**Professional Conduct and Code of Ethics**

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***Introduction:***

It is my responsibility to make ethical decisions. As a public relations professional, I must follow an ethical system which drives the critical process of how I work through moral issues. I have to consider every aspect involved from duties to values. All decision-making involves values which reflect my presumptions about social life and human nature. A personal Code of Ethics is vital to my career as it gives me something to lean back on. It represents my values and principles I hold dear to my heart, and that is very important to carry in the professional world. I follow a virtues-based framework, and I believe following values and morals are the most important thing in distinguishing a person. Aristotle’s theory of virtues shaped the argument of that “if we learn virtues of loyalty, duty, charity and honesty as youths, those virtues will become a part of us,” (Georgetown University, 2020a) which is what my Code represents.

***My Pledge:***

I vow to be honest, loyal, accountable, transparent, respectful and law abiding in everything I do, every day. Money, career, etc., won’t get me very far if I have a poor reputation and personality. Holding myself accountable every day in the way I want to live will strengthen me physically and emotionally. It will build character, charisma, loyalty and respect from others. It will help me grow every day as a person, whether it’s in my personal or professional life, and I will continue to adjust my Code within each chapter of life I’m in. Things may not always go my way or as I planned, but I must stay true to myself and never let my character be broken from something that can be communicated through.

I believe communication is the building block between relationships and effective communication will go a long way. Without communication, assumptions and false information are formed which will cause myself to go against my Code of Ethics out of stress and tension. However, I believe that even when a crisis occurs and I am put in a morally difficult position, I will regularly look back on my Code for guidance to make the right decision.

***My Personal Tenets:***

My Code of Ethics will be used as a way to put my values to practice. All my life I have set the bar high for myself, including my standards, and this Code will help me stay on track. I have a responsibility to follow standards, and this Code I have written out is what I strive to do be responsible for every day. I go beyond my expectations and this Code molds me into the person I am. I placed my tenets in this specific order because I think of them as building blocks. I believe to have one of these is to have another. I can’t say that I believe in one thing when I don’t in the other that correlates with it completely. My tenets all combine into the values and beliefs of my character.

1. ***Honesty*:** I will value honesty in all aspects of my professional and personal life despite the potential for loss of clients or business. I choose this because I believe people need to be honest in what they believe in especially when it comes to public relations. If I see that something is offensive or may be conveyed the wrong way—I will let my client know that and offer a different approach. Patricia Parsons mentions in her article, Ethics and Tasteless Campaigns, that “crossing the line from questionable taste to bad taste sometimes takes us into a moral dilemma” (Parsons, 2015). But who determines that line to cross? Is it me, my company, client, the public? I believe that the individual determines the line—so I will determine what line crosses the boundaries of my moral decision-making process. At the end of the day, Parsons mentions that it is a question of right and wrong, which I interpreted of its up to myself to make that decision based on what I believe is right from wrong. I understand that there will be times where I am in a situation where I have to make an ethical and moral decision. This is where my ethical framework will come in play as a virtue based. According to the ethical framework lecture, a virtues-based framework is “one looks internally to those virtues and weighs what to do.” (Georgetown University, 2020a). A movie that supports my claim in honesty was, The Insider, where the main character, Jeffery Wigand, knew that he had to make a hard decision on whether to speak against the tobacco company he works for and inform the public of the harmful effects or stay silent for his family. In the end, he chose the honest choice—and told the honest truth to the public. This movie is a strong example on how a character uses his ethical framework when making moral-decisions in his career, which is exactly what I would do if I was ever placed in a situation like he was.
2. ***Loyalty:*** As a public relations professional, my primary loyalty will be to the public. Despite the fact that I will strive to be loyal to my employer as well as my clients, the needs of the public will always come first. Even though some people view PR as a smoke and mirrors business, it’s actually about building trust with public audiences. When I sit back and think about how I can bring trust and loyalty back in the workplace, I refer to Roger Halls comments on the topic. He me mentions “70 percent of people don’t like their job and employees at all levels feel there is no trust or loyalty in their company” (Hall, 2008). How can I fix that? At the end of the day—communication is key. How I communicate and what skills I use. Both of those things will increase both, trust and loyalty in the workplace. Being loyal to my company is a way larger concept than just saying I will be loyal. A journal from Rice University published in Business Ethics describes my tenet of loyalty and the whole concept of what a Code in general stands for.

The journal states, “A duty of loyalty and our best effort are our primary obligations as employees, but what they mean can change” (Rice University, 2018). A Code of Ethics is meant to be changed over time. Everything that I say now, will be altered with new trends, environments and experiences I face—but I am obligated to myself to stay loyal in the present time.

