

Building a Global Environment of Integrity

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A friend recently told me he was planning to write a book on global PR crises. He suggested I write a chapter. So that I could understand what he was talking about, I asked him to name a truly global PR crisis. I have yet to receive a return call. Most crises begin locally, and it takes extraordinary stupidity, culpability, negligence or malfeasance to blow them up into global or, at least, multinational situations.

In a world where there is a range of cultural acceptabilities and different levels of cultural sensitivity, what a crisis is or what is unethical in one country may well be taken

far less seriously in another country. What each of these incidents and situations has in common is the behavior of those responsible for the crisis.

Here are examples of situations that could have multinational, perhaps global, repercussions.

Case One

A client company sends a memo worldwide from its top European executive suggesting better ways to manage operations. Among the larger sections of the memo is a discussion about how to control costs. One suggestion is to reduce dependence on higher-salaried individuals by hiring people with less experience at far lower salaries. In the United States, of course, this is beyond unethical: It is illegal. How does this approach to management fare legally and ethically in other cultures? In any event, what do you do?

Case Two

A global company based in Brazil decides to have its annual management retreat at an upscale European vacation destination. The general management of the organization is predominantly female, upper management predominantly male, representing a variety of cultures and ethnic backgrounds. At the first evening's event, the chief operating officer announces that he is sending a tray of complimentary tequilas and vodkas to every table, and that he'll be around shortly to toast the future with those present. He moves to each table, does the toast, drinks two-ounces of tequila or vodka, and then selects one of the women at the table to dance with. This takes about 15 minutes per table. He visits 11 tables. The party goes downhill from there. The second night, the routine is repeated.

Illustration: Henk Dawson



Case Three

Your company is approached by the intelligence service of another country, which has covert operations in several countries where you have branch offices. The request is simple: They want members of their service who work where you have offices to carry business cards from your company and be allowed to receive telephone messages and some e-mail traffic through your branch office. You are given authentication that this is a legitimate request.

Global Implications

Operating in a global environment provides some unusual and interesting ethical and business operation dilemmas. Globalization illustrates a need for globally acceptable approaches to ethical dilemmas, and a set of standards to prevent, pre-empt, detect or deter unacceptable behaviors. Nearly every developed country in the world has its current list of corporate and organizational offenders and offenses. Thus far, the PR function in these organizations has not been indicted or singled out for errors of omission, commission, ignorance, negligence, complicity or culpability. Neither has public relations been cited as a clarifying agent of behavior, a source of pre-emptive, corrective action, or, frankly, for having blown the whistle. It is fair to assume that time is running out for public relations.

A global ethics development effort has been underway. Led by the Global Alliance (GA), an umbrella organization of national and international PR societies (including PRSA) from more than 50 countries, it is charged with developing global, ethical protocols and uniform Accreditation for public relations. The goal is to establish model behavior standards for corporations and organizations across cultures, and to provide a platform to expose, illustrate and prevent inappropriate behavior. Moreover, an anonymous ask-the-experts service is offered by the GA through its Web site to facilitate this transfer of knowledge among different cultures. *(For more on the GA, please see Page 48.)*

PRSA members will recognize key elements of the content of this protocol as being adapted from the newly revised PRSA Code of Ethics, adopted in 2000. In addition, a great deal of global thinking and content from other parts of the world has influenced the protocol and its new service for practitioners. (Go to www.globalpr.org to review the protocol and the latest Global Alliance information.) Jean Valin, APR, who led the ethics work group and will chair the GA in 2004, characterizes the goal of the organization this way: "Our vision for the GA is: one profession — one voice."

Scandals in business, government and other organizations

will likely continue to surface. Global companies have the potential to have problems on a global scale. Ultimately, absent punitive powers, the primary role of public relations will be to create an environment of integrity within organizations. In this environment, the behaviors that brought about the laundry list of jailed or shamed companies from so many countries can be prevented or pre-empted. The list of international business executives whose accomplishments have been discredited and whose admiration from the public has evaporated can be reduced along with other undesirable institutional behavior.

Most of my clients are experiencing fractured ethical environments. Helping them recover from these situations is the nature of my practice. The lessons these situations teach are fundamental and pertinent to fostering ethical behavior and to detecting, deterring and preventing future unethical practices. There are distinctive patterns of behavior to look for (wherever you happen to be on the globe):

- Unethical behaviors happen on purpose, beginning with conscious decisions by individuals or at the direction or insistence of their bosses.
- Self-indulgence, self-forgiveness or arrogance are predicate factors.
- Taking short cuts or ignoring established rules are the first acts.
- Overlooking questionable behaviors or decisions by important people becomes an accepted practice.
- Failure to challenge the rogue behavior of key producers or leaders sets the example.
- Making unethical behavior mandatory ("Do whatever it takes to get the job done, or to get a bonus, or to keep your job") sets the pattern.
- Unethical behavior, left unchecked, eventually leads to illegal acts.

For the global practitioner, building an environment of integrity based on global behavior standards will become key for keeping the PR function relevant. This will require experience to make constructive management suggestions to avoid further ethical conflicts and behaviors — and their disastrous results. ■

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