

ETHICS IN THE PUBLIC RELATIONS PROFESSIONAL WORLD:
A GUIDE FOR THOSE ENTERING THE FIELD

A THESIS

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Abstract

This research project explores ethics in professional practice within the public relations and communications field, particularly in the context of higher education. Through qualitative one-on-one interviews, it investigates how practitioners navigate ethical considerations in their daily work and overall career. Findings reveal a gap between ethical parameters valued in the field and their practical implementation, highlighting a lack of training and support systems. As a result, participants have felt compelled to independently navigate ethical dilemmas throughout their career, and that college did not fully equip them with the tools they needed to do so. Drawing from these findings, the project proposes practical strategies such as mentorship, interactive and discussion-based workshops, and integration of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) values to foster ethical decision-making in the field. The culmination of this research is encapsulated in a user-friendly guide tailored for college students, recent graduates, and new professionals entering the public relations and communications field. This guide offers actionable insights and advice drawn from real-world experiences, aiming to equip emerging professionals with the tools to find and uphold ethical standards throughout their careers.

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Introduction

In my studies at the University of Oregon, everyone is required to take a media ethics class, regardless of their major concentration. This establishes the mindset that ethics are important generally in communications, and that everyone believes that they matter. Beyond that class, however, ethics and ethical frameworks are not broadly applied to the public relations major requirements. While we do discuss the PRSA Code of Ethics as the industry standard, it is often only for two weeks at most out of a 180-credit degree. As a result, I have felt unconfident in my ability to handle communications ethics in my future workforce because when you are out in the field, you are often faced with ethical dilemmas that are not as clear cut or simple.

I am not discussing this to speak poorly of the major, but rather to use it as an example that while ethics are baked into the public relations field through organizations like PRSA, they are not being trained or taught as prominently as they should be, especially for younger PR professionals. In addition, when looking at past literature on this topic, there does not appear to be anything targeting young professionals and as a result, few have a clear understanding of ethics beyond PRSA's guidelines when they go into the field. This is where my thesis comes in and what I am exploring. Through studying past research and interviewing current communications professionals, I aim to identify common ethical dilemmas and navigation techniques used to develop an ethics-based guide for emerging professionals entering the field.

Literature Review

The following literature first walks us through the idea that ethics are not integrated as prominently into the field as they should be, and a few reasons why this might be the case. It then discusses the effect that this has on practitioners and workplaces, as more variation and confusion has arisen out of the lack of integration and support. Finally, it looks at what is needed in the field now, such as more discussions around ethical frameworks, training, and resources.

Why Are Ethics Not More Prominent in the Public Relations field?

It is important to note that the Public Relations Society of America does have a professional code of ethics, but they do not seem to be completely operationalized. This is where the disconnect lies, as despite this code, many public relations professionals note that their organizations do not provide ethics training (Lee & Cheng, 2012; Neill, 2016). Lee and Cheng found through their survey that 52% of professionals reported not receiving training from their organization and Neill found that 63.4% of PRSA members did not receive training from their organization. Of that number, 34% of PRSA members did participate in ethics professional development provided by PRSA (Neill, 2016). Furthermore, even though some public relations practitioners embraced the role of providing ethical counsel in their organizations, they noted that there is a “state of neglect” for this role in terms of education and support (Bowen, 2008 p. 271). This could provide an explanation as to why these skills are wanted in the public relations field but are lacking.

Because of this lack of training, professionals are working in the field without the skills and toolkits they need to employ ethical codes. The 2017 Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE) report found, for example, that new professionals are not quite meeting employer expectations regarding ethical skills and abilities (Neill, 2021 p. 52). In trying to

uncover specific ethical issues and lacking skills, Neill (2019) found that the most common ethical issues were (1) transparency (2) lack of ethics training (3) deceptive practices (4) no consequences for unethical behavior and (5) verifying facts/information. In skills and abilities necessary for an ethical public relations career, she notes the top five being (1) personal code of conduct or values system (2) personal integrity and accountability (3) awareness and knowledge of ethical issues (4) critical thinking and (5) honesty and transparency. The skills that were lacking in general were courage/speaking up, ethical awareness, and critical thinking/problem solving (Neill 2019 p. 57).

A similar lack of integration was noted in research regarding public relations students and young professionals as well, and noted that there is a lack of confidence in them in behaving ethically. Despite also being aware of the PRSA code of ethics, this did not deter academic misconduct (Auger & Cho, 2016). Moreover, when presented with unethical public relations practices, young professionals also did not provide recommendations on how to address issues, which points to feeling a lack of power and confidence to change them (Gallicano, 2013 p. 239; Neill, 2019).

Lack of Integration Creates Variation

With this lack of ethics training and integration into the workplace, studies have also shown that different PR professionals and workplaces hold different ideas about ethical duties. Some saw ethical behavior as an essential component of a practitioner's identity, for example, and another saw the same thing, but that they were not encouraged by their organizations (Bowen, 2008; Fawkes, 2015). Therefore, discussion of ethics and standards such as values or core principles in the workplace would lead to a more supportive organizational culture and be more helpful in resolving ethical dilemmas (Alexander & Murphy, 1998; Bowen, 2005; Bowen

& Stacks, 2013). Despite these findings, researchers still note that a cultural shift toward emphasizing ethics as central to public relations practice, evaluation, and research in the classroom is needed, and have been calling for this to happen since the early 2000s (Watson, 2001). By making this shift and establishing ethics as a core value of public relations, measurements of objectives and effectiveness would be based on things such as relationship strength, truthfulness, and data transparency (Fitzpatrick & Bronstein, 2006; Place, 2015 p. 14). Furthermore, practitioners' consideration of ethical evaluation would promote honest communication that protects and respects everyone involved in public relations (Place, 2015 p. 14).

There is also a disconnect as to whether their ethical duties lie within organizational service/public service or within serving their clients (Bowen, 2008; Neill & Drumwright, 2012). Public relations professionals are confronted with the complex decision to uphold an ethical versus pragmatic obligation (Neill, 2021 p. 165). As nontraditional media practices grow, the ease and opportunity to engage in unethical acts grows. Several practices are now contributing to opportunities to act unethically such as the blurring of paid and earned media that decreases the audiences' ability to discern a content's source and an increase in social sharing making it difficult for message creators and disseminators to control the message (Schauster & Neill, 2017).

What is Needed Now

Because this past research has shown that a lack of integration of ethics in the field exists, and that as a result it creates variation and broken structures, more discussion around how to implement ethical frameworks (like those in PRSA, value ethics, moral reasoning, etc.) needs to exist in the field. In addition to this discussion, the field needs a tangible framework around

amplification ethics and issues from a PR perspective. While this research exists in media studies, it is not prominent in fields like journalism and public relations where amplification issues are most pertinent (Phillips 2018). Public relations ethics guides need to discuss this kind of amplification, and the lack of findings around this is telling in that PR professionals do not have the linguistical framework to talk about it. The conversation around this needs to be opened and translated to the PR work field.

