Seeking the sweet spot: Observations from a workplace praxis intervention programme on public relations and professional communication ethics.

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Abstract
This paper records the initial observations from a series of action research site visits, in an ongoing, long-term programme of workplace ethics research. At time of writing six communication departments and public relations consultancies had been involved to varying degrees as action research sites, of a planned 12. The participants had provided verbal and written feedback documenting their thoughts on ethics, their reactions to the ethics tool that was demonstrated to them, and their suggestions for its improvement and for the improvement of ethics in the communication field generally. The ethics pyramid proved a useful 'way in' to the topic of ethics; that is, it was functioning as an approach to facilitating dialogue as well as a tool in its own right.

In addition to valuable adaptations to the ethics tool to make it more practical and more aligned with workplace norms, from this initial feedback several patterns have emerged. Repeated dialectical themes are evident, suggesting that stances towards ethics may fall into an habitual series of opposing categories. Understanding these categories gives clues about barriers to ethical rigour in the workplace, and about the drivers that can help stimulate greater attention to ethics in the field of professional communication practice generally.[1]

Introduction

The 'ethics pyramid' is a simple communication planning tool that was first conceptualised in 2004, first published a year later (Tilley, 2005), and is now in its third version following feedback and adaptation at two early action research sites during 2006 and 2007. It consists of a pyramid graphic on one side with four labelled stages starting from the base up (see Figure 1 below), and a series of 'how to use'

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suggestions on the other side (see Figure 2). It is gloss-laminated so that it can be written on with a whiteboard marker during planning, then erased to be reused next time.

The development of the pyramid was strongly grounded in the extensive literature on ethics in general and communication ethics in particular but, as a tool, the pyramid focuses on applied ethics. It aims to help practitioners manage that often ambiguous literature (Tilley, 2005) in order to arrive at practical ways to consider what might be good behaviour in a given situation.[2]

The ethics pyramid is not a system for being ethical. It is, rather, a kind of basic planning grid into which communication practitioners can slot whatever systems for being ethical they agree, with their stakeholders[3], will guide their actions in a given communication situation, such as a campaign. The pyramid cannot guarantee that ethical action will occur or that the agreed systems will always be followed, but it can prompt practitioners to: think about ethics as something collective rather than impose their individual values; start a discussion with stakeholders about what ethics might mean on this occasion and what values, rules, and outcomes are important; agree some consensus principles or approaches; set targets for ethics; and, perhaps most importantly, measure whether those targets have been achieved so that it is clear which (or whose) values, rules or outcomes the communication ultimately favoured.

The structure of the ethics pyramid is nothing new. In its initial version it resembled, and acknowledged its debt to, Macnamara's (2002) 'Macro Model of Evaluation', a pyramid breaking the typical components of a communication campaign planning process into three steps. In its current version, while it retains the pyramid shape, the pyramid has been broken into four steps, on the advice of practitioner research participants who pointed out that the first level was in fact always two stages in application. It now correlates with the plethora of planning systems – such as Hendrix's (2001) ROPE, an acronym for Research, Objectives, Programming, and