1. ***Accountability****:* I will be accountable toward my actions despite the risks of getting in trouble with my authorities. I will own up to my mistakes and suffer the consequences if I do something wrong. I was taught at a young age that I should always own up to my mistakes because it will help me learn in life. Whether it was with school, my friends, my family—mistakes were okay, I just held myself accountable for them. As a PR practitioner it is vital for me to hold myself accountable in the work I do for clients. They trusted in me to handle the name of their brand, and it is my job to be responsible in the way I do that. Cy Wakeman defines accountability in a strong and meaningful way. Accountability isn’t just an action, but also a belief. Personal accountability is “believing you are fully responsible for your own actions and consequences,” which ties into holding myself accountable for following my Code of Ethics (Wakeman, 2015). However, accountability also goes much deeper than just believing in myself. There’s a lot of benefits from holding the value of accountability. John Hall dives deeper into how accountability is relevant in a workplace. “Accountability bolsters your company’s culture, improves your employees’ individual performance, results in stronger adherence to compliance and is good for bottom line” (Hall, 2019). In shorter terms accountability shapes who I am, who my company is and what we stand for.
2. ***Transparency:***I will show transparency in the work I complete in my personal and professional career despite my beliefs being different than some others. I believe in showing people, especially my clients, who I really am—and being open and true through every step of the way. Jennifer Bell explained it perfectly in an article published in PR Week by stating, “the evolving PR landscape in communication firms need to be transparent, trustworthy and take a firm stance on an issue” (Bell, 2019). This source supports my claim on transparency because it relates this tenet to the PR profession, which is what my life will be revolving around. As the title of the article is, “Transparency and trust are more important than ever,” I can use her words and guidance to help defend my argument on why I believe transparency is crucial in the workplace. Practicing transparency will also be vital in my personal and professional life. In practicing this, “businesses are seen as being more honest and trustworthy” (Fanaras, 2018). Not only does this source from Linda A. Fanaras support my transparency tenet, but also my claim to stay honest and trustworthy in everything I do. These three things are important in managing public relations.
3. ***Respect:*** As a professional adult, I will respect my colleagues, higher authority figures and the public who I am sharing information to despite not agreeing with certain views they may have. I understand that the work force does not revolve around me and I have to adapt to different situations and people. I will respect everyone, despite race, gender, color, background, etc., in using persuasion, not propaganda to gain the public’s attention. Ethics in public relations: A guide to best practice, book by Patricia Parsons describespublic relations as a professional pursuit, truth telling, trust, rights, respect and the issue of propaganda versus persuasion. This book supports my claim that I will not use propaganda to persuade my audience with false images and information. Parsons dives deep into concrete steps to avoid the propaganda in persuasive communication in which one is to avoid false, fabricated, misrepresented, distorted or irrelevant evidence to support my point of view. In my profession, I will always respect the right of decision making to the public and advertise the truth. I often ask myself the question of what an ethical media professional looks like today and if I do really resemble one. Patrick L. Plaisance Ph.D. looks deeper into the distinction of public relations practitioners’ short-term interest being above long-term public service in his article in Psychology Today. In modern times, PR practitioners include characteristics such as “avoiding potential harm to others, respecting the autonomous agency of everyone which they work, and embracing the proposition that their profession has public service and the promotion of social justice at its heart” (Plaisance, 2014). This description of what a PR practitioner should look like are characteristics that I strive to have, if I do not already. In support of my tenet of respect, my end goal is for people to see me as a respected individual completing my duty to the public.
4. ***Law-Abiding****:* Despite the fact that I strongly value rules, I will not obey rules I deem to be professionally unethical because my priority as a PR practitioner is to enhance the integrity of the profession. In every workplace, I believe that there should be a formal code or set of rules to follow. Thomas Bivens supports my argument this statement in his book, Mixed Media: Moral Distinctions in Advertising, Public Relations and Journalism. Law-abiding rules should be followed and respected in the workplace and professional environment because it sets boundaries and puts things in order. Bivens states, “Advocates should have an established formal code within the workplace to provide a common understanding of the objectivity, methods and boundaries necessary for furthering the cause” (Bivens, 2009). Without any type of law and order, no place would function successfully. There are steps and practices I can take to grasp a better understanding on how to maintain a law-abiding mindset. Joanna Hatt analyzes ethical and legal practices in public relations. Every company or business has their own Code of Ethics that they must abide by being an employee. Companies will publish the codes themselves to set standards for their ethical behavior. I hold myself to my statement of being one of those public practitioners who abides by the law. “How accountable and credible you are, and are perceived to be, determines your success in the industry,” Hatt said, “Abiding by professional codes of conduct helps improve the public's trust in the PR profession and consequently helps your business's public relations efforts” (Hatt, 2017). There are a lot of rules I must follow as a PR professional, and I am using this Code as a starting point in my journey to a law-abiding career.