Practitioners also want and need to have integrated ethical training. One study found that many senior public relations executives embraced ethics counsel as integral to their jobs (Neill & Drumwright, 2012). Through a later survey, they found that the majority of practitioners and educators believe ethics counsel is public relations' responsibility (Schauster & Neill, 2017). Similar to what we saw about value ethics in the workplace, Place (2019) found that professional experiences are key to building confidence in employees for practicing and providing moral and ethical reasoning. Not only did this increase confidence in experienced practitioners, these professional experiences and relationships provided young professionals with more confidence to speak up about ethical concerns (Place, 2019; Schauster & Neill, 2017).

Similarly, while previous studies note that 89% of participants agreed that public relations practitioners should provide ethics counsel and note that there is a lack of training and resources, they also noted a higher percentage (55%) that received ethics training on the job (Neill, 2021 p.174). This finding as a whole, however, led to something interesting: that education was a more positive predictor of moral reasoning than current on-the-job training. This led them to the question, "what is happening after college and during the first few years of professional experience that is potentially impacting moral reasoning? Are the formative years of socialization occurring during the entry-level stages of one's career, and when does moral

development plateau? (Neill, 2021 p.174). Their average sample age was 48.38, with only 12 participants falling in the under 30 age range.

This suggests that their professional training reinforces what was learned in college, but additional variables such as having access to mentors or the ability to discuss ethical concerns with supervisors had no significant impact on moral reasoning, which is contrary to many previous studies (p.174). It is important to note, however, that this finding could be indicative of the age of the participants. They concluded that the participants' high levels of moral reasoning were developed in college and maintained through industry socialization and training. They also note that future research on young, emerging adults as they enter the public relations workforce is needed (Neill, 2021 p.176). This thesis seeks to build on this premise by asking:

RQ 1: What are some of the common ethical dilemmas PR professionals face?

RQ 2: How do these professionals navigate ethics in their careers?

RQ 3: How can students prepare to navigate ethics as they enter their careers in PR?

Methods

Following my key research questions and literature review, this section will address my method for answering questions and developing my guide. For the information collecting stage of my research process, I interviewed eight communications professionals working within higher education. I discuss the questions that guided my interview, how I found and selected participants and how I approached confidentiality.

Questions for interviewees

This section outlines the questions I asked the participants in order to gain a holistic view of not only what ethical dilemmas they had faced, but also a deeper understanding of what factors contributed to their decisions and mindsets. I intentionally kept questions consistent across all participants to be able to analyze any variation in answers that came out of them. That being said, some were skipped as needed on a case-by-case basis if the participant did not have experience in that area or did not want to answer a question. The questions are outlined in appendix A.

The Interviews

Selecting interview subjects was a largely word-of-mouth process, as well as outreach to potential participants via public sites such as LinkedIn. Because of what I found in literature, and as a way to narrow my sample scope and focus, I decided to focus on communications professionals working within higher education. Experience ranged from 1-5 years, 5-9 years, and 10+ years and all participants were 18 years or older. This was the only criteria, all other considerations (race, gender, etc.) were not considered specifically or reported. By using semi-structured one-on-one interviews, I was able to gather qualitative data based on people's unique experiences and issues with ethics in the communications field. Interviews lasted between 20 and

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40 minutes, and questions were provided to participants 24 hours in advance to allow for preparation time. They took place virtually via Zoom and Microsoft Teams calls as chosen by the participants.

After the interviews, I then coded the notes and transcriptions based on key themes that emerged from the participants answers. Once coding was completed, I engaged in confidentiality procedures of removing any personally identifiable information from the transcripts and collected data. All data was kept confidential with numbers (participant #1, #2, etc.) assigned to the folders and recording files. Once findings were written, the number system was switched to pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality while also making the findings easier to read. The list of pseudonyms are as follows: Shawn, Toni, Iris, Claire, Phil, Alfred, Cody and Gina.

Findings

The following sections discuss my research outcomes. Findings are separated into sections of common themes that emerged during the interview process, and flow from discussion of personal and workplace values to issues and potential ideas for change. These sections are not solely written with guidance for young professionals in mind, but as more of a holistic overview of all findings that can inform young professionals on current issues in the field and how participants navigate them. These findings revealed three core themes: values, vocation and voice. First, that participants led with their values, and that everything else was rooted in that. Second, that once they found their values, their approach to treating their job as a vocation. Lastly, how important it was for them to find their professional voice, and that it takes time to do so. Beyond these core themes, the vision section at the end focuses on what they believe is needed moving forward and support they hope to see in the future of the field.

Values

This first section walks through what respondents said regarding their treatment of values and revealed that the way they see them was the foundation of everything else they discussed. Because of this, findings must start with this core theme and nearly all the other finding themes stemmed from the discussion of both personal and professional values. Below are the general values that participants noted as their closest held ones. It was interesting to see that while they did not name many of the same ones, they can be grouped into similar value categories: DEI focused, duty focused, and truth focused. DEI focused ones comprised inclusion (authentic representation in media, access and opportunity), Community (what we are working towards needs to be done in concert with others), and Cultural Humility (understanding that your

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perspective is only one and being humble; open to learning). Duty focused ones centered on learning and self-improvement, responsibility (in choosing opportunities and work that align with values), and loyalty (to client, centering their needs in decision making). Lastly, truth focused ones included authenticity, integrity, and consent (being upfront with the people you are producing content about, making sure they are okay with it).

A common trend was that people found these values through time and age, failing in past projects or work environments, and having self-reflection on their experiences. Many also combined this with personal learning, such as through reading books or choosing to attend opportunities that aligned with their values. Participant Toni noted that identifying your values first is a central component to working in an office or team. Then, after you have identified them and can put them out in your work, you need to identify the values of the team you are working with.

All of your work needs to come back to that. Both in terms of how you do it, but also how you prioritize and your decision making – everything about how you go about your work should be rooted in your values...and your values should be the one thing that never gets thrown out the window or be compromised.

Rooting work in your values offers personal growth and authenticity, but when this is implemented, it also extends it to authenticity in the work you and/or your team is putting out into the world. The decisions that you make become purposeful, and as a result, more creative and genuine content comes out instead of content just focused on trends. It transfers focusing on just having an output to having an outcome that is done well. Beyond creating more genuine content, this centering of values in the workplace creates more employee fulfillment in their work because they are experiencing fulfillment of their values in the workplace.