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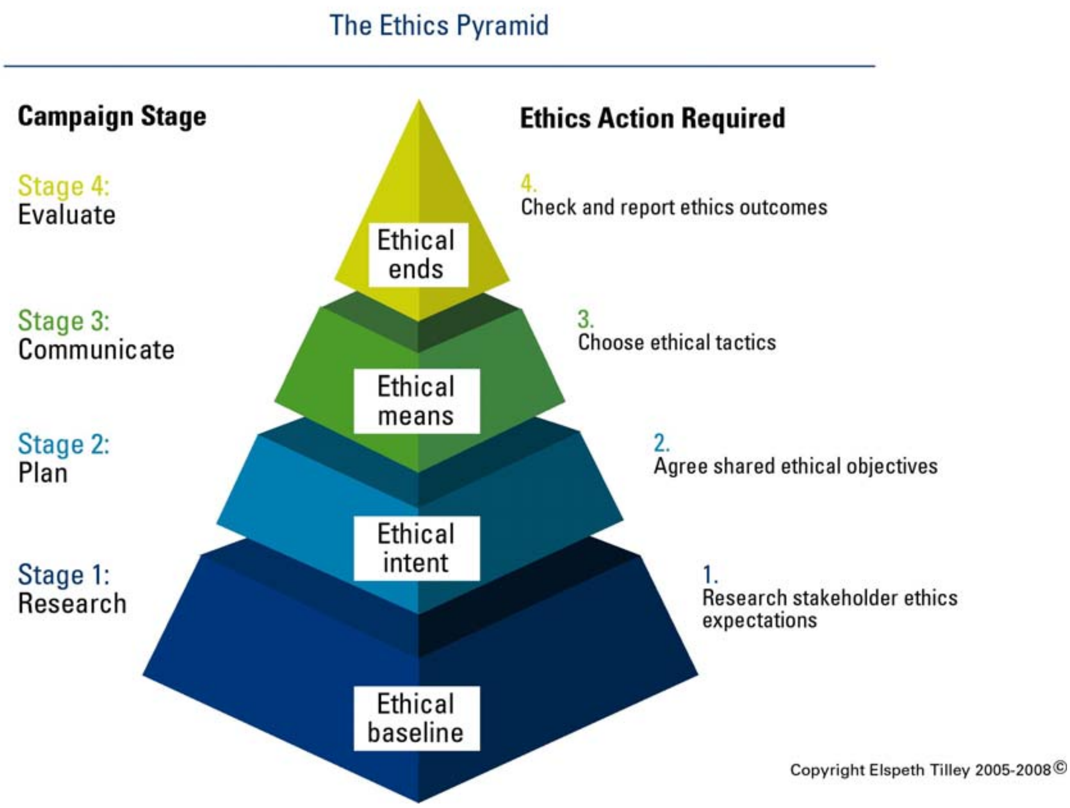
[2] The communication ethics literature is not revisited in depth in this article as it has been covered in depth elsewhere in connection with the pyramid's development (Tilley, 2005) and in connection with public relations ethics generally (Tilley, 2009 forthcoming).

[3] 'Stakeholders' is used here in a broad non-technical sense to mean all parties affected, directly or indirectly, by a particular communication. The term 'publics' may be more appropriate (Mackey, 2006) but as the workplaces involved exclusively used 'stakeholders', this article follows their understanding and application of the term.

Evaluation – that answer Freitag's four strategic planning questions: Where are we now?; Where do we need to get to?; How will we get there?; and How will we know when we've arrived? (Freitag, 1998). At recent site visits this four-step structure has resonated with every practitioner present, suggesting the graphic now reflects the typical structure of the communication planning processes being used in New Zealand workplaces.

Figure 1: Front view of the ethics pyramid



The pyramid differs from existing planning grids in that it explicitly incorporates ethics into these four standard stages, by asking practitioners to: first research stakeholder ethical expectations; then agree shared objectives for ethics with stakeholders; next think through how their actions and tactics can meet these expectations; and finally check their performance against the agreed standard. The guidelines given on the pyramid itself are deliberately fairly broad and generic – the idea is to prompt a process, rather than prescribe details – although some possible 'examples' are provided. Practitioners have to find how that process relates to their own work and each different communication situation they face. Formative research, for example, can occur through whatever questions are appropriate for the particular context, which might be very basic such as simply 'How ethical do you think we were last time you dealt with us?' (and give a Likert scale for responses) – perhaps appropriate if dealing with an external stakeholder such as customers – ranging through to an incredibly complex question such as 'What does ethics mean to you?' (and collecting qualitative responses for collation, thematic analysis and feedback) – which may be workable if dealing with an internal stakeholder such as staff. Likewise objectives can range from simply aiming to score higher on the Likert scale next time (and I would argue, especially given the data below about the 'scariness' of ethics as a concept, that it is better to have even an undefined approach to being more ethical than none at all – often what is needed is successful implementation of a 'baby step' to make ethics seem manageable before more complexity can be introduced), to aiming to organically develop a comprehensive corporate code of conduct or social responsibility policy and assess its impact. A range of sample questions is given on the reverse of the pyramid (Figure 2).

