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Responsibility and Accountability

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“The Buck Stops Here”

Sign on President Harry S. Truman’s desk

Human beings seek accountability. People want to know who is responsible for certain actions and who is accountable for the consequences of those actions. Harry Truman referred to his famous desk sign on more than one occasion to point out that responsibility, in the end, must be taken by someone—some identifiable person must be held to account. Truman was willing to accept that accountability. Increasingly today, people are more likely to ask, “Where exactly does the buck stop, or does it ever stop?” In the wake of a multitude of recent corporate scandals, commentary has been rife with questions of responsibility and accountability; however, much of that discussion has been carried on without clear knowledge of the definitional differences between the two terms and the significance of those differences. Of public relations in particular it might be asked, “Why weren’t you standing guard?” which is a simplified way of asking, “What is public relations responsible for, and for what is it accountable?” Unfortunately, there is no common perception—at least among business leaders, public relations professionals, and scholars—as to exactly what constitutes both responsibility and accountability, and therein lies the rub.

Responsibility versus Accountability

The roles taken on by public relations practitioners imply a responsibility to perform certain functions associated with those roles. Business historian Vincent E. Barry has defined the term *responsibility*, when used in business affairs, as referring to “a sphere of duty or obligation assigned to a person by the nature of that person’s position, function, or work.”¹ Responsibility could thus be viewed as a bundle of obligations associated with a job or function. Narrowly defined, *role* refers to a job description, which, in turn, encompasses, but is not limited to, *function*. For instance, a practitioner’s role may be that of media relations. Function would refer to the specifics of the job, including press release writing and dissemination, as well as the maintenance of good media relations. In this sense, responsibility refers to more than just the primary function of a role; it refers to the multiple facets of that function—both processes and outcomes (and the consequences of the acts performed as part of that bundle of obligations). A responsible actor may be seen as one whose job involves a predetermined set of obligations that must be met in order for the job to be accomplished. For example, the primary functional obligation of someone involved in media relations is the same as cited in the foregoing sentence: to maintain a good working relationship with the media in order to respond to queries and to successfully work with them to “get out the message.” In many cases, simply discharging this primary obligation (the function associated with the role) may be sufficient unto itself; however, responsibility can also include *moral obligations* that are in addition and usually related to the functional obligations of the role. Thus, responsibility assumes that the actor becomes also a moral agent possessed of a certain level of moral maturity and an ability to reason. It is important to note that as early as Aristotle, moral responsibility was viewed as originating with the moral agent (decision maker), and grew out of an ability to reason (an awareness of action and consequences) and a willingness to act free from external compulsion. For Aristotle, a decision is a particular kind of desire resulting from deliberation, one that expresses the agent’s conception of what is good. As Australian ethicist Will Barret points out,

Moral responsibility assumes a capacity for making rational decisions, which in turn justifies holding moral agents accountable for their actions. Given that moral agency entails responsibility, in that autonomous rational agents are in principle capable of responding to moral reasons, accountability is a necessary feature of morality.²

For example, the moral obligations of the role of a media relations specialist might include such admonitions as “don’t lie to the media” and “use language responsibly, free from intentional obfuscation.” These moral obligations are naturally joined to the parallel functional obligations associated with the role. Responsibility, then, is composed of a duty to discharge not only the *functional* obligations of role, but also the *moral* obligations.

In addition, teleological (consequential) considerations tend to demand a level of accountability commensurate with the level of responsibility. In other words, if it is the job of a media relations specialist to carry out the primary functions outlined above, shouldn’t that person be held accountable for mismanaged information, bad publicity, lack of credibility, or other troubles associated with the functional obligations? If responsibility is defined as a bundle of obligations, functional and moral, associated with a role, then accountability might be defined as “blaming or crediting someone for an action”—normally an action associated with a recognized responsibility.³ A problem arises, however, in that while responsibility and accountability are often conflated, and admittedly importantly linked, they are not identical by definition or moral implication.

