

After the Plea

BY JAMES E. LUKASZEWSKI, APR, FELLOW PRSA

One of the big questions already asked by many in and out of our profession is, "Where were all the PR people and all of the pre-emptive, conscience-like behaviors when the big guys — Enron, Worldcom, Andersen and the rest — were circling, then plunging down the ethical and moral drain?"

It's unlikely that you will hear these missing PR practitioners on professional development panels mentioning their service and "best practices" in these criminal, or at least unethical, organizations. Where will you find them? They'll be serving on panels involved in discussions of ethics. Their bosses may be sitting beside them.

Why? Ethical behavior is mandated, monitored, measured and evaluated. Violations can be sanctioned when an organization has settled with the U.S. Department of Justice through a Plea Agreement, Consent Order, or accepted administrative or related criminal or civil sanctions. As part of the settlements and parole, the perpetrators are often required to speak publicly, acknowledge their crimes, what they've learned, and how their behaviors have changed as a result of prosecution or sanctions. This ongoing public admission is like a penance required for corporate or personal redemption by society.

These organizations follow a tough road to redemption with rigorous codes of conduct and onerous, compli-

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cated, legalistic compliance programs. If there was ever an opportunity for PR skills and practices, it is in these areas: compliance, code-of-conduct development, and ethics education and integrity programs.

At present, it's rare to find a PR person involved in these programs. Compliance and code-of-conduct programs tend to be lawyer-driven and dominated and mostly overseen by professional compliance supervisors. These programs could benefit significantly from PR involvement, all the more so because violations of these agreements can lead directly to high-profile penalties for top managers.

Want access to the top? Want to be involved in substantive discussions and actions involving ethics and communications, and to be able to help or make your boss live up to his or her principles? Get involved in compliance and integrity work.

It's the third track, the Integrity Development Track, the positive motivational track, that so often gets short shrift in these programs. Lawyers and business leaders traditionally have little knowledge of these positive ap-

proaches and find it easier, and perhaps more acceptable among their peers, to enforce codes of conduct, but even then they do it without much enthusiasm and without the motivational energy required to develop a culture of voluntary compliance. This is an area where public relations, with its sense of ethical behavior, knowledge of the expectations of constituents, and understanding of the victim mentality can provide the positive motivational process that is necessary for ethics programs to truly work as envisioned, as anticipated by employees, and as expected by the government.

Tired of trying to sell fuzzy, touchy-feely vision and value programs? Go for ethics and corporate compliance. These are areas where what you do has teeth. Maybe it's time to look in your own back yard to see what impact you could have within your own organizations in existing ethics, compliance, and integrity development structures. It could be some of the most intensive, challenging and fulfilling work you will ever do in the PR profession. ■

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