Figure 2: The flip view of the ethics pyramid – prompts for setting objectives

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Ethical Principles: Some Prompts For Setting Objectives

Q: What ethical virtues do I personally or do we as a team want to embody?

A: Virtues to choose from: Aristotle's mean (what is reasonable), mum test (what will make others proud), publicity test (what I'd be happy to see on the front page of the newspaper), pride test (what I would be proud to claim as my work), fairness (what I think is fair to all parties), honesty (what I think is ethical transparency).

- To help choose your virtues you may wish to have an ethics brainstorm, personal ethical reflection session, consult expert counsel, or undertake reading in ethics.
- When you have chosen virtues, express them as measurable objectives:

Sample Objective: To score 80% or higher, on an anonymous survey, from every member of the PR team in answer to the question "How proud are you of the work you have done throughout this campaign?"

Q: What rules will we adhere to?

A: Rules to choose from: Laws, codes (corporate conduct, professional ethics), ethics checklists (Kidder, propaganda index, Bok).

- To help choose your applicable rules, you may need to consult legal advisors or your organisation's ethics officer or refer to your professional body.
- When you have chosen a rule, express it as a measurable objective:

Sample Objective: To score 90% or higher, on an anonymous survey, from every member of the PR team in answer to the question "How well do you feel [insert specific campaign tactic] complied with the code of ethics of the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand?"

Q: What ethical outcomes do we want this campaign to achieve?

A: Outcomes to choose from: Universalisability, reversibility, benefit/harm, SOCS, Rawls' original position, TARES, Potter Box, fairness (what all parties think is fair to them), honesty (what all parties think is transparent), ethics (what all parties think is ethical).

- To help choose ethical outcomes, you will first need to consult with both the client and the publics who are targeted with the campaign. Benchmark research will need to ascertain what these stakeholders want to see in terms of ethics, and set objectives accordingly.

Sample Objective: To score 80% or higher, on anonymous surveys, from our client and the publics communicated with during the campaign, in answer to the questions "How ethical was this campaign?" and "How ethical was our conduct as a PR team?"

See http://praxis.massey.ac.nz/ethics_pyramid.html for more suggestions and further information.

None of these questions is a perfect 'catch-all', but nor are they intended to be. The nature of exactly what questions are asked about ethics in the research phase is less important than that they are asked, and that then some measurement is enacted to ensure that having been asked, they are acted upon. The process of asking stakeholders for their views about ethics and evaluating the organisation's responsiveness to those views is itself providing an ethics of inclusion. This is the ethics envisaged by Botan, when he talks about organisations and their stakeholders "interpreting the world together" (1993, p.71) rather than organisations imposing their reality on stakeholders, and by Grunig (2006, p.165), when he talks about "bring[ing] the voices of publics into the decision-making process". Grunig is referring mainly to operational decision-making – yet he acknowledges that the voices of publics also need to be brought into the decision-making process with regard to less tangible decisions, such as what is ethical. This is particularly important for organisations engaged in global or cross-cultural communication, where understandings of what is ethical might be so different as to be "culturally incompatible" (Shuter, 2003, p.450), but morals and values are so personal as to suggest that there is *always* potential for divergent understandings of what is ethical (Boynton, 2003). The pyramid cannot (and arguably should not) eliminate such divergence, in fact it encourages it, but it can foreground it, track it, measure it, and report it, so that both organisations and stakeholders have a better understanding of what was meant by 'ethical behaviour' in any given situation.

This, then, was the tool that this research took into busy communication workplaces and asked practitioners to 'try out' over a period of weeks. A tool both very simple, and at the same time with the potential to be very complicated, depending how deeply practitioners chose to investigate what is meant by being 'ethical' both for themselves and for their stakeholders.

