

DISCUSSION KEY FOR CASE #5

Plagiarism

Case Summary:

One of your agency's largest clients is a leading international airline and the client has asked you to write a speech for the Chairman of the Board that will be delivered at an International Air Transport Association gathering in Geneva, Switzerland. Your client hopes to use the speech as a springboard to open discussion about the subsidies many airlines receive from governments in the countries where these carriers are based. Your client's position is that this creates unfair competition and lowers the subsidized airlines' standards of service, safety and security. Your deadline is immediate and you have the worst writer's block you've ever had in your life. Through some random electronic searches, you find the perfect speech on YouTube. It was delivered by a member of Panama's National Assembly who opposed the government's generous subsidies of the country's state-owned airline and was posted with subtitles. You are ready to copy it and present it to your client because it is exactly what you have been directed to write. But you're uncomfortable because you know the speech will not be your own work. The deadline is immediate. What do you do?

General Guidance:

Plagiarism is an all too frequent practice that involves the unauthorized use or close imitation of the language and thoughts of another author and the representation of them as one's own original work. The user fails to make any attempt to attribute the work. Plagiarism can be treated as fraud or theft of intellectual property. Plagiarism is different than copyright infringement, although both are violations of another's intellectual property rights. For more information on this topic see: [Professional Standards Advisory #16 – Plagiarism - http://www.prsa.org/AboutPRSA/Ethics/ProfessionalStandardsAdvisories/PSA-16.pdf](http://www.prsa.org/AboutPRSA/Ethics/ProfessionalStandardsAdvisories/PSA-16.pdf)

1. Identify the ethical issues and/or conflicts.

Is it ethical to use someone else's words without attribution, and is it ethical to accept compensation for those words?

Is it ethical to give a senior member of your client's firm a speech to deliver that was delivered by someone else in another context, potentially setting them up for public ridicule?

2. Determine internal/external factors likely to influence your decision.

Do local, state or federal copyright laws and plagiarism guidelines require a particular decision? **Copyright** infringement is a legal issue and involves the expropriation of another's words, images or other creative works without approval or compensation. **Plagiarism**, on the other hand, is an ethical and professional issue that deals with falsely representing another's ideas or words as your own. In this case, using the existing speech and presenting it as your own would certainly be plagiarism and would also likely violate copyright laws. But it is possible to be guilty of plagiarism even if the copyright permission was granted or waived.

Other questions to consider:

- What do my company and professional values, policies or procedures require?
- What action do I believe is in the public's best interest?
- What actions are in the best interests of my firm and my client?

3. **Choose key values that apply.**

- **Honesty.** We adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth in advancing the interests of those we represent and in communicating with the public.
- **Expertise.** We acquire and responsibly use specialized knowledge and experience. We advance the profession through continued professional development, research, and education. We build mutual understanding, credibility, and relationships among a wide array of institutions and audiences.
- **Fairness.** We deal fairly with clients, employers, competitors, peers, vendors, the media, and the general public. We respect all opinions and support the right of free expression.

4. **Consider parties who will be affected by your decision and evaluate the public relations professional's obligation to each one.**

The executive who presents this speech will be the party most affected by the unethical use of this speech if it should become public that it was copied from another speech. That executive will be publically humiliated and it will be this person who will be considered the plagiarizer. He or she could also face legal and financial liabilities if your action is also a copyright infringement.

Obviously, if that should happen, you will likely be dismissed from your firm, and your firm will lose this client's business. Your firm's reputation could be permanently damaged as well.

Others affected by stealing this speech include the audience, thinking they are hearing original words, the media who might quote the client and the actual author of the original speech whose words would be misappropriated.

5. **Select ethical principles to guide your decision making.**

- **Free Flow of Information.** Preserve the integrity of the process of communication. Be honest and accurate in all communications.
- **Competition.** Preserve intellectual property rights in the marketplace.
- **Disclosure of Information.** Be honest and accurate in all communications. Avoid deceptive practices.
- **Conflicts of Interest.** Avoid actions and circumstances that may appear to compromise good business judgment or create a conflict between personal and professional interests.

6. **Make a decision and offer a brief rationale.**

It would be completely unethical to use this speech as is and present it to the client as your own. You could, however, get some good ideas from the speech in terms of tone, types of examples used, structure, etc. Ideas cannot be copyrighted. Also, you may quote a few lines of the speech as long as you attribute them to the correct source.

If you cannot write the speech yourself, then you must ask someone else at your firm to do it in your place. Even having the client cancel the speech would be preferable to having the Chairman present this stolen speech and risking public embarrassment.