While this integrated model is an ideal way of thinking about values in the workplace, the reality is often much further from that. What if you do not have the privilege of working in a

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place that centers values? Or, that centers values different than your own? Participant Alfred noted that the first few internships they had after college were rough, in the sense that their values and work styles did not align with the work environment. For them, it was a matter of waiting it out, and eventually switching jobs (when they had the opportunity) to one in higher education that aligned with their values. They said,

That's why I'm still here [working at a university] seven and a half years later because I was like, you know, I could make a lot more money in the private sector, but those values didn't really align with what I wanted to do. So that's why I'm here for now.

For another participant, Gina, it was different. Instead of waiting for a workplace that valued their specific personal values, they learned that their personal values and professional values do not have to be the same thing. They created a separation, because while starting a career in higher education did align with their values, they were not making enough to support themselves and their family. So, they went into the private sector. From this shift, they realized that corporate work would not always match with their personal values, but that they could make up for it in other ways of their life.

So there's ways you can still incorporate [values], y'know, the funds that I get paid I'm able to also donate to causes that I'm passionate about...so you kind of find your way around it and you know you have to at the end of the day be able to support yourself. And so, I think you can always find something that aligns with your ethical values in your work, even if it's not necessarily overarching or broad.

This distinction is an important reminder that there is privilege in being able to pick and choose a workplace that fits directly with your values and not being limited by external factors that influence ability to job hunt. It also should serve as a reminder that ethical, and value focused work looks different from person to person. Especially when you are a professional first starting out in the field, as Alfred experienced, you may not be able to work somewhere that directly aligns with your values.

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In addition to participants personal experiences with values, there was also a clear point from nearly all of them that diversity, equity and inclusion values overlapped or were central to their values. In addition, a want for these DEI initiatives to be integrated into the communications workplace as values rather than afterthought. For Toni, anything accessibility wise DEI was not implemented at the small university they worked at until after they were sued. Despite this lack of integration, they had personally been working to make every piece of work they touched accessible.

I wasn't involved in websites at the time, but everything that I was able to do, I was making sure that it was accessible, at least down to doing signs that have the right contrasts and sizing." And after the university was sued, "they started a new tone of taking these things seriously and getting people proper training and trying to get everyone on the same page, so that was the beginning of things getting better in that role.

Toni notes, however, it should not take being sued to start DEI training initiatives in the communications field. They found that training and professional development centered on DEI practices overlap and are parallel with the best practices for communications.

You know, good visual design is also accessible to people with reading and visual impairments, and it just naturally goes together that way. And good oral and written communication is also best practice for people who are neurodivergent or people who are not native language speakers.

Having a workplace perspective that couches communications efforts in DEI is an essential shift that must happen for ethical practice. The way they intersect should not be considered just a checkbox, but a way of life that will become second nature when practiced.

Both participants Toni and Iris mentioned the checkbox analogy in this shift.

So much of a strategic plan is checkboxes, but I'm really passionate about the idea that ethics and DEI in marketing and comms is not a tactical approach. It is a way of life embedded in the organization and the professionals that we have.

Instead of considering it as a to-do list, everything that is done, from the way they act in the office to the communications that they write and creative content produced, is just created

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with inclusion at the forefront. They also note that, as a person of color, they often get tasked with this work, which can feel challenging and tiring. So, for this shift to be truly implemented, it needs to be supported and implemented by all workers on the team. For Claire, it was helpful to think of this shift in terms of a technical communications model based on Black feminist theory that discusses the “3P’s: positionality, privilege and power.” This idea that you should be aware of your positionality, think about what you are overlooking and what privileges you are taking for granted.

Participants noted that, as a whole, DEI training in communications is ethical communications training. Phil noted that the dean of the department they worked at carved out time specifically to discuss DEI initiatives regarding their style of communication. “I think it was really important...our initiatives were pretty entrenched in inclusive communication.” Further, this time gave employees the space to discuss with one another and created a feedback loop where they would discuss later as they implemented their work. The resources felt built into the work that they did, rather than an afterthought or something they just had to check off. The idea that accessibility for and authentic representation of the wide group of people that will be impacted by your work is something that Gina had to learn on their own early in their career, but that they are now seeing implemented more and more into discussions and workshops. This type of training is also a benefit to employees themselves because through companies doing this kind of work, it encourages employees to show up as their authentic selves. Given this importance of values and an understanding of their role in participants’ experiences and the workplace, the next section will explore the idea of vocation.

Vocation

This section discusses how participants saw, and treated, their job as a vocation and the importance of being treated as one by the job as well. Themes that contributed to this were the amount of support and appreciation for communications work that their job showed, training and professional growth offered and mentorship support. First, a consensus across all interviews revealed that a communications ethics class, if they had one in college, was a “one class thing” that was not super impactful – it was more so just a requirement to check off for graduation. While they noted that the class was probably an important part of the curriculum, it would probably be more impactful if it was incorporated into discussions of other communications classes. This supports past research that ethics developed in college, especially if they are only one class, need to be maintained through industry workshops and discussions to be reinforced.

As far as participation in ethics-based communications workshops since entering the field, participant answers varied. Interestingly, however, the responses varies based on whether or not they worked at a small or large university. First, speaking on their experience at a small university, Toni noted that there was a lack of consent and choice in work assignments born out of a lack of appreciation for the communications field.

There was a lot of just, work responsibilities just kind of land on a person, and there's no discussion about that. There's no ‘how do you feel about this? Are you comfortable doing this work? Is this even what you want?’ And then also the additional responsibilities come with no formal approach to it, and this is something ethically that I have found throughout higher education very often is that, you know, this work gets to be assigned and everything because, especially because, with communications and PR work, everyone wants it, but no one takes it seriously.

They note that this smaller institution did not value ethics and values clearly out of a concept of not understanding and not taking it seriously. Moreover, part of this dynamic was due

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to an overall lack of support and “everyone’s just trying to survive” mentality that did not allow for time to assess core values and ethical approaches to communications work combined with a smaller audience and therefore, less perceived risk with putting out content. This experience continued to more recent roles, with communications still being treated as an afterthought, and more focus and emphasis being placed on administrative work. When communications work is thought of this way and given without proper training to the employee, they become the one to blame as they are the one who “touched it last, whether or not they had any true decision making power or any true involvement in how things got rolled out other than being the person who sent the message.” To cope with this, Toni tried to self-educate through books and YouTube videos because the institution did not have mechanisms in place for professional development or realize the importance of communications training.

Some of this work, both having to do some of the self-education and some of the work itself, like on my lunch break behind a closed door because my coworkers did not take that kind of work seriously. So, you walked by my office, and you see that on Twitter all day or I’m, you know, designing graphics. It was a legitimate business thing that my boss wanted me to do, but my coworkers, you know, thought that that was just a bunch of fluff bullshit, and so I’m having to do that on my own time in secret in order to meet deadlines.