Methodology

This study follows an action research methodology, that is, the research is envisaged as an ongoing collaboration between researcher and participants (Greenwood & Levin, 2005). Feedback is performed through a loop, in which recommendations made by participants are considered and acted upon to make adaptations to the ethics tool, and to the process of the research itself, and these adaptations are returned to the same research site, or enacted at the next, for further testing. The researcher is not the 'expert' telling people how to be ethical; the researcher is a facilitator who shares and engages and exchanges views in a joint learning experience with the participants (Adler, Shani, & Styhre, 2004). Specifically, this action research was in the nature of a ‘praxis intervention’ (Madhu, 2005), that is, an exchange in which different theoretical and philosophical approaches are discussed, compared and applied to lived situations so that all parties might start to see some of their own ideological assumptions and become more aware of the various frameworks (cultural, spiritual, and other) through which they have come to their default understandings of what is ‘ethical’. Praxis intervention aims to stimulate a kind of mindful self-awareness in both ‘researcher’ and ‘researched’ (while also undermining the traditional distinctions between those roles), unsettling all parties’ prior assumptions and norms by making those norms articulated and observable for comparison (Giddens, 1984; Bourdieu, 1993).

Within this methodology, various methods were employed, including: participant observation and fieldnotes; semi-structured workshops; printed surveys with both quantitative and qualitative questions; taped one-to-one interviews; taped focus groups; and email discussion. Each site initially received a workshop visit in which the ethics pyramid was demonstrated. The workshop includes an overview of different approaches to ethics (such as virtue ethics, deontology, and consequentialism) and often also a working-through of a challenge facing the participants, by using the different approaches to show that often different conclusions are reached as to what is ethical depending what approach is taken. After the workshop, a survey is completed, and a discussion session is taped. Tapes are later transcribed and the transcriptions analysed using qualitative analysis software. Over subsequent weeks, if individual participants choose to make contact, which some in most workplaces do, the conversation is continued via email or telephone. A return visit is also offered, to gather repeat survey and focus group data, and a later phase of the research will report on these follow-up findings.

The participants

The first six action research sites discussed in this paper include the communication divisions of one government department and one State Owned Enterprise, one communication consultancy in Wellington, and two communication consultancies in Auckland. Other sites that have been visited are not discussed here because research is ongoing or did not progress beyond an initial visit, as all sites have the option as to their degree of involvement (at time of writing ongoing sites include a further two consultancies in Auckland and three in Wellington, and a national membership organisation). At the six sites discussed here, a total of 42 communications staff, ranging from a majority of senior executives with responsibility for overseeing accounts and managing projects, to a handful of relatively new or junior staff, directly participated in the research. Many other staff in those workplaces also received materials and information, and held discussions with colleagues, but were not directly involved in data collection. The direct participants have provided written survey data, taped interviews, tape-recorded verbal discussion, email feedback, and at some sites where the research is more advanced, have participated in follow-up focus groups after using the pyramid in their workplace. Interestingly, although all participants are offered the opportunity to participate anonymously in a secure private online discussion forum, none have done so, preferring one-to-one email and phone discussion. All participants have given written permission for their feedback to be used and published on condition neither individuals nor workplaces are identified – although some workplaces stated that they would be happy to be identified I have not done so.

Limitations

A key limitation of the study is that the participants are a small self-selected group. Recruitment was through advertisements in the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand newsletter – which will catch the attention primarily of members of that professional organisation, who may by definition therefore already have a heightened interest in issues of professionalism, such as ethics – and through an invitation email to a range of practitioners selected by region. Those who choose to respond to such invitations may not reflect industry norms. Nonetheless, the research is designed to be in-depth and intensive, getting to the nitty-gritty of what makes ethics tick on a day-to-day basis for particular workplaces, rather than offering a comprehensive and representative picture of the communication profession. The themes in responses, despite the diversity of workplaces in size and type of work, suggest the data remain a valid resource for developing better ways to prioritise communication ethics in general.

