

Public relations practitioners are accustomed to dealing with bad publicity – their own. The profession has been likened to spin-doctoring and even outright lying. Maybe the PR industry should hire a PR firm to counter allegations of subverting the public good through dishonest communication. Or not. That’s where ethics come in to bring respectability to the practice. The perceived failings can be fixed with diligent adherence to principles such as integrity, honesty, humility, excellence, fairness, courage, loyalty – hold on there. Is loyalty truly an ethical principle that PR practitioners should observe to keep their practice honourable?

Loyalty is often promoted as a noble trait in public relations, even though it can force the loyal practitioner to sacrifice ethics in many cases. The same can’t be said for those other ethical principles. Does showing integrity jeopardize honesty? Would behaving with humility undercut excellence? Does fairness limit courage? No, they are all companions that fit together. Each one incorporates virtue and promotes high moral standards by supporting virtuous aspiration in every circumstance in which they’re applied, unlike loyalty, which is either conditional, purchased or detrimental. I believe loyalty has no place among the ethics that should guide PR practitioners because it doesn’t meet the standards to qualify as an ethic.

The Markkula Center for Applied Ethics defines ethics as “well-founded standards of right and wrong that prescribe what humans ought to do, usually in terms of rights, obligations, benefits to society, fairness, or specific virtues”, including refraining from conduct that violates the dignity and rights of others. I can agree that ethics are primarily concerned with principles that guide people to do the right thing and make a morally justified choice, but I’m not willing to embrace another component of the Center’s definition asserting that “ethical standards

include those that enjoin virtues of honesty, compassion, and loyalty.” In my view, loyalty is not on par with honesty and compassion, or any other ethic. If it were, that would make loyalty an ethical choice, yet history reveals numerous cases when it was anything but. PR practitioners can effectively become collaborators in unethical behaviour due to their questionable ethic of loyalty.

In Kevin Stoker’s article *Loyalty in Public Relations: When Does It Cross the Line Between Vice and Virtue*, he treats loyalty as an ethic but only if it’s practiced in certain ways. He argues that the way to show true loyalty in the face of an organization that tests one’s loyalty is not through blind obedience, but with a conscious choice to voice concerns internally about the organization’s failings in the earnest belief that it can rectify its behavior. Hence, the “loyalist” believes the organization is worthy of loyalty, and that’s the sticking point. Ethics don’t apply to only those who deserve them. Ethics are standards upheld independent of the perceived worthiness of the beneficiaries of ethical behaviour.

If loyalty can be maintained only under certain conditions, it doesn’t sound like much of an ethic. Actual ethics are not conditional. An ethical standard of fairness, for example, does not stipulate that fair is only fair if PR practitioners abandon fairness in some cases. No ethical PR practitioners say that honesty is not actual honesty if they’re being honest with the wrong people. What makes these principles ethical are that they apply to every public, even if the practitioner finds it challenging to extend them to all and even if the publics who are treated ethically engage in unethical conduct themselves.

The Canadian Public Relations Society Code of Ethics doesn’t mention loyalty as an ethical standard to which PR professionals must adhere, unlike the Public Relations Society of

America's Statement of Professional Values, which addresses loyalty specifically: "We are faithful to those we represent, while honoring our obligation to serve the public interest." By this standard, loyalty has to be tempered with a higher competing interest. No other virtue loses its virtuousness by rigorous application in every circumstance. When unflinching devotion to loyalty leads to an immoral choice, it hardly qualifies as an ethic.

One of the most frequently occurring PR dilemmas happens when loyalty to a client or an employer comes at the expense of loyalty to the public interest. Consider a case involving America's highest profile PR position – White House Press Secretary. Scott McClellan was the press secretary for President George W. Bush's administration from July of 2003 to May of 2006, in the time when the United States went to war in Iraq to remove the threat of Saddam Hussein's alleged weapons of mass destruction. Was McClellan upholding an ethical standard by showing loyalty to President Bush and his administration while they led America into a war that McClellan himself later claimed was sold to Americans with propaganda? Stoker would say that if he believed the administration was doing harm and he stood by it anyway, then he wasn't showing loyalty at all, but rather an "exit from moral responsibility."

