationale.

## **Guidance for Case Study #6**

### **Professional Standards Advisory PS-15: Looking the Other Way**

Among all of the staff functions in an organization, it is the communicator and communication department that seem to be in just about everyone's backyard, everyone's meetings or plans and everyone's strategic discussions, including those where ethical dilemmas arise. All too frequently, when questionable behaviors occur, the alarm fails to be sounded at an early stage for reasons ranging from fear to self-consciousness, to wanting to keep the boss happy, to "it's just not my concern." This behavior is looking the other way and it can be unethical.