Findings

These preliminary findings are reported here in a fairly general sense, giving an overview of the trends and issues emerging in the data as a complete set to date. For clarity the qualitative responses are presented clustered around the four questions asked on the printed survey where they are relevant to those, with additional qualitative issues addressed below. Even though more sites will follow, some clear patterns are already evident across the data corpus, with the same kinds of issues raised repeatedly and some distinct themes emerging. As is usual in action research, the next phase of the research will feed back these findings into the research loop, perhaps taking these themes as a starting point in discussions with the next workplaces, so that the research can keep moving on from discovering problems to finding and testing solutions, as it has already done with several issues (see adaptations, below).

The survey research began with a question designed to gauge general levels of concern about communication ethics – is more focus needed on ethics in the public relations/communication industry? A Likert scale offered responses from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). The mean response (n=42) was 4.15, just above ‘moderately’. The respondents see a definite need for more attention to ethics.

The next question asked whether respondents anticipated using the ethics pyramid in their work, again with a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (all the time). This time, the mean was much lower – at 2.87 hovering above ‘occasionally’ but not quite at ‘sometimes’. Anticipation of the ethics pyramid as a solution did not match levels of concern about ethics as a problem.

The next question sought information about the main barriers to using the ethics pyramid. It offered both a series of options for selection, and an open box for qualitative responses. The overview below is drawn from both the qualitative and quantitative survey data, as well as transcribed discussion and focus group data relating to barriers.

Barriers

The number one barrier identified by survey respondents was time. It was selected more than twice as often as the next most frequent barrier, which was that clients may not see a need for using an ethics tool. One respondent commented: "[It] makes sense but there are limitations in NZ – time, funds, client re-education, etc." Another commented that a key barrier was "Explaining the need without making the client feel under scrutiny/defensive".

Qualitative data supported the concern about clients: a repeated barrier mentioned by several consultancies was "This is not relevant for many clients". Focus group comments suggested some clients would embrace it, but for others it simply was not considered to be in the realm of the kinds of services they were seeking, such as marketing communication support for a broader existing advertising campaign, event management for a product launch, etc. For these clients it would be "too far out of left field" to even suggest. The word 'ethics' itself was also seen to be a barrier to communicating with clients about the pyramid. Ethnographic observations suggested that workplace discussions that started with 'ethics' often seem to be starting off in the realm of the unfamiliar for practitioners and could quickly lead to glazed eyes and stifled yawns – even the word 'ethics' itself is somehow off-putting. Several practitioners asked if it could not be "called something else, something other than ethics" and one said just the word ethics was "scary"– although at least one of these was happier with the name by the end of the first visit, when she felt, after discussion, that she could now see ethics as an umbrella term for a range of things such as values, integrity, striving for excellence, etc.

Respondents pointed out on several occasions that there were differences between Auckland and Wellington in terms of the numbers of clients for whom investing time in ethics measurement might be seen as relevant, with Wellington consultancies seen as more likely to be doing government or social marketing work, and Auckland consultancies more focused on commercial clients. Those clients seeking strategic advice may be more likely to see it as relevant, and it was seen as particularly relevant for government clients: "It could be built into our performance agreement with the minister." One respondent said it was "particularly beneficial for work with government departments to counter allegations of wasted taxpayer money on 'spin'"; another at a different site said almost the same thing: "the government sector is having to defend their comms spend and justify it in the face of stories about 'spin', so this could be relevant there".

The next most frequently selected 'barrier' option on the survey was "Not needed – ethics covered at present". The contradiction between the prevalence of this answer, and the initial answer which indicated a widespread belief that the profession needs to focus more on ethics, could perhaps be explained by a kind of 'not me' syndrome (Zimbardo, Ebbesen, & Maslach, 1977) in which respondents believe that their own behaviour is not influenced by a prevalent context – that they are an exception to the norm. Many of the comments made during discussion supported this interpretation, suggesting respondents saw their own workplace as ethical, with others in the industry responsible for any problems: "[It would be] hard to focus on ethics as a standalone – [I] think it's inherent in what we do." Some blame-shifting onto the media was also a reoccurring feature of discussion: "It's not PR that needs the ethics pyramid, it's journalists." Sometimes the extent of a 'we don't have a problem with ethics' response was modified even during the course of a respondent's own discussion of the issues, for example this response illustrates changing thinking processes:

> I was trying to think of examples where I've been uncomfortable from an ethical perspective and I couldn't really. I could think of examples with clients who were heading in the wrong direction and when you help them out and when they were grateful for the help is really more the situation. But the thing that occurred to me was what I haven't got covered in that is how the audience feel. So I know how I feel and I know how the clients feel, but what we don't know is whether our audience feels that they've been dealt with explicitly – and that's ethically – and that's the tricky bit. That's the bit that you need to [start considering]…

There was also on more than one occasion during discussions a clear split in the kinds of 'not me' responses offered by managerial and non-managerial staff. Managers tended to make positive statements of pride in the ethical nature of their own work and be quite enthusiastic about what was being achieved. Non-managers were often more cynical, suggesting that even though they too were personally being ethical at this point in time, unethical practice was rife elsewhere to the extent that they had very little pride in their profession. Two managers made very similar comments conveying shock – "I had no idea you felt that way" – in response to somewhat despondent suggestions by members of their staff that there was little hope for the ethics of the profession as a whole, because there is always something slightly inherently unethical about some aspects of public relations work, even if those aspects were not performed by their current workplace. "There will always be people willing to do the horridness," one said. The managers seemed quite taken aback that their own enthusiastic vision of communication practice as mostly a force for good was not necessarily shared even by their own staff – perhaps sensing that for these employees the 'not me' defence may not be sufficient to sustain long-term job satisfaction.

There may be some validity in the 'not me' response, given the self-selected nature of the sample provided workplaces with a proactive interest in ethical issues who were likely at the forefront of industry practice in the area. However, all of the workplaces acknowledged that there was room for ethics to become more explicit in their daily practice. The key to motivating action in that direction seemed always to be to help the groups find some sort of consensus middle ground between excessive optimism about what was already occurring and excessive cynicism about what was possible. I came to feel that it was often the case that the 'success' of a workplace session – measured by my own target for success, which was that the pyramid would be used again after I left – was tied up with my own abilities (or lack thereof) on a particular day to facilitate that 'sweet spot' between the extremes of the dialectical views.

Problems with the tool itself, and/or with my communication about it

Another option selected several times in the 'barriers' survey question was 'Not a practical tool'. Qualitative data gave some insights into the reasons behind these selections. Criticisms of the ethics pyramid tended to fall into two dichotomous camps: one set of criticisms suggested that it was too easy or simplified to work for something as complicated and multivalent as ethics – "attempting to create tangibles out of an intangible topic means the true nature of ethics may be distorted" – and another set of criticisms suggested it was too complicated to use: "Practicality at work is an issue" and "I think that the idea is great – but could be displayed/communicated better". When these concerns about oversimplification versus excessive complexity were identified at early sites, and talked through with participants, I developed some communication strategies that reduced the reoccurrence of this response on subsequent surveys. The primary strategy was to acknowledge, as I did at the beginning of this paper, that the ethics pyramid is not a tool for ethical guidance: rather, it is a process system ('filing cabinet') for managing and incorporating approaches to ethics. Its structure will always be simple, but its content can be as simple or as complicated as needed. Again, I found that if I was able to make my own presentation hit a middle ground between excessive simplification and excessive complexity, the concerns were largely alleviated.