Change came when they started working at a larger institution with more resources and more ability to bring in skilled professionals with a formal background. They spoke of a new director of communications and specialist, who brought with them an ethos about training on the importance of ethics and doing things properly. This shift is something Iris commented on as well. They note that the value of communications ethics in the workplace shifts based on leaderships willingness to both learn about it and be a steward of it from the top down. “That contributes to a culture within an organization, these leadership positions are fundamental and foundational in creating a culture within an organization that has a value of ethics.” The

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organization's willingness to support employees in professional development is central to whether they receive training and workshops.

Regarding the training and workshops themselves, participants had varying levels of access and participation in them, from some attending and even hosting them to others rarely or never having the opportunity. The workshops themselves also varied in terms of the impact and help they provided employees. Workshops that were seminar-based, "one off" and/or completely separate from the specific organization or workplace did not seem to have as lasting of an impact on participants. This type of workshop can be good in the moment, Phil noted, but is harder to implement in their actual work. Those trainings give you ideas and information, but once you get back to work, you are left trying to figure out how to actually apply it.

Instead, Phil, Toni, Iris and Gina spoke about a more integrated approach, often called "communities of practice." These get a variety of people who do the same type of work together to discuss things, usually led by resident experts in the area. It creates a supportive and ongoing environment that centers peer-to-peer learning among colleagues. Phil spoke about one for social media managers across the campus, for example, that would meet once a month to discuss initiatives, ideas and issues. They have a more lasting impact, Toni noted, because of the networking aspect combined with the frequency and familiarity.

Being able to just have someone that you can just ask a question of is much more beneficial than going to a seminar and getting talked at for a while, maybe being able to ask a question or two, and then being sent home with a handful of PDFs and trying to apply that to your work life.

Gina discussed that this communities of practice idea seems like the next step, or step up, from traditional workshops. While they did not get a ton out of traditional workshops and seminars, they think they could be very valuable for people who do not already have constructs

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for DEI related and ethics-based communication practices. This brings up an important distinction and idea, that the traditional workshop or seminar model might not be bad at all, but those initiatives need to focus and center on those that have little existing knowledge or experience on the topic. For someone that has been doing that type of training for a while, however, it would make sense to focus on incorporated models based in dialogue training that allow for more discussion and integration.

Another form of support and guidance that participants noted as being incredibly helpful was the role of mentorship. Several participants spoke about specific mentors and how having mentors' support was a huge part of their journey. Moreover, participants emphasized that two specific types of mentors are beneficial. The first is those within the workplace you are a part of. So for Shawn, that looked like open communication with their boss, and for Iris, it was other people within the sphere of the organization that helped them "learn the ropes" and answered questions. The second type of mentor needed is from outside of the workplace. Iris noted that it is important to have someone external that you could safely discuss concerns with and offer more of a coaching mentality – a safe outside perspective.

Outside of a specific workplace, Phil talked about the overall impact that a mentor had on their career. "The thing that helped me in the career path was having a strong mentor with tons of experience in the field," he said. So, finding opportunities to network with people who have more experience and can offer that different perspective and advice that you wouldn't get in a traditional classroom can be integral to finding your footing in a career. In addition, as Iris mentioned, they even play a role in helping you find your values through example and reflection.

Now that we have an idea of participants vocation and support, or lack thereof, the final section will discuss the significance of voice.

Voice

This section walks through how these professionals give voice to their values and dedication to their vocation. To that end, participants shared concerns regarding responses to ethical dilemmas, as well as what factors contributed to their ability to voice concerns. Nearly all participants spoke directly about this and felt strongly that it was a part of acting ethically and in line with their values at work, and two themes arose with voicing concerns. The first, that the ability to do it comes with time and experience. Both Toni, Iris and Alfred touched on this and noted that it is hard to be able to bring anything up if you do not feel confident or a hundred percent sure that what you are saying is true or valid. Their ability to bring things up came slowly throughout their careers as they developed, got more experience and advanced positionally.

It's easier to get buy in on things that if I tried, y'know, 15 years ago, to say 'we need to do it this way because it is supportive of our core values,' I would get, y'know, something like 'oh yeah of course' but no one would actually care and those matters would have been pushed lower down on the priority. So, in earlier times trying to go out on that limb and say this is important, that might have been the best that I would have gotten. But now, it is a lot easier to get buy in, and I've learned that if you don't have buy in, you can't get anything accomplished in the working world today. (Toni)

Along with this idea, Iris noted that having the language to be able to speak up was another key factor. It took them years into their career before they fully learned the verbiage of speaking up and asking questions rather than sitting with things. Once they were in a leadership position, they realized how much inherent privilege comes with that in being able to openly voice concerns, so now work with their team to give them the tools and language needed to

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speak up and make ethical decisions together. This creates an organizational culture that values feedback and, as a result, employees feel safer voicing concerns or questions. This is not something that exists in every office, however, which leads to the second theme that arose: how to do what you can when you are not able to fully speak up, and that speaking up about something can exist on a spectrum.

Claire noted that while they are not able to push back against the type of content that goes out, they can adjust wording and make a small difference in the message, for example, to be more inclusive or to present things in a less pushy way. For Gina, this idea comes with an understanding that you have to pick your battles, and that there is a lot of give and take.

It might get shot down and you kind of have to be okay with that. Figure out, 'ok I couldn't make that impact that I wanted to make, but I have to, you know, log on again tomorrow and figure out how to do my job'...I think finding the people that you trust to impart that opinion on is really important because it might not always be really well received. A queer activist from the University of Michigan once said, 'anytime you trust somebody who has more power than you do you do that at your own risk' and that's something I keep in mind.

There is a balance between voicing your opinions and concerns with an understanding that it may not go well, and an intention of working in collaboration with your team rather than "bulldozing," as Alfred put it. Moreover, they also brought an idea that if possible, having a three-to-six-month savings fund where if something really goes against your values or ethics, you can just say "F you" and walk away. Though this should be considered as more of a last resort, and that there are ways even during the interview process to ask questions about values that could help prevent getting to this point. Iris said that while interviewing, asking questions such as "can you tell me about the values that are on this team? And, as a new professional in the field, what are ways you would expect me to contribute? Or are there ways in which you feel strongly that you would not want my contributions?" Their hope is that these types of questions

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will become more foundational in every emerging employee and in turn, reduce the stigma that might exist around it.

Vision

While the first three sections focused on the ethical realities facing communication professionals in higher education, this final section highlights what participants hope to see moving forward and for the profession's future regarding ethics and support. Out of this prompt, participants raised a few different ideas. First, participants argued there needs to be more guidance from larger communications organizations and codes, such as PRSA, on just how much ethical variation there is day to day in roles. Claire said that while they reference the PRSA code of ethics, the examples are very “black and white” and of things that seem more obvious. It is much harder to write about deeper issues that are difficult to discuss. Gina noted that along with this, having more of an ombuds type role at an intrapersonal level instead of just high-level issues would help facilitate discussion and nuance that often gets lost.