According to ethics activist Geoff Hunt, accountability

is the readiness or preparedness to give an explanation or justification to relevant others (stakeholders) for one’s judgments, intentions, acts and omissions when appropriately called upon to do so.

It is [also] a readiness to have one’s actions judged by others and, where appropriate, accept responsibility for errors, misjudgments and negligence and recognition for competence, conscientiousness, excellence and wisdom. It is a preparedness to change in the light of improved understanding gained from others.⁴

The simplest formula is that a person can be held accountable if (1) the person is functionally and/or morally responsible for an action, (2) some harm occurred due to that action, and (3) the responsible person had no legitimate excuse for the action. Ideally, the assumption would then be to hold a person who is responsible for an action also accountable for the results of that action. That, however, may not always be the case.

This position assumes that the responsible person is relatively autonomous, or free to make decisions associated with his or her job without outside pressure or influence. And, under normal circumstances, one would hope that public relations practitioners would have that autonomy. However,

the nature of autonomy often changes with the environment in which a public relations person works, and is certainly affected by the role and the functions associated with that role.

Responsibility and Autonomy

Most professions stress autonomy among their members. Being able to perform work free from interference (especially from those with less expertise) is vital to being a successful professional. After all, most professionals are hired exactly because their expertise is needed. As philosopher John Christman notes, to be autonomous, by most accounts, is to be oneself,

to be directed by considerations, desires, conditions, and characteristics that are not simply imposed externally upon one, but are part of what can somehow be considered one's authentic self. Autonomy in this sense seems an irrefutable value, especially since its opposite—being guided by forces external to the self and which one cannot authentically embrace—seems to mark the height of oppression.⁵

There are several ways to look at autonomy as it relates to responsibility and accountability. Philosopher and ethicist Mitchell Haney suggests that the moral community is composed of two kinds of actors: responsible actors and accountable actors. Responsibility is viewed within this model as having a higher level of autonomy by nature in that it implies the actor is able to “self-oversee, self-regulate, and self-motivate responsive adjustments to maintain adherence with appropriate moral standards of action.”⁶

“Responsible actors need not depend on external or mediated motivational pressure for responsive adjustment. [They are] expected to be motivated to correct harms and reduce future risk of harms without external or mediated pressure to do so.”⁷

Under this formulation, the actor (moral agent) has the capacity to impose moral law on herself, thus achieving a level of “moral autonomy” we would hope to associate normally with professional status. This somewhat Kantian model supposes that we understand ourselves as free, reasoning individuals—invoking a mandate of both self-respect and respect for others (but not control by others).

Freedom means lacking barriers to our action that are in any way external to our will, though it also requires that we use a law to guide our decisions, a law that can come to us only by an act of our own will. This self-imposition of the moral law is autonomy.⁸

According to business ethicist Norman Bowie, if a person is a responsible, autonomous adult, that person can be viewed as a moral agent, directly

accountable for his or her actions. “A responsible being is a being who can make choices according to his or her own insights. He or she is not under the control of others.”⁹

On the other hand, the *accountable* actor is “held to external oversight, regulation, and mechanisms of punishment aimed to externally motivate responsive adjustment in order to maintain adherence with appropriate moral standards of action.”¹⁰ This responsible-/accountable-actor model assumes a dichotomy in which responsible actors, because of moral maturity, are capable of self-motivation in their responsive adjustments for actions they have performed, while accountable actors must rely on external pressure (blame or credit) for this adjustment. This is similar to the “consequentialist” versus “merit” positions on moral responsibility. The consequentialist view holds that the actions of moral agents can be influenced by outward expressions of praise or blame in order to affect certain behaviors (accountable actors), while the merit view assumes moral agents can and do recognize their choices and make their own decisions (responsible actors).¹¹

The theory of the accountable actor uses what might be termed a behaviorist approach, which seems to suggest that people are motivated and shaped by forces external to themselves. Certainly people are motivated, at least in part, by rewards and punishments; however, even those considered accountable rather than responsible actors generally have a developed moral sense and a fair idea of social conventions and moral principles. The problem arises when people are affected by forces beyond their control, forces that may even affect the level at which they reason. As philosopher and ethicist Kevin Gibson points out, “Indeed, in the presence of some external factors, individuals may not actively reason at all, but work according to habit or obedience without a thought.”¹²