Adaptations

The qualitative data also revealed some specific details that early respondents disliked about the pyramid. Some of these comments were excellent prompts for improvements to the design, but others indicated that distraction by details might be a barrier in itself. At the first two sites, I was asked why, if I wanted the pyramid to be 'non-scary' and user-friendly, it was bright red, which connoted 'danger' and 'stop' (it was then changed to blue/green). I was also asked why it had three sections, which was considered illogical (Macnamara reports receiving the same comments about his first pyramid prototype, 2002), and I was told that the first step was too "messy" (it was then changed to four sections and the first step split into two parts). These adaptations worked well for subsequent sites, with no further comments on these issues, and some very positive feedback about the four steps. Two new questions then arose, however: 'Why is it a pyramid?' and; 'Why does it go from the bottom up when we read from the top down?' These latter two are valid criticisms of the design, which evolved that way for historical reasons because of its origin in Macnamara's work, but they were the only comments made on these respondents' feedback forms, which suggested that their focus on the design meant little time left to engage with the principles of the ethical process. However, as with all other feedback, these comments will be considered in the pyramid's next incarnation.

Helpful features

The final question on the survey asked respondents 'What are the most helpful features, if any, of the ethics pyramid?' There were many more responses to this question than to the barriers question, which was notable given verbal discussion tended to centre more around barriers than around helpful features. Some typical comments are given below, in decreasing order of thematic frequency:

- Integrates with existing processes, integrates with campaign
- Putting steps/a process to follow to ethics can help us to see how we can include it in our work
- Ability to market organisation as an ethical communicator, shows value for consultancy and client
- Simple, straightforward (relatively)
- Is a guideline rather than a rule
- Can focus thinking
- Encourages measurement of some intangible yet extremely important aspects of any PR campaign, turns intangible into more practical and tactical tool
- Think differently about our business and actions
- Including ethical thinking while working through the process/plan. …could help break down barriers; open mind; think more widely and more deeply
- Reminding us that the backbone of any robust campaign is research and understanding your audiences
- Setting objectives of which one or two should be ethically-based
- A framework with questions – A good reminder/pathway and way of working. A reminder to ask the right questions
- A useful checklist of what needs to be considered
- Tests ‘personal’ values versus ‘others’.

The familiar four-step structure and its affinity with other systems such as ROPE (Hendrix, 2001) seemed particularly to be part of the appeal of the ethics pyramid, with more comments on that than on any other positive aspect. Although sometimes I also felt despondent about ethics after workplace discussions, these written comments provided at the ends of sessions indicated that there was perhaps more willingness to ‘give it a go’ than the verbal discussion always revealed.

Discussion: Drivers for ethics

From the thematic analysis of both the survey data and the more informal qualitative data, some patterns occurred that indicated there were some key motivational drivers for implementing a system for ethics compliance that were similar across the six sites.

Respondents identified these drivers as relevant both for themselves and for their clients.

Reputation benefits

Feedback from the early research sites identified clearly the importance of making links from ethics to reputation management. I was advised that any reputation benefits available to consultancies and clients from attention to ethics should be stated in ways that were unambiguous and to the forefront in my explanations of the pyramid. Without that link, a senior manager suggested, spending time and effort on ethics “sounds like a luxury spend” for everyone involved. If ethics could be seen as one of many “reputation outputs”, however, this manager saw more likelihood of buy-in from clients and staff. In response, I tried changing the way I presented the pyramid at the next seminar. Instead of starting with an exploration and definition of ethics, I started by talking about reputation and its measurable value to both communication consultancies (or communication divisions) and their clients (or employers). I observed a clear change in responsiveness and body language, which suggested participants were more comfortable and relaxed with this as a starting point. Reputation management was not only familiar territory (as opposed to the ‘unknown’ of ethics); it was also less contentious territory. Another key bonus was that it pointed to known mechanisms for showing a return on any investment of time and resources that was being asked of participants to both pay more daily attention to ethics, and to participate in the ethics research itself. Having found some mutual ground with participants on the importance of and value to be gained from reputation, it was easier to take them with me as we moved into the less familiar territory of how performance against ethics measurables could form part of that reputation.