***Using my Tenets in Real Life:***

Every interview I have been in has always been a nerve-wracking situation. Although it’s a perfect time to showcase my talents and portray everything I’ve been working so hard for—every interview always feels the same in the beginning with the basic, open-ended questions. However, I have noticed that there were times where I would use my tenets in a job interview, and there were times where I didn’t.

What I have learned throughout many interviews throughout my post undergrad life is that people will indeed lie. They will tell me that I am exactly what their company is looking for, that my qualifications and experiences are tremendous, that they can see me being part of their company after a few more interviews. The end: no job offers. “Thank you for your interest in our company but we found someone with more qualifications.” How do someone expect a person to gain job experience when they won’t even give the individual a chance. One interview for example was for a few months, unpaid and it’s all about gaining skill in the PR professional world. However, I had to email them myself for a follow-up because after the interview that I swore went great—I heard no response for two weeks. If a company is hiring people, at least have the decency to respond to the applicants. It’s respectful and it shows who the company is as a whole.

I can admit though during that interview, even though it was all woman my age, I felt like I was lying to myself. I didn’t feel authentic and true when I was speaking. My parents always told me to never speak about my autoimmune disease in job interviews because people will most likely end communication right away (even though there’s a Disability Act). But my illness has shaped me into the woman I am today, through all the obstacles and trials. I wasn’t being honest and transparent with myself, which are two of the most important tenets in my Code.

So, I put that to the test with this one interview I recently had. The interviewer was explaining that their company works as advocates and with non-profits. I mentioned to him that I am an advocate for a non-profit myself—and he asked me which one. He was very interested and impressed that I was a part of that organization and there was something inside of me saying tell him the reason why. I told him why—and it was all because I was an advocate for a nonprofit for my illness. Before any of that, I was telling him my story of how I have been through more obstacles than a person my age, and I came out stronger than ever without giving up. He was so impressed with my honesty as it could be hard to be vulnerable and transparent during an interview because most of the time, I want to impress the company acting like a person I am not. However, this position and this conversation made me become more transparent and show him why I believe I am a good candidate for this position and why he should hire me. Long story short—he saw my work and remembered our amazing conversation and he hired me for the job. On top of that, with my honesty on wanting a paid internship, he didn't want to lose out on someone who was so perfect for the position just because he wouldn't pay some money for the hard work and time. He decided that he would make it a paid internship for me because he said the most important thing is the person who could benefit the company and be a great asset. Again, all about not lying and being truthful in what I am looking for—being honest and transparent.

Transparency and honesty are everything when it comes to a job. I don’t want to lie acting like I am this person with all the skills they’re looking for when chances are I don’t. A job is supposed to teach me new experiences along the way, so from here on out, I will be honest and if I am not strong in something the job is asking me to do, I will tell them that but also tell them I would love to learn how to do that. If I don’t feel ready to open up in, I will remember to be as transparent and honest as I can. I also know to shift the answer back into why I are interviewing for that company and what led me there.

***PRSA Gaps:***

I believe that when it comes to the balance between encouraging a free flow of information while still properly safeguarding the confidence of my client, I must be honest and accurate in all communication. As it does mention that already in the PRSA Code of Ethics, there's more detail behind it. For instance, I must report all information accurately, despite it breaking some confidence of my client. When I am honest to the client when something is wrong, their confidence isn’t too egotistic, and they can learn from the error and not have a PR crisis on their hands for sharing false information. I think a big part of the Code missing is how I can learn from each relationship I form. Open communication with each other will better the decision-making process in whatever situation I may be in. I honestly believe this Code can be comprehensive and when I read it fully, I can see a clear understanding on what the highest priorities are. These include integrity of communications, honesty and accuracy in communications and preserve the free flow of unprejudiced information.

In my own experience, I feel as if I was in a conflict of priorities whenever I was rushing girls in my sorority. The panhellenic rules were if I loved a girl, I had to stay subtle, and not promise anything to make them feel as if they are automatically going to get a bid. For example, girls are given water and a napkin coming in the house, and when they leave, I must take it before they pass the threshold of the door. If not, I could give off false information of “bid promising”, which could result in problems with officials. It’s similar to the Code of allowing the free flow of unprejudiced information when giving “gifts”. In one house that I adored, all four girls who rushed me gave me a bid-promise and told me they’d see me the next day at bid day, so I left thinking I was going to be in that sorority. The next day, I get my bid card and it was not the house that promised to see me. Those girls broke their moral code and ethics of recruitment by providing false hope and causing biased opinions during my decision-making process.

This situation goes hand-in-hand with the public relations profession. A practitioner is expected to be honest and use their morals when making a decision for their client. I will use my Code to exemplify my decision and in not promising my client something that I am not one hundred percent sure of. I would also not bribe my client with special gifts—I will be true to myself at all times, being transparent and law-abiding.