So, in addition to responsible actors being imbued with the ability and the freedom to make self-regulating decisions, they are also able to motivate (free of outside pressure) their own responsive adjustments to situations in which their decisions have had an impact. This is what separates them from accountable actors, who must rely on external oversight for motivation to respond and adjust. However, while this scenario may be appealing in theory, the ability to respond based entirely on self-motivation (or autonomy) is also limited by role and environment.

Environment, Role, and Autonomy

Responsibility can be, and often is, determined by role; however, the environment in which the public relations professional works and the degree of autonomy allowed by that environment have a great deal to do with accountability. Chief among the commonly recognized environments in which public

relations practitioners work are agencies (or firms) or they might be employed as full-time staff within an organization or corporation, or as independent counselors. Most public relations practitioners, and many researchers, agree that the independent public relations counsel enjoys the greatest degree of autonomy.¹³ Of all the roles in public relations, this is the only one not subsumed within a larger, bureaucratic system—either corporate or agency. Clients hiring such “independent” counselors usually do so out of need for autonomous, professional advice, and by so doing accept the professional recommendations of that person as, at the very least, sound opinion. Independent public relations counsel might be said to be the most autonomous of the roles within the practice, if for no other reason than the lack of bureaucratic entanglements. Because of the level of autonomy normally associated with this role, it may also be the most professional of the roles within public relations. And, as Hunt points out,

Accountability in the professional context is about answering to clients, professional colleagues and other relevant professionals. The demand to give an account of one’s judgments, acts and omissions arises from the nature of the professional-client and the professional-professional relationships.¹⁴

However, public relations is not just a counseling profession; it can also be said to be an advocacy-oriented practice. To advocate is to take up the cause of another and to work on that other’s behalf to promote that cause. One of the key differences between the roles of advocate and counselor is the degree of autonomy allowed to each by the nature of the role. Remember, the general assumption is that autonomy is a highly valued component of professionalism; however, for the advocate, autonomy is not particularly valued or desired. In fact, for the advocate, a more desirable trait might be loyalty.

Most businesspeople would argue that loyalty is indeed one of the chief duties of an employee, and, in fact, being a “team player” is highly regarded in the business world. As a team player, the public relations practitioner is generally expected to follow the directions of the team leader without argument. Thus, advocates are expected to be subjective—that is the nature of advocacy. Subjectivity brings with it an implicit understanding that one’s first allegiance is to the client, or employer. To advocates fall the job of bringing skills of persuasion to bear through methods and on issues often predetermined by management. Since they had no hand in arriving at either the focus or the nature of their advocacy, can they be expected to consider the broader implications of their actions? And, to what degree are they accountable for unjust or immoral acts in which they may have been used as instruments?

Part of the assumption of advocacy is that the advocate takes up the client's cause fully, without any value judgment toward the client himself. Advocates use their expertise to advance a client's cause. Thus, advocacy often fits well into what is known as the "agency" model of the professional-client relationship.¹⁵

Agency and Advocacy

Under the agency model, a professional acts most often under the direction of the client. Public relations firms, for instance, may put together elaborate campaigns to serve their client's interests; however, the client picks the agency, determines what exactly will be "marketed," and decides whether or not to use the ideas generated by the agency. The agency model most clearly exemplifies what legal scholar W. H. Simon calls the "ideology of advocacy." This ideology assumes two principles of conduct: (1) that a professional is neutral or detached from the client's purposes, and (2) that the professional is an aggressive partisan of the client working to advance the client's ends.¹⁶ The argument is that advocacy is ideologically "blinded" to ethical considerations outside those of the client.¹⁷ Such a construct thus allows professionals to absolve themselves of moral responsibility for the client's ethical shortcomings, thus shifting accountability from the professional to the client. In addition, responsibility under this model is mostly functional and links the professional to the client by an obligation to perform to the best of her or his ability on the client's behalf. To cite a moral responsibility here would generally serve no practical purpose. Attorneys, for example, are bound only to observe the restraints of law as they "zealously" advocate on their client's behalf. Obviously, this ideology would work well for professions such as the law, in which even unpopular causes would sometimes need to be defended. Without such an ideology, these causes might go unrepresented. But what about other professions such as public relations?

