

## Book Review

Journalism &amp; Mass Communication Educator

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Marlene S. Neill and Amy Oliver Barnes

*Public Relations Ethics: Senior PR Pros Tell Us How to Speak Up and Keep Your Job*. New York: Business Expert Press, LLC, 2018. 150 pp. \$34.95. ISBN: 978-1-94709-864-0 (print); \$19.95, EISBN: 978-1-94709-865-7 (e-book)

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Given their combination of scholarly expertise and significant professional experience across a range of journalism and mass communication areas, Neill and Barnes are exceptionally well-qualified to author this text.

Neill, PhD, APR, is an assistant professor at Baylor University teaching public relations and advertising. Neill has published numerous scholarly articles focusing on ethics in public relations, and her research provides much of the foundation for this book. Neill also has significant professional experience in governmental and nonprofit public relations.

Barnes, MA, APR, is an associate professor at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. Barnes has significant professional experience in both broadcasting and public relations, and has received several journalism, broadcast, and public relations awards. Barnes chaired the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) National Research Task Force and currently chairs the 2,000-member Southwest District of PRSA.

Ethics is one of the most—if not *the* most—important aspects of public relations. Historically, the image of public relations has been tarnished by practitioners who fail to represent their organizations ethically and/or who fail to influence their organizations to operate ethically. In today's climate of increasing public distrust of mainstream media, fake news, and the transparency social media provides, especially in crisis situations, the need for public relations practitioners to operate with integrity and credibility has never been greater. Raising ethical concerns or “speaking truth to power,” as the authors couch it, is an intimidating proposition with potentially serious career consequences. Neill and Barnes identify both the barriers that impede ethical decision making and counsel, as well as the strategies developing professionals can utilize to influence ethical behavior in their organizations.

*Public Relations Ethics: Senior PR Pros Tell Us How to Speak Up and Keep Your Job* is based on survey research conducted over several years, primarily by Neill and colleagues, as well as insights gleaned from approximately 150 in-depth interviews with elite public relations executives representing the PRSA College of Fellows, The

Arthur W. Page Society, and the Southern Public Relations Federation. These individuals are among the most experienced and distinguished public relations professionals in the world. Their interview responses are used generously throughout the book to articulate ethical dilemmas, illustrate principles, and identify strategies for ethical public relations practices.

Organized into 10 chapters, the book explores why ethics matter in public relations; why the individual practitioner should care about serving as an ethics counselor; the importance of building internal relationships; the type of strategies that can be used to influence ethical behavior; additional information on the benefits of having allies and building coalitions internally; last resort approaches, such as whistle-blowing; the use of mentoring and training in developing ethical approaches; how to build an ethical organizational culture; practical advice from senior pros; and, finally, 10 Everyday Practices that should be implemented every single day. The book also has four appendices that summarize specific research findings into easy-to-digest tables.

The book is appropriate for both undergraduate and graduate public relations students, as well as professionals in the early stages of their careers. It would be an excellent required text for a Public Relations Ethics course. As not all universities have a course solely dedicated to public relations ethics, it could also serve as a supplemental text for a Communications Ethics course that considers ethics across the communication disciplines. Most public relations faculty address ethical concepts throughout their curricula, so this also could serve as a valuable faculty resource. Finally, new professionals will benefit from the wisdom, advice, and practical strategies the senior professionals have shared.

While this text does a great job integrating theory and research, defining terms, and wrestling with abstract concepts like morals and values, its strength is in the practical and tangible strategies it offers professionals as they endeavor to be the “ethical conscience” (p. 14) of their organizations. The lessons learned, advice and strategies, are both comprehensive and compelling. For example,

- Public relations professionals need to embrace an “ethical conscience” not only because they are the eyes and ears of the organization when it comes to listening to stakeholders and environmental scanning, but also because they are the face and voice of the organization when serving in the spokesperson role;
- Public relations professionals can bolster their influence as ethical counselors by developing strategic alliances and building coalitions, especially when they realize that they do not have the authority to address a particular issue;
- Depending on the issue, setting, and timing, public relations professionals can choose from a variety of influence techniques, ranging from confrontational to questioning, that is, an ethical discussion couched in terms of whether it is aligned with the company’s values may be more effective than making an accusation of unethical behavior;
- When using last resort strategies, such as rocking the boat and whistle-blowing, public relations professionals may have their motives questioned, be marginalized, isolated, reassigned, or fired;

- PR people foster an ethical culture by helping HR promote core values on the front end to new employees and by telling stories of employees who embody those values;
- PR professionals need to be business literate, which includes being able to make the long-term business case for ethical decision making.

The most substantive critique I have for this book is that it does not provide adequate context as to why there is the need for such a text. I suspect the authors believe this need is obvious, and to experienced professionals and educators, it certainly is. If the target is public relations students and new professionals, however, these individuals likely would benefit from having real-world examples of the kinds of ethical quandaries they may face. Unfortunately, we have numerous incidences of individuals, businesses, governments, higher educational institutions, and so on behaving badly. This context could have been provided in numerous ways, including the following possibilities: a summary of the range of ethical issues a public relations practitioner may face or a list of organizations that have suffered because they have not acted ethically or a case study example (or two). Such specifics would have made a compelling case for why it is so important for public relations practitioners to develop that “ethical conscience,” to help promote an ethical organizational culture, and to adopt the strategies identified in the book to bolster their ethical and strategic influence.

Another, minor, critique is that although there were several helpful tables and charts summarizing research data, there was only one infographic. Figure 8.1, which identifies six recommendations for building employer branding, is excellent. There are several other areas, lists, and so on that would benefit from the use of infographics or other visuals. For example, the 10 Everyday Practices the book concludes with could be transformed into a powerful infographic. Again, given the audience this book targets, additional visuals would be desirable.

*Public Relations Ethics: Senior PR Pros Tell Us How to Speak Up and Keep Your Job* is a significant contribution to the field of public relations. The combination of scholarly research and practical advice from the leading public relations executives in the field is a winning combination.