***Personal Style Analysis***

To give an example on how I had my values put to the test, I am analyzing my previous workplace when I was a Social Media Coordinator for an office in the Spears School of Business at Oklahoma State University. The employees ages ranged from 18 to 60, and I would have to say the dominant work style was definitely the Get Alongs. Everyone just wanted to get along, even if we secretly, even vocally, disliked someone in our office.

With that huge age range, it was evident that the styles and culture are shaped by the leaders. In my office, there were five cubicles where the student workers plus one extra would work. We weren’t considered the managers or bosses. The “cube” environment was very laid back, accepting and fun. Then, there were the individual offices, six to be exact, and their style ranged from getting things done and getting things right. So, that’s why I believe my office was a mix of all styles, which is why the dominant was to just get along. The two main directors of the program were the ones that were all about “getting things right”. If even a period was off on a press release or email, I immediately had to correct it. It was very obvious when interviewing there for the first time that these two were going to be the ones that I would have to bite my tongue for.

However, I noticed it wasn’t just the directors. There was a guy in my major that was in every class and extra-curricular activity with me, and the two of us never got along because he didn’t like my personal style of my work (school and professional), and he would be very vocal about it. He eventually became my “shadow” in my office as he was going to take over once I graduated. My colleague would tell me that he would talk bad about me and the work I do the days I wasn’t in office for no apparent reason, and the girls would just listen uncomfortably because the office is a family-like environment and everyone is so close together to have any issues.

I believe the work style changes for each type of job, they’re not all the same. If I had to choose what style I am, I would have to say a mix of get it done and getting validated. According to the lecture video on styles, having a get it done style are “the ones who don’t have a lot of times for complaints, suggestions or details; the goal was clear.” Then the part where my style is getting validated are “motivated at work is highly influenced by getting validated, getting thanked” (Georgetown University, 2020). I enjoy being acknowledged for my hard work and dedication, which I know isn’t always promised. However, being noticed for what I am doing gives me motivation and drive to continue working hard and reaching beyond my goals. I am also a perfectionist. I take pride in my work and I get upset if I see one error or get things wrong. This guy who wasn’t my biggest fan was upset because I would go through class, projects, work just getting things done—and getting a perfect grade for it. The amount of effort I had to put in didn’t seem like a lot to others because I had a natural talent of working under pressure and in a fast-paced environment. I didn’t have time to take all the time in the world to complete something—the ideas just came to me. My qualities fit the environment I was in because there wasn’t time to complain about anything—I just did the work I was given. As my personality doesn’t align with people disliking me, my morals and values are more important to me than my ego, so I acted like a young professional would do and tolerated him and worked together for the sake of our career. With my particular personal style at work, I was able to successfully fit the role I was given. Working for social media is fast-paced with posting on all platforms, advertisements, press releases—there is no time to waste since events were an everyday affair.

Evidence of the frameworks was handed to me immediately on my first day of work. I was easily prepared for what to expect because I had a folder with a letter inside of the previous student that had my job. She gave me advice of what to expect, introductions to each staff member and their personalities, and the things that were expected of me. Going into any job, previously or in the future, I know that not everyone is going to have the same personality and work styles—everyone functions and works different and I believe that getting along is the most important part of a business, because working in a place I don’t enjoy is miserable. Although I loved the job, that type of work environment was a little too toxic for me because no one was honest in what they were feeling. As we were able to be successful and get things done in the process, I felt like there was an elephant in the room majority of the time, which made being there uncomfortable, which no job should make me feel that way.

***Conclusion:***

Each year, I will reflect on how well I followed my Code and what I can do to better myself in following it. To keep myself accountable, I will make a pros and cons list on what worked for me and what did not. Also, to get a second opinion on my Code, I will get together with a friend to read out loud my tenets and have her/him give back constructive criticism.

To make it more work-related, I will also review it with a colleague or manager/boss to direct me into possibly changing some parts to fit more of my company environment. My Code will hold personal and professional tenets that I expect myself to follow every day. It will portray my values, morals and ethical decisions that I will strive to follow every day, and I would want my friends, family and work to keep me in check by knowing what rules I follow.

Only keeping my Code to myself won’t benefit me in any way because I will have a biased mindset, however, being highly influenced by how my family and friends see me will give me a push to reevaluate what my Code means to me.

At the end of the day, I want my Code to represent me as a person. Whoever reads it, will know what kind of person I am and what I stand for—without even having to meet me. This document will be a contract between myself to always stay true to my beliefs. I hope to alter things along the way of my journey, and I want to be able to change things around. Life is all about living, learning and growing—and I want to make sure my Code is always part of that journey.

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