

ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING GUIDE HELPS RESOLVE ETHICAL DILEMMAS

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For public relations and other professionals, ethical dilemmas arise when responsibilities and loyalties conflict and a decision about the appropriate – i.e., ethical – course of action must be made. Often, a choice is required among actions that meet competing obligations. For example, when might the obligation to serve the public interest override loyalty to clients? When does a particular stakeholder’s interest take priority over an employer’s interest? In other words, just exactly what is “responsible advocacy”?

These questions illustrate the challenge of practicing ethical public relations. And they raise the related issue of how alternative actions should be weighed and competing interests balanced. In this regard, an ethical decision-making process can be helpful. Such a guide forces the decision maker to address significant issues that should be considered before taking action.

A number of such processes exist – ethics educators offer a variety of approaches to ethical decision making. The following guide, which is adapted to meet the specific needs of public relations professionals, is offered as one approach that PRSA members may find helpful in addressing ethical dilemmas:

1. Define the specific ethical issue/conflict.
2. Identify internal/external factors (e.g., legal, political, social, economic) that may influence the decision.
3. Identify key values.
4. Identify the parties who will be affected by the decision and define the public relations professional’s obligation to each.
5. Select ethical principles to guide the decision-making process.
6. Make a decision and justify it.