In addition to this type of support, Toni, Iris, Claire and Phil wished that there would be more explicit support for ethical work. Toni said, for example, that while it is messaged to them from higher up officials, it is often the first thing that gets thrown out, out of convenience and an ability to get away with it. So, if there were more specific mandates required of and supported by leadership that enforced the ethical initiatives they mentioned, it would not be an afterthought but instead integrated into the system. For Alfred, this was a practice that existed when working in a financial aid office, that they had to sign an ethics statement, because they were dealing with sensitive information. But this did not extend to the communications field when switching to a different campus role. For Iris, this support and potential mandates should be couched in DEI

Winz

systems and the idea of impact that communications efforts will have on all audiences. Through these ideas, people working in the communications field would have more integrated support because ethics would be embedded with everyday work, rather than represented in a single training or checklist.

Through looking at values, vocation and voice, we saw how participants considered and navigated ethics in their day-to-day work and careers. Overall, there was a gap between ethics valued in the field, such as the PRSA values, and their implementation. Participants highlighted their experiences, or lack thereof, with workshops, training, mentorship and voicing concerns as ways they navigate ethical dilemmas. Drawing from these findings, I have created a short guide for graduating college students and others about to enter the communications field. It features participant experiences and insights, as well as practical steps and ideas to consider as they job search and enter the workforce. While it is embedded into this thesis, the idea is that it can stand on its own as an approachable and easy-to-navigate resource.

The Guide



ETHICS IN THE PUBLIC RELATIONS PROFESSIONAL WORLD

A GUIDE FOR THOSE ENTERING THE FIELD

BY APRIL WINZ

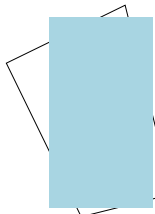


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WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

WHY SHOULD YOU READ THIS BOOK?

As a current senior public relations major about to enter the workforce, I was inspired to research and write a guide centred on navigating ethics in the communications field because I felt that it was something I couldn't really find anywhere else. In my studies, everyone is required to take a media ethics class, which establishes the mindset that ethics are important generally in communications, and that everyone believes they matter. However, beyond that class, I wanted to know more about what that looked like on a day to day level for people working in the field. In other words, how

could I prepare myself? What things did I need to be watching out for or know about the field in relation to navigating ethics and my values? This guide is a result of asking those questions to eight communications professionals as a part of my undergraduate thesis project. It walks through three different key themes I found and integrates the perspectives and experiences of the participants (note: any names referred to are pseudonyms) to give the reader tangible advice to take with them as they enter the field. I hope this guide helps you as much as the process of putting it together has helped me.

A FEW DEFINITIONS

I want to first define a few key terms regarding the types of ethics that are important to keep in mind as we go throughout the suggestions presented in the guide. First, that **ethics are based on value systems that guide a person's decision making**. These ethical value systems determine which actions are "right" or wrong" and/or which ones have moral worth. Because of this, codes of ethics are specific and can differ, but for the case of this definition section, we'll just focus on a few of the common ethical categories that people tend to fall into.

The first is **deontology**, which was formulated by Immanuel Kant. **This system is primarily focused on one's duty**, and is also known as ethical absolutism because there isn't a gray area. It isn't concerned with any end result, but rather how we determine the moral intent in a decision itself. Kant believed that we all have duties that must never be abandoned, regardless of the outcome. These duties are absolute and apply to everyone. This system also does not value personal emotions behind actions, because Kant did not believe that humans always had rational control over their feelings. So, the intent behind the chosen action holds the importance in this category of ethics (Barrow & Khandhar, 2023).

Consequentialism, in opposition, is **based entirely on the outcome (or consequence) of an action or decision**. It judges whether an action is ethical based on what ends up happening, therefore motives matter less. There are two common categories within this system: hedonism and utilitarianism. Hedonism focuses on if the outcome to the action produces pleasure or avoids pain, and utilitarianism judges the outcome by whether it is the "greatest good for the greatest number" (Cummiskey, 1990).

Care ethics, or "the ethics of care", is focused on **the idea that there is moral significance in fundamental elements of relationships and dependencies in human life**. It seeks to maintain relationships by valuing the well-being of care givers and receivers. It asks, to what extent are you thinking about consequences for other people and making decisions with others in mind. It builds on the motivations to care for ourselves and others (especially those that are vulnerable or powerless), and is inspired by memories of being cared for and the idealizations of the self. Care ethics affirm the importance of emotion and the body in moral deliberation and reasoning (Sander-Staudt, n.d.).



Last but certainly not least, **Value ethics are based on individual beliefs and virtues that become the basis for how a person acts**. It's focused on the person wanting to be informed, and then making decisions aligned on their values. Because it centres on this, it doesn't emphasize duties, rules, or consequences as other systems do. Conflict can arise from this system as people often believe they have the "right" values because it's the one's they're raised with or that are a part of their culture. Some values have more of an intrinsic worth, such as love or truth, while others are more based on traits or behaviors, such as ambition or responsibility (Hursthouse & Pettigrove, 2023).



CHAPTER 01

VALUES

This first section walks through value-focused approaches to ethics. It discusses what respondents said around how they see values. Overall, it revealed that values are the foundation for all other decisions. Because of this, we'll start our journey exploring this, as the other sections stem from both personal and professional values.

PARTICIPANTS VALUES

Before we dive into discussion, it's important to get a feel for what specific values communications professionals are holding. Below is a list of these values. They are grouped into categories to show that while there was variety in responses, they overlap a lot in terms of core value.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Focused

- Inclusion (authentic representation in media, access, opportunity)
- Community (what we're working towards needs to be done in concert with others)
- Cultural Humility (understanding that your perspective is only one and being humble; open to learning)

Duty Focused

- Learning and self-improvement (always working to be your best self)
- Responsibility (choose opportunities and work that align with values)
- Loyalty (to client, centring their needs in decision making)

Truth Focused

- Authenticity (in showing up as self)
- Integrity (doing things you agree to, being honest with co-workers)
- Consent (being upfront with the people you're producing content about, making sure they are okay with it)

What do I think about these values?

Take this space to jot down any notes regarding the values on the previous page. *Which ones do you resonate most with? Are there any that you want to learn more about? Any that don't fit with your sense of values?*

HOW DID PARTICIPANTS FIND THESE VALUES?

A reassuring theme throughout participant responses was that they found their values through time, age and trial and error. They came through experiences, such as failing in past projects or work environments and having self-reflection on these experiences. They also combined learning through experience with personal learning through books or articles.