There are several reasons why the agency model is not suitable for most professions, including public relations. First, public relations professionals are variously obligated morally. These obligations cannot be discharged properly if all decisions are left to the client. Despite the commonly voiced belief that the primary loyalty of public relations practitioners is to the client, we know that significant moral concerns can arise from ignoring third parties. Second, the agency model seriously decreases professional autonomy. Most professionals would object strenuously to abdicating their decision-making authority. Finally, professionals may accept or reject clients

who do not meet their moral standards. According to ethicist Michael Bayles, “Professionals must . . . be ethically free and responsible persons.”¹⁸

The author Dorothy Emmet has described a profession as that which “carries with it the notion of a standard of performance, it is not only a way of making a living, but one in which the practitioners have a fiduciary trust to maintain certain standards.” Aside from the expectations that a professional will possess a certain technical ability, “professional competence has to be joined with professional integrity.” In other words, “the more professional a job, the greater the responsibilities that go with it.”¹⁹

Again, the definition of a professional has to carry with it the freedom of autonomy. The German ethicist and philosopher Immanuel Kant stated as a categorical imperative that all humans should be treated as ends and never merely as means. Broadly speaking, this can be construed to mean that obligations arising out of agreements between professionals can be assumed to have been the result of negotiations between responsible, autonomous adults.

Bivins argued that public relations practitioners operating as advocates may indeed be “ethically free and responsible persons,” and suggested that advocacy may be an ethically responsible activity if practiced from within what Bayles calls the “fiduciary” model of the professional-client relationship.²⁰ In fact, Bayles suggests that the fiduciary model of service best fits the true role of the professional.²¹ In this model, a client’s consent and judgment are required and he or she participates in the decision-making process. The key to the model is the nature of the decision-making process in which the client consents to proposals rather than decides. For the process to work, the client must trust the professional to accurately analyze the problem, canvass the feasible alternatives, know as well as one can their likely consequences, fully convey this information to the client, perhaps make a recommendation, and work honestly and loyally for the client to effectuate the chosen alternatives.²² This model allows clients as much freedom to determine how their lives are affected as is reasonably warranted on the basis of their ability to make decisions. To the degree that the client is incapable of making an informed decision, it is incumbent upon the professional to educate them to a point at which they are capable of decision making on their own behalf. In this sense, the relationship between the professional and the client might be said to be symmetric, requiring both mutual understanding and cooperation. Clearly, this model must be based on a trust relationship, thus further obligating the professional morally as well as functionally.

Under this model, it could be fairly stated that both the functional and moral responsibilities of the public relations professional toward the client are discharged in consort with the client. But what about the functional and moral responsibilities toward affected third parties? Practically all

professions recognize third-party obligations, and if advocacy is to be considered a legitimate function of public relations, then there must be a way to recognize those moral responsibilities.

The function of advocacy, as it pertains to public relations, can remain a professional role responsible to client interests, professional interests, and third-party interests only if the professional includes a preliminary stage in the process of accepting a client's issue. Under the fiduciary model described above, the public relations professional as potential advocate may be hired, for example, because of her or his expertise in the field of audience analysis, knowledge of the most efficacious persuasive techniques, and the proper methods of dissemination. It is generally accepted that the first job of public relations professionals is to establish a thorough understanding of the issue that they may be addressing on behalf of the potential client. Without that assessment, no professional should ethically proceed to undertake the role of advocate and the moral responsibility that role implies. Thus, a proper ordering of priorities would place a thorough understanding of the issue at the top of the list preceding any attempt at campaign development or even audience analysis.

