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## **Ethics Commentaries:**

### **BUILDING A GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT OF INTEGRITY**

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A friend of mine recently told me he was planning to write a book on global public relations 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 get 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 behaviors of those responsible.

Here are some examples of situations that could occur somewhere on the globe that could have multinational, perhaps global, repercussions.

#### **Case One**

A client company recently sent a memo worldwide from its top European executive suggesting better ways to manage operations. Among the larger sections of the memo was a discussion about how to control costs. One suggestion was to reduce dependence on higher salaried individuals, by hiring individuals 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, the question is, what do you do?

#### **Case Two**

A global company based in Brazil decides to have its annual management retreat at a popular and 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

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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, consuming a two-ounce 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 . . .

## Case Three

Your company is approached by the intelligence service of another country who has covert operations in several countries where you have branch offices. The request is simple, they want members of their service who work in-country 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, every day, 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 offences. Thus far, the public relations 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 clarifier 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 (including the Public Relations Society of America [PRSA]) of national and international public relations societies from over 50 countries, to develop, amongst other things, 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 hopefully prevent inappropriate behavior. Moreover, an anonymous 'ask-the-experts' service is offered by the GA via its web site to facilitate this transfer of knowledge amongst different cultures.

Members of the Public Relations Society of America 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](http://www.globalpr.org) to review the protocol and the latest global Alliance information.) Jean Valin, *APR, Fellow CPRS*, who led the ethics work group and will chair the GA in 2004, characterizes the goal of the GA this way, "Our vision for the GA is: one profession – one voice."

It is a safe forecast that scandals in business, government, and other organizations will continue to surface. Global companies have the potential to have problems on a global scale. Ultimately, absent punitive powers, public relations' primary role will be to create an

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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 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 become accepted practices.
- 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 make a bonus, or to keep your job”) sets the pattern.
- Unethical behavior, left unchecked, leads eventually to illegal acts by someone.

Some years ago I was invited to meet with several organizations involved in energy trading. Questions were already being raised about the process. The purpose of the meeting was to make an assessment of exposure. I was told by this group of very bright people that one of the difficulties with this business process was that its complexity required someone “to be a rocket scientist” to understand it.

My response was, “If you can't explain what you're doing to your nine year old son or daughter at the dinner table, some of you will be going to jail, soon.” The rest, as they say, is history.

Ethical public relations practice is a prerequisite to helping foster and maintain ethical business practices.

For the global practitioner, building an environment of integrity based on global behavior standards will become a key mechanism for keeping the public relations function relevant: with the competence necessary to ask crucial questions, and the experience required to make constructive management suggestions to avoid further ethical conflicts and behaviors, and their disastrous results.