It's okay to not know your values yet. They are not a "one and done" situation. They change and evolve as you grow in your life and career.

Why do this work?

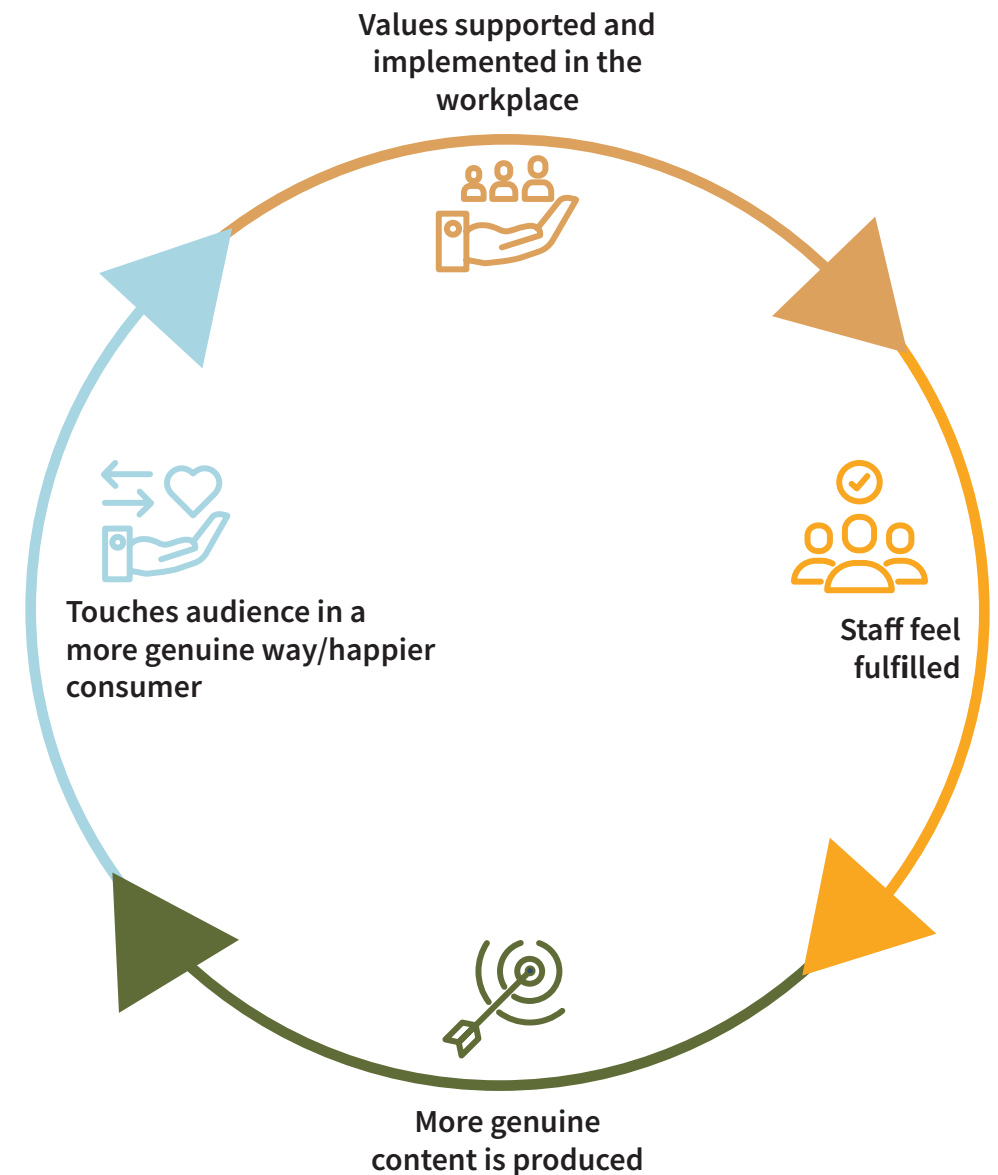
Identifying your values first is a central part of working with an office or team effectively. Participants noted how much easier it was to navigate projects, and problems, when they understood their values and what was driving them in their work. All the work that you do needs to come back to these values. How you prioritize your work, decision making, and everything else should be rooted in them.

"Your values should be the one thing that never gets thrown out the window or be compromised," Toni, a participant, said.

By rooting work in your values, you demonstrate personal growth and authenticity, but when implemented well, it extends to authenticity in the work you and your team put out into the world. The decisions that you make **become purposeful, and as a result, more creative and genuine content is born.**

This creates a circle, where the centring of values in the workplace creates more employee fulfillment in their work, because they are experiencing fulfillment of their values in the workplace. The diagram on the following page illustrates this idea.

VALUES FULFILLMENT CIRCLE



HOW CAN YOU START TO FIND YOURS?

A great way to start out in finding your values is to take a minute to self-reflect and look back on how you've handled past experiences and consider what you hold as most important in your life. A couple questions to guide this process are:

What environment, settings or resources are necessary for you to do your best work?

In thinking about your relationships, what makes them feel strong?

What qualities do you admire most in others?

How would you describe your work ethic?

And then, use the list on the following page to name some of your thoughts and characteristics. Set a timer for a minute and circle the values that you're most drawn to based on your reflection. Don't over think it, just quickly scan the list and circle.

Use your circled values as a starting point to defining your core values. If you have a lot (6+) or ones that are similar, try to narrow them down until you have 4-5 remaining. Then, self reflect. Do these remaining words sum up the qualities and experiences you mentioned above? If so, you've found your values.

It's okay if they don't feel quite right or if you are unsure -- you have time to sit with these and see how they feel over time. Remember, it's okay for them to change and evolve too!

Acceptance	Family	Popularity
Accountability	Fairness	Power
Achievement	Flexibility	Quality
Adaptability	Friendship	Recognition
Adventure	Growth	Relationships
Authenticity	Happiness	Reliability
Authority	Hard work	Reputation
Autonomy	Honesty	Respect
Balance	Humility	Responsibility
Boldness	Humor	Results
Bravery	Impact	Security
Candor	Improvement	Self-improvement
Challenge	Ingenuity	Simplicity
Clarity	Innovation	Spirituality
Collaboration	Integrity	Stability
Compassion	Kindness	Success
Communication	Knowledge	Sustainability
Community	Leadership	Teamwork
Contribution	Learning	Tenacity
Creativity	Loyalty	Time management
Curiosity	Meaningful work	Transparency
Dependability	Optimism	Trustworthiness
Determination	Ownership	Wealth
Diversity	Participation	Wisdom
Empathy	Patience	Work ethic
Enthusiasm	Peace	Work-life balance
Equality	Persistence	

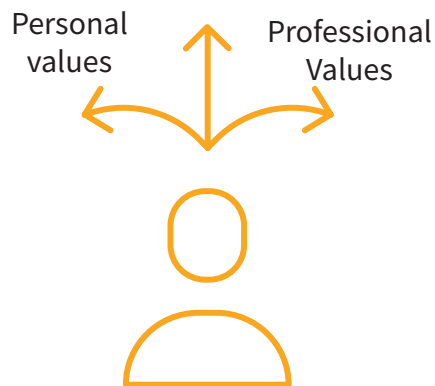
WHAT IF YOU DON'T HAVE THE PRIVILEGE OF WORKING IN A PLACE THAT CENTRES VALUES?