The role of autonomous professional assumes a certain level of objectivity in the sense of an ability, in the Kantian implication of the term, to use reason to determine action.

As Australian philosopher Will Barrett points out,

The sources of moral responsibility—the grounds on which moral responsibilities can be ascribed to agents—include our past actions, our roles, and our developed moral agency. The last of these—being capable of recognising [sic] *the force of moral reasons*, and of responding to them—is a pre-requisite for the other two sources of moral responsibility, and so of accountability [emphasis added].²³

By contrast, the role of advocate assumes a certain amount of subjectivity in the sense of one-sidedness of purpose and lack of consideration for third-party interests. However, objectivity and subjectivity, although often at odds, are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and the public relations professional may, in fact, be both objective and subjective. The key is the order of approach. Objectivity, or the capability and freedom to be objective, is certainly one of the benefits of autonomy, and should be brought to bear in the early stages of counseling the client—the period in which a thorough understanding of the issue is obtained. It is during this stage that the public relations professional will determine the ramifications of the proposed actions and their effect on all parties.

During this stage, the public relations professional may apply any of several applicable ethical theories to the proposed act in order to determine if the act itself (means) and the outcome (ends) are morally responsible. Deontologically (dealing with the means), several standards may be applied, including a determination of the legality of the act (whether it violates existing laws or applicable regulations), company procedures and policies or organizational codes, and any codes or standards existing for the profession—in this case, the Public Relations Society of America’s Code of Ethics. Although this procedure will merely provide professionals with guidelines, assuming that all that is legally or professionally permissible may not be ethically permissible, these will at least allow them to advance to succeeding evaluative stages.

Teleologically (dealing with the consequences, or ends), public relations professionals may apply standard cost-benefit analysis to the issue, determining the potential financial consequences of the act to the client and the affected third parties. Beyond these monetary considerations, they may attempt to determine societal effects. If, after such applications, professionals determine that the act itself, the intent of the act, and the potential consequences of the act are morally acceptable, then they may proceed with a clear conscience to the succeeding “subjective” stages of advocacy. From this point on, the objective, professional public relations counselor may become the subjective, professional public relations advocate.

Thus, the requirements of subjective advocacy may be honorably met only after the ethical requirements of objective counseling are met. To insinuate that advocacy may take place without a predetermination of the morality of the issue being decided upon is to subscribe to the ideology of advocacy that W.H. Simon denounces. For the truly professional public relations practitioner, the order of decision making is all-important, because responsibilities differ as roles shift from counseling to advocacy, as does attendant accountability.

Public relations professionals must first work from the framework of a fiduciary model of the client-professional relationship in which autonomy is, more or less, equally divided between the contracted parties (responsibility and accountability are shared). They must then undertake to determine objectively the ethicality of the action being proposed, considering both means and ends. Only when the morality of the action has been determined should the advisor become the advocate, acting subjectively in the client’s exclusive interest, but with responsibility and accountability shifting to weigh more heavily on the professional. Even then, considerable attention needs to be given to the morality of the message itself and to the techniques by which it is to be disseminated. This ordering of stages from the objective to the

subjective will allow the professional public relations practitioner to perform all the necessary functions ascribed to the roles of the profession without either falling into the trap of ideological advocacy or succumbing to a less autonomous position. Ideally, responsibility and accountability would then coincide.

In-House PR: The Effects of Organizational Structure on Moral Decision Making

Ethicist and theologian Marvin Brown describes two ways of approaching the subject of ethics in organizations—the “individualistic approach” and what might be called the “communal approach.”²⁴ Each approach incorporates a different view of moral responsibility. According to Brown, discussions about ethics in organizations typically reflect only the “individualistic approach” to moral responsibility. “According to this approach, every person in an organization is morally responsible for his or her own behavior, and any efforts to change that behavior should focus on the individual.” By contrast, the “communal approach” views individuals not in isolation, but as “members of communities that are partially responsible for the behavior of their members.” Herein lies the key to understanding the problems associated with assigning responsibility and accountability within organizations.