Two years after the end of his tenure, McClellan published a highly critical tell-all memoir alleging that President Bush misled Americans about the war. Many observers considered it a stunning show of disloyalty to the Bush administration and would argue that the after-the-fact whistle blowing was his ethical failure, not showing loyalty despite misgivings. Roy Peter Clark highlighted these contradictions in his article *The McClellan Case: When Loyalty and Public Interest Collide*. Of conflicting loyalties, he says, "Sorting them out is often at the heart of responsible decision-making," pointing to the fact that even when loyalty is

honourable, it's not an ethic on its own, but rather a choice to make on the way to arriving at an ethical decision.

Kevin Stoker would be among those arguing that it was not McClellan's lack of loyalty to the president, but to the public interest that made his conduct unethical, because he continued his staunch support of the president's policies even though he believed a misinformation campaign was underway. "Submissive employees transform loyalty into a vice because they no longer choose their loyalties." No other ethics become vices when those upholding them fail to carefully choose who should be the beneficiary of their ethics.

Another high-profile show of disloyalty occurred when CBC's radio host Jian Ghomeshi was dumped by both his newly hired public relations firm Navigator and his longtime publicity company Rock-It Promotions in the wake of his 2014 sexual misconduct scandal. Was their disloyalty a breach in ethical conduct, or quite the opposite? Many would agree that in parting ways with Ghomeshi, they were actually prioritizing an ethical standard of honesty when it appeared that his story wasn't credible. They may have been choosing loyalty to the public good over loyalty to a celebrity client.

The CPRS didn't let the issue of the disloyalty go unnoticed in the PR industry. It published a statement during the crisis declaring that "everyone deserves public relations and communications counsel." Without using the word loyalty, it echoed the sentiment in the APRS Statement of Professional Values in asserting that "regardless of the client," its professionals seek to "help them find a voice, gain visibility, build trust, strengthen relationships, and safeguard their reputation. Crucially, we pursue these goals with the firm belief that PR must always benefit and protect the public trust." Whether this statement refers to loyalty to the

client, the public trust or to the profession itself, it suggests Ghomeshi deserves some loyalty while acknowledging loyalty has its limitations. Those limitations don't apply to the other ethics in pursuit of bolstering relationships and protecting reputations.

Choosing loyalty to one public over another isn't necessarily evidence of a high ethical standard; it may simply mean that the chosen public is more valuable. Rather than an ethical consideration, it becomes one of commerce. No one except those on the inside of Navigator and Rock-It can say for certain, but there's a case to be made that Ghomeshi was dropped only because keeping him as a client would damage their brands, limit the number of clients seeking their services and ultimately affect the bottom line. The move may very well have been a sound business decision, but it was just that – about business, not ethics. If those companies operated in a different culture or in a time before the current wave of empowerment and support for women seeking redress when they've been victims of sexual misconduct, Navigator and Rock-It may not have been so willing to sack their client. Even if Ghomeshi had managed to stay on as a client of those agencies, it would have been purchased loyalty. Truly ethical standards can't be bought.

Some clients of PR companies garner earned loyalty because they treat their publics with respect and produce a product or service that adds value to community. It's tough to claim the ethical high ground when showing loyalty to an organization that does everything to earn continued support. The real test comes when that organization is facing a PR crisis. Even in upstanding organizations, mistakes happen: consumers are poisoned, waterways get contaminated, wrong limbs are amputated, and friendly banter is misconstrued. The client could become the object of public derision. When a PR agency shows loyalty to a client in its

darkest days, is that when we can finally say that loyalty qualifies as an ethic? I still say no, because that loyalty was, after all, purchased.

Loyalty in and of itself is not an ethical principle; it's a choice resulting from decisions which may or may not be ethical. Including loyalty among the ethics PR practitioners should observe only muddies the ethical waters by elevating a behaviour that often allows unethical behaviour to flourish. Loyalty simply doesn't meet the standards that make other ethics virtuous. The public relations industry would bring more respectability to the profession by demoting loyalty to the ethical conundrum that it is.

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