It's important to note that the more integrated approach above is an ideal way of thinking about values in the workplace, and may not reflect the workplaces you start out in. You could be working in a place that doesn't center values, or, that centers values different from your own. One of the participants, Alfred, said that this was their experience after graduating college as their first few internships did not align with their values and work style.

There are a few different things you can do in this case. The first, is a "wait it out" approach, where you stick around until you have the opportunity to switch jobs to one that aligns with your values. In this approach, the emphasis is on finding a place that embodies your values, and putting other things, such as salary, lower on the priority list.

But, there is privilege in this option, and it isn't a possibility for everyone.

This is where a different approach comes into play: the idea of separation. For Gina, this was an ideal approach. Instead of waiting for a workplace that valued their specific personal values, they learned that their personal values and professional ones don't have to be the same thing.



Creating separation

They created a separation, because while the career they originally started on aligned with their values, they weren't making enough money to support themselves or their family. Other important factors, such as being able to work from home, had more importance as they were an immunocompromised person. In creating this shift, they realized that their work wouldn't always match with their personal values, but that they could make up for it in other ways of their life.

In this approach, the emphasis shifts to finding a place that fits your other needs, and then finding other areas of your life where you can embody your personal values. For example, the participant noted that they're able to donate some of the funds they're paid to causes they are passionate about.

"I think you can always find something that aligns with your ethical values in your work, even if it's not necessarily overarching or broad."

It's OK to take other paths

This distinction is an important example that there is not a "one size fits all" approach to integrating your values in work. People have their own external factors to account for, and a solution for one person isn't always the solution for someone else. Ethical and value focused work looks different from person to person. And, as you're first starting out in the field, it will take time to learn and recognize what the decision looks like for you.



DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION INTEGRATED IN VALUES

In addition to finding your own values, it's also important to incorporate DEI values in your communications work. And in many cases, they intersect or overlap with general values. Before we get into ways to incorporate them into your work, I want to recognize that there is a call for a overall shift and integration of DEI values into the communications workplace.

Nearly all of the participants noted that there needs to be a shift in how their workplaces view DEI initiatives from an afterthought to a central integration. Toni noted that training and professional development that centered on DEI practices overlapped and were parallel with the best practices for communications.

So, as we dive into a few key ways that participants have implemented DEI values, and how you can as well, remember that the work isn't solely on your shoulders and that it will take time to see the full integration that is needed.



WAYS YOU CAN IMPLEMENT DEI VALUES IN THE WORK YOU DO

Center accessibility in visual design

01

Good visual design is design that is accessible to those with reading and visual impairments, the two naturally go together. Consider color contrast, text sizing, and overall alignments across the design. The WebAIM website is a good reference for this.

Don't think about it in checkboxes

02

Most of a strategic plan is checkboxes, but DEI in the communications field shouldn't just be a tactical approach. Instead of considering it as a to-do list, put it at the forefront of your mind and in the material you write

Think about your position

03

When thinking about the shift of integrating DEI values into work, it's important to consider positionality. Think about what you might be overlooking based on your background and perspective, and what privileges you're taking for granted.

Seek resources and additional learning opportunities

04

Whenever possible, and especially for topics you know less about, look for additional books, articles or resources. While on the job trainings may be offered, it isn't always a guarantee. Because of this, participants noted the importance of learning on your own to fill in gaps where needed.

CHAPTER 02

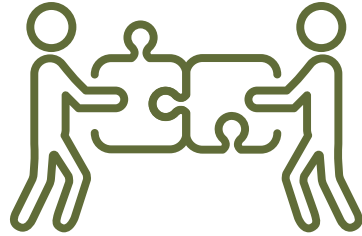
VOCA TION

This section discusses how participants saw, and treated, their job as a vocation and the importance of being treated as one by the job as well. Themes within this focus on support, training, professional growth and mentorship.

WORKSHOPS

Ability to participate in workshops varies

Before we dive in to the different types of workshops, it's important to know that the ability to have them as an opportunity varies between workplaces. For example, Toni noted that they had more responsibility and less resources, such as trainings and workshops, while working at a small university. But, this changed when she started working at a large one.



Variation born out of not taking ethics seriously

While workplaces not supporting workshops or training can be because of a lack of resources, most participants spoke that it happened out of a lack of taking ethics in communications seriously. The lack of support can be a key indicator that the workplace environment doesn't value the integration of ethics. Or at least, has not considered it as in-depth as they should.

Self-education in place

While it isn't ideal, if you are placed in this situation, participants noted that what helped them was learning on their own through books, YouTube or LinkedIn Learning. And, that change will come eventually. For participants, it came through things like a change in leadership (where someone came in who had an ethos around training) or through leaving that position and working somewhere that had more support systems.

PLANNING AHEAD

Consider in relation to job search

If you are job searching, consider how much workshop and training would be a priority when looking at different companies and organizations. It's okay to take the time to slow down and evaluate where this would fall, and in ranking your opportunities.

Get a feel for it in the interview process

You don't need to go entirely off of vibes or a company website to discern if they have support systems in place for ethics-based training, you can ask about it in the interview! Below are a few questions that can prompt this.

What opportunities are there for training and progression?

How do you help your employees grow as professionals?

What opportunities are there for career development, including additional training, envisioning new projects, and taking on a leadership role?

Be comfortable with unknowns

As you're starting out in the field, it's okay to admit you don't know something and find comfortability in that. As a new hire, one of the participants talked about the pressure they felt to prove themselves, but they learned that there is value in being transparent about the things you don't know. It opens up the opportunity to learn and for growth, and to voice questions about things that surprise you.



TYPES OF WORKSHOPS...

Seminar-based

These workshops are often one time events and focus on one speaker giving information to a group or crowd of people. Due to this structure, they are less personal and often not specific to one workplace or tasks.



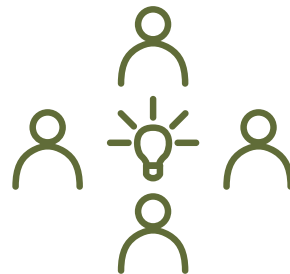
Workplace focused seminars

Slightly more integrated, workplace focused seminars are speakers and sessions hosted by and for a specific workplace. It is still a one time thing or low frequency.



Communities of practice

The most spoke about and integrative type, communities of practice are groups of people who do the same type of work across a campus or large company and are led by resident experts in the area. They are ongoing, such as monthly, and create a supportive environment that centres discussion and peer-to-peer based learning.



AND IMPACT/BENEFIT

Seminar-based

Participants noted this type of workshop as being less impactful and harder to implement into their actual work, but good in the moment. Conveys ideas and information, but not always the steps and specificity needed to apply it. Therefore, they are good as an introductory method for those who have little existing knowledge or experience in the topic, but not for participants looking for more advanced approaches.

Workplace focused seminars

These are nice in the sense that it gives time for the workplace to present initiatives and ideas specific to its employees and overall mission. And, as they are workplace specific, there is more time for questions and discussion of how the topic fits.

Communities of practice

The impact of these workshops, participants noted, was more beneficial and long lasting because they had someone familiar that they could ask specific questions to due to the frequency of it. Participants who will find the most value in these are ones that already have a base understanding and construct of the topic.

MENTORSHIP

Another main form of support that participants found incredibly helpful was the role of mentors in their lives. They spoke about specific mentors and how having their support was an integral part of their journey. There are different types of mentors that you might find along your career path, but here are the two common ones that were discussed most.

Within the workplace

Finding support and mentorship with people you work with is often the easiest and first place to start. Participants noted these mentors helped them out in "learning the ropes", answering work-specific questions, and just having someone comfortable and trustworthy to connect with.

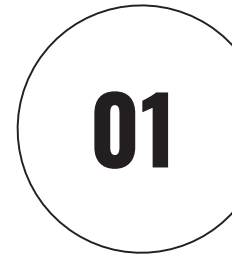
Outside of work, general mentors

It's important to have external mentors that you can safely discuss concerns with and offer an outside perspective. Finding opportunities to network with people who might have more experience and offer perspectives and advice that you wouldn't get in a workplace or classroom is especially helpful when first starting out in the field. They can even play a role in helping you identify your values through being an example and helping you reflect on past experiences.

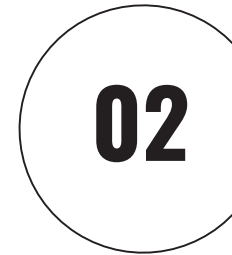


FINDING MENTORS...

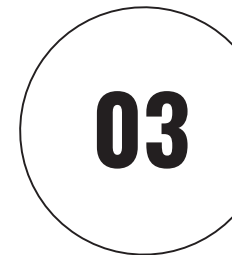
Take the space below to identify places you might be able to network and find mentors at. Start with the circle of people closest to you, friends and family, and expand from there.



Connections through family and friends



Connections through university and/or workplace



Connections beyond, such as at conferences or networking events

CHAPTER 03

VOICE

This section walks through the importance of finding your professional voice and ability to speak up and share concerns. It explores contributing factors towards participants ability to speak up and the benefits and cautions of doing so. Nearly all participants felt strongly that speaking up is a part of acting ethically and in-line with their values at work, but there are barriers and factors that contribute to being able to find this voice.

FINDING YOUR VOICE

It comes with time and experience

The ability to speak up does not come overnight. It's hard to bring anything up if you don't feel confident that what you're saying is true and valid, participant Alfred noted. Trust the process and recognize that the ability to voice concerns comes with time and throughout your career development and position advancement.

Having the language

Another key aspect is having the specific language to be able to speak up. Iris, another participant, said that it took them years into their career before they fully learned how to word questions and speaking up rather than sitting with things.

There's inherent privilege in being able to speak up

People in leadership positions, or in other ones higher up, inherently have more ability and ease to voice opinions and concerns than those starting out in the field. This is another reason to be patient and understanding with yourself as you are starting out. It's okay to recognize that you might not be in a position to actively voice all ethical concerns, and that is not on you directly, it's a result of organizational power structures.

Understand potential risks

Especially when first starting out, risks to speaking up about ethical concerns or issues will be higher. Go into it with the mindset that your suggestion or idea might be shot down or pushed aside, and that you still have to come back again the next day and do your work. Finding people you trust to share with is also important because your opinion might not always be well received. Gina noted that something she keeps in mind is a quote from a queer activist that "anytime you trust somebody who has more power than you, you do that at your own risk".

WAYS TO HAVE IMPACT WHERE YOU CAN

Because finding your professional voice takes time and experience, it's important to discuss other ways you can have impact when you aren't able to fully speak up. And, that speaking up about something can exist on a spectrum.

- Adjust wording in small ways to messaging. For example, to make it more inclusive or present things in a less assertive way.
- Pick your battles where you can. While you might not be able to make the impact you want to in one area, you might be able to in another, and there is a lot of give and take.
- Bring opinions and concerns with an intention of working in collaboration with your team, rather than "bulldozing," as one participant put.

BRING IT UP IN THE INTERVIEW PROCESS!

There are questions you can even bring up during the interview process that can help prevent sticky situations where your feedback wouldn't be well received. One of the participants noted a hope for people entering into the field to ask these questions so they become even more foundational and in turn, reduce any stigma around it.

- Can you tell me about the values that are on this team?
- As a new professional in the field, what are ways you'd expect me to contribute?
- Are there ways in which you feel strongly that you wouldn't want my contributions?



THE END



Thanks for reading

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Appendices

Appendix A: Flexible Interview Guide

Personal experience with PR ethical dilemmas

1. What values do you hold most in your professional life?
 - a. How did you come to the realization that you value them?
2. What do you wish you had known about ethics and values in the PR field before going into it?
3. Looking back on your job search experience as you were beginning your PR career, did you ever have a situation that made you question if something was ethical?
4. In your work experience, how have you found that different organizations you've worked with valued the role of ethics in PR differently?
 - a. (If so) What factors do you think contribute to those different perspectives?
5. As you have grown in your career, have you felt more comfortable in voicing concerns when it comes to ethics and values in the workplace?

Participation in workshops or trainings

1. (If participant studied communications/PR in college) Did you have any classes or workshops that incorporated ethics and ethical thinking into communications and/or public relations?
2. Have you participated in any public relations ethics-based workshops since working in the field?
 - a. If so, how receptive were you to the workshop? Do you feel that it helped?

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- b. (If participant experienced both training in college and workshops in the field)
How would you describe the difference between your experience in learning about communications ethics in college versus learning about them in the field?
3. Are there additional resources you turn to, or rely on that provide guidance on ethics (such as mentors or communication with supervisors)?
4. What's lacking / what resources do you wish you had in terms of navigating ethics in your career?