Complex organizations tend toward decentralized decision making, which, ideally, would require professionalized decision makers at every level.²⁵ The ideal would be for both the responsibility and the accountability of decision making to correlate. However, as they become more complex and decentralized, these same organizations also lend themselves too readily to a dilution of accountability in decision making. Moral “buck passing” often becomes the rule rather than the exception. It is too easy to blame others for decisions over which we have had minimal input or control. When the public relations function is subsumed within a large, complex organization, decision making can become attenuated and accountability spread thin. In a very real sense, the structure of large organizations tends to affect the way in which decisions are made. Furthermore, the temptation to pass the buck on decisions of all types, including moral decisions, increases mightily as the organizational hierarchy becomes more complex.²⁶ In fact, the traditional hierarchical structure of most organizations lends itself naturally to blockages in communication.

Understanding is generally developed within organizations through the realization of effective communication flow. The typical “flow” brings task-related (functional) communication through many levels before it reaches its

intended receiver. As messages travel downward through the organizational hierarchy, they have a tendency to become less clear and, in some cases, actually distorted. Research has repeatedly shown that distortions such as those that occur during “serial transmission” damage message integrity.²⁷ In addition, factors such as personality type and an individual’s power, status, and role also greatly affect the integrity of both communication channels and the communication itself.²⁸ Partly because of the tendency of communication to become distorted as organizational hierarchies increase in complexity, assigning responsibility and accountability likewise becomes more difficult as the organization becomes more complex.

It may be that corporations, like individuals, do not set out to do wrong—they are simply driven by egoism (acting in their own self-interest). But, as professional ethicist Gabriel Moran points out,

Corporations, like natural persons, have inner divisions and an unconscious (the company design) from which most decisions emanate. Corporations . . . live by habit, by doing what they always do. But there are people in the company—supervisors, managers, administrators, executives—who are paid to be conscious of what the company is doing. Even when a result is not intended, the company is responsible for the effect if it did know of the effect or could have known.²⁹

The in-house public relations function is undoubtedly the most problematic for assigning responsibility and accountability. The level of autonomy and the weight of decision making, and thus professionalism, will vary depending on whether the head of the department is a middle-level manager, an upper-level manager, or an executive. Thus, owing to the nature of corporate bureaucracy, the public relations practitioner subsumed within an organization may be nonautonomous or, at best, slightly autonomous. The groundwork is then laid for a decision-making hierarchy that may gradually dilute the authority of public relations practitioners to follow their own personal and professional directives.

In addition, the dilution of decision-making authority is more common in larger organizations, in which practitioners may often serve as employees rather than truly autonomous professionals. However, even this reduction in autonomy does not reduce a public relations practitioner’s responsibility to act ethically—it only makes the lines of responsibility less clear. As PR professionals and agency principals Bruce Klatt and Shaun Murphy remind us, accountability is a “statement of personal promise.”

Accountability applies only to individuals, and is both a personal promise and obligation, to yourself and to others, to deliver specific, defined results.

Being accountable within an organization means you agree to be operationally defined as the sole agent for an outcome, regardless of the often-inadequate level of authority or control that you have been formally assigned by the organization.³⁰

Less autonomous practitioners must also determine the ethicality of their actions; even though the major difference between them and their more independent counterparts, the degree of autonomy, may inhibit the extent to which practitioners may object to actions they determine are less than ethical. Obviously, independent counselors may advise, and thereby object, from a much stronger position than their counterparts subsumed either within an organization or an agency.

The primary problem is that the tendency toward moral buck passing will not lessen as long as organizational hierarchy encourages the dilution of responsibility and accountability. This now-too-common dilution of accountability frustrates onlookers who can't determine who is to blame when something goes wrong. The tendency to place blame is entirely normal; however, the degree of accuracy involved in assessing accountability is problematic at best.