Personal development as a strategist

Another driver that helped motivate some of the research participants to spend the time that was being asked of them to consider ethics, was a desire to be in a more ‘strategic’ role within their organisation. More than one manager commented to the effect that staff often asked to be given “more strategic work” but many were unclear as to what “stepping up” to strategist actually involved. I was advised to demonstrate clearly the links between taking a strategic overview, and thinking about ethics. In response, I tried to work some explanations of strategic thinking and planning into the initial discussion of reputation management, and position ethics as an important variable that effective strategising will encompass.[4] Again, this provided some mutual ground – participants agreed that it was important for communication practice to be more strategic and relationship-oriented as opposed to offering short-term tactical 'quick fixes', which, in addition to showing some personal career enhancement benefits from a focus on ethics, offered a kind of platform of agreement upon which the idea of ethics compliance could then sit.

Professional image benefits

A third driver that motivated some of the participants was a felt need to counter a negative image for communication (especially public relations) as a profession. Many were frustrated with the depiction of public relations in popular culture and mainstream media and were motivated to try to retain some credibility for their profession. Some saw the pyramid as a possible tool for doing this – others suggested that it too would be painted as 'just another PR stunt' by critics. Again, I found that participants were most likely to indicate that they would use the pyramid again when the discussion could reach a kind of 'middle ground' on this issue, acknowledging that cynicism could not be eliminated but that using an overt ethics measurement tool might nonetheless bring some benefits both for particular consultancies and for communication management or public relations as a profession.

Conclusions

The methodology of action research has proved enormously beneficial to developing a more practical and workplace-relevant ethics pyramid. On a topic such as ethics, where there are no simple or singularly 'right' answers, the collaborative methodology is ideally suited to allowing flexibility for individual viewpoints to come together without pressure, to mingle and co-exist, and ultimately to create something useful from the exchange itself. Some helpful drivers have been identified, which might prove valuable to managers in motivating their staff, and to practitioners in motivating their clients, to invest some time and resources in thinking about ethics. These drivers have certainly proven to be effective in recruiting additional

[4] Because of my own ethical orientation, which is influenced by a pacifist worldview, I interpreted and presented 'strategy' not in the military sense of a manoeuvre to outflank an opponent but in the sense it is used in much of the reputation management and relationship management literature – that is, meaning a long-term and macro view of an organisation's relationships with all its stakeholders and a proactive approach to maintaining the sustained health of those relationships by listening to feedback and being willing to modify the organisation's behaviour.

participants for the research – consultancies are highly responsive to mention of reputational value in particular, seeing it as relevant for both themselves and their clients.

The tool itself has undergone numerous changes – both cosmetic and in terms of how it is presented and communicated. I suspect what has been changed most by the process, however, is the researcher. I have gone from preaching about ethics to listening to stories about ethics and trying to reflect back to participants a sense of the diversity of their own and others' worldviews. I have gone from trying to 'solve' ethics problems in workplaces to trying to facilitate inquiry as to the nature of the problem. I have gone from thinking there is 'an answer' to public relations ethics to wondering what the question is – but then, this is actually the aim of a praxis intervention, so I probably need to become accustomed to feeling unsettled by the process. The prompting of mindful self-reflection was most certainly the case for this researcher – throughout this work, using the pyramid with different people and responding to their questions, I became increasingly aware of the enormous diversity of understandings of and approaches to ethics in New Zealand workplaces – from Hindu scriptural teachings to game theory – and was forced to confront the origins and particular cultural orientations of my own existing ethical parameters. I was also prompted to want to understand the differences and similarities between my own and others' ethical orientations better. Feedback suggested many participants felt the same way.

Along the way I have also felt occasionally that I have been privileged to participate in some discussions that hit the 'sweet spot' – what Aristotle (1985) might call the golden mean – in which a balance is achieved between too much fear of ethics' complexity and too little respect for its diversity, between seeing ethics as too hard to begin tackling or too easy to need concentrated vigilance and proactive attention, between seeing it as someone else's problem or too overwhelming a responsibility for individuals, and between sanguinity and pessimism. Those are the moments that seem to make it worthwhile for all involved, not just for the researcher. At the very least, I am told I have "stimulated some very interesting internal discussion" that continues after I am gone, and that alone is enough to justify moving ahead to the next six sites.

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