Moral Excuses (Passing the Buck)

Unaccountable people are into excuses, blaming others, putting things off, doing the minimum, acting confused, and playing helpless. They pretend ignorance while hiding behind doors, computers, paperwork, jargon, and other people. They say things like “I didn't know,” “I wasn't there,” “I don't have time,” “It's not my job,” “That's just the way I am,” “Nobody told me,” “It isn't really hurting anyone,” and “I'm just following orders.” Unaccountable people are quick to complain and slow to act. In organizations, unaccountability is a highly contagious disease.³¹

In order to protect ourselves and keep our self-image intact, we often choose to rationalize our decisions. *Rationalize*, in this sense, means “to devise self-satisfying but incorrect reasons for a particular behavior.” It is, therefore, crucial that we understand our *reasons* for preferring one action over another and to admit them to ourselves. Unless we understand our real reasons, we will be content to rationalize our actions by using other means—most often adopting moral excuses or assigning the blame to others.³²

As Aristotle pointed out, people deserve blame for their wrongful conduct. Contemporary philosopher Laurence Stern agrees, noting that “[f]or immoral acts which are not sufficiently serious to warrant inflicting harm [punishment]—as well as for all other immoral acts committed without

excuse—one can say that the person *deserves blame*.”³³ In fact, it’s only when a person has a good excuse that we tend not to hold him accountable, and Stern suggests that a recognition of the moral excuses common in everyday life tends to minimize the overall harm of the act itself.³⁴ Of course, there are good excuses and there are bad excuses. Among the excuses people tend to identify as *not* legitimate are those most often associated with external factors and the dilution of responsibility, frequently a result of organizational hierarchy. As Gibson points out,

[I]t is important to consider the types of external factors that may influence our individual choices when we are faced with ethical dilemmas. Simple awareness of their existence and the ways in which they exert influence on our behaviors may be enough to lessen their power.³⁵

Gibson further defines an *excuse* as “something that acknowledges that a wrong action occurred but seeks to show that the perpetrator deserves little or no responsibility for the action.” Among the most common “pass the buck” excuses are the following.³⁶

I was told to do it, or *I was only following orders*. This excuse may be given more often than any other in hierarchically structured organizations such as big corporations and larger institutions like the military. The need to follow orders is obviously important in these hierarchical organizations and institutions. For one thing, it tends to bring consistency to an operation. Obedience to those whom we consider to be experts or who possess superior judgment is usually considered a good thing. The downside is the inclination to allow authority figures to make decisions for us. It relieves us of the stress of deciding for ourselves, and of the accountability that comes with autonomy. While the excuse of “just following orders” is more commonplace inside larger, corporate-like structures in which individual autonomy is diluted, public relations practitioners who work within the agency model are not immune to its lure. It is often much too easy to blame the client who, after all, is technically giving the orders.

However, the likelihood of this excuse surfacing is much greater in hierarchically structured organizations. The moral standing of the order itself is less likely to be questioned if there is a strong belief in the efficacy of a hierarchical organizational structure and a trust of those in power. The human tendency to obey orders has been empirically tested time and again. Blind obedience to authority, regardless of the moral rightness or wrongness of the orders, almost seems to be the norm. However, even in the most formal hierarchically structured institution, the military, rules have been updated to reflect increased moral accountability. It is now clear, under military law,

that “military members can be held accountable for crimes committed under the guise of ‘obeying orders,’ and there is no requirement to obey orders which are unlawful.”³⁷

In other words, claiming ignorance of the immorality of the order doesn’t excuse us from moral accountability. People are individually responsible regardless of orders. As Gibson notes, “Ultimately we must take personal responsibility for our acts, and cannot shrug them off as inevitable or by saying that we are mere instruments of others’ will.” The scholars Deni Elliot and Paul Lester agree, pointing out that “as long as you are free to act in a voluntary or autonomous way, moral responsibility for your actions are not transferable to someone else. Your boss can take away your job, but not your moral agency.”³⁸

It was my job. Professionals commonly justify their actions by appeal to the requirements of their professional roles. In his book *Ethics for Adversaries*, Harvard professor Arthur Applbaum describes an official who was an executioner for the French government. He accepted without question the functional responsibility of his role, and discharged it with great alacrity. However, he never once questioned the moral legitimacy of his role nor the propriety of the executions themselves.³⁹

It is not unusual for public relations professionals, for example, to claim that they are acting within legal bounds on behalf of clients on whom they refuse to pass moral judgment (the “ideology of advocacy”). It is, after all, their job to serve the client’s wishes competently with all their professional expertise being brought to bear on the issue. As noted earlier, however, blind obedience to another’s wishes is not an excuse for unethical action, especially by professionals who have a responsibility to more than just a client. This is also why most professions have a code of ethics: to ensure that members are clear on what the profession expects of them outside client interests.

When less-than-ethical tactics are used to serve a client’s purpose, the excuse is often that it is the job of the public relations professional to serve that interest “zealously.” The public relations firm of Hill and Knowlton used questionable tactics on behalf of Kuwait during the first Gulf War, a clear example of this category.

Everybody’s doing it. This is a formulation of what is called “ethical relativism,” which states, among other things, that whatever the group you belong to says is right is probably right. Human beings possess a natural tendency to conform to the group. Just look around and observe what others are wearing. How close in style is it to what you are wearing? At its worst, this tendency to conform can lead to a shirking of individual moral responsibility, or even a lack of recognition that such a thing exists. A poor record on protecting whistle-blowers doesn’t help in this area either.

However, conventional wisdom doesn't necessarily equate with being right. As John Stuart Mill noted in the nineteenth century, it may be that the one person who disagrees with a widely held point of view is the only person who is morally correct. Consider also the acts perpetrated against Jews and others by the Nazis prior to and during World War II. Certainly there were those within Germany who disagreed. But it is also certain that there were a great many who agreed because "*everybody* was doing it." However, there is a certain degree of empowerment associated with seeing even one individual disagree with the establishment point of view—an empowerment to trust and act on one's own convictions. Dissenting voices can be powerful tools in determining the right action. They should never be discouraged.

An odd formulation of this excuse is the tendency to follow the industry trend. For example, throughout much of the 1990s into the twenty-first century, there was a sense that simply denying facts was a legitimate approach to public relations. Victor Kiam, the entrepreneur who purchased Remington Razors and part ownership in the New England Patriots, denied he had made a sexist remark about a female reporter wanting access to the Patriots' locker room. Firestone denied any problems with its tires in 1999, even though there were numerous fatalities linked to their failure under high-speed conditions. And both Arthur Andersen and Enron spent a great deal of time denying that anything was wrong while both companies literally self-destructed. While this is certainly poor public relations, when everyone seems to be doing it, the temptation to follow suit is sometimes overwhelming.

My actions won't make any difference. This excuse is often used as a way of explaining the futility many of us feel as part of an organization or institution over which we have very little control. It also leads to the parallel excuse that "if I hadn't done it, they would simply have found someone else who would have." In answer to the "I can't make a difference" argument, just ask the people in the state of Washington how they feel about whether their vote counts or not. In the 2004 gubernatorial election, they selected a new governor by fewer than 150 votes.

The second part of this excuse basically assumes there will always be someone with less scruples than you who will step in to take your place at a moment's notice to do the dirty work. However, this assumption negates the possibility that you might actually counter the moral wrong. If you are working on a public relations campaign for a tobacco account, for example, you may be correct in assuming that someone else will probably eagerly take your place if you refuse to do the work; however, your action may inspire others to do the same, and if you then lend your talents to an antismoking campaign, you have further justified your action.

It's not my problem. The poet John Donne once famously observed that “no man is an island.” Individuals are responsible for their actions, or inactions, and their effect on others. Each hand that contributes to a chain of corruption within an organization helps forge a link of that chain. Even if we are not directly in the line of responsibility, there may be times when an issue is important enough to act on a broader moral obligation.

Public relations professionals are also bound by an obligation to third parties, their profession as a whole, and to themselves to preserve their own integrity. Remember, you may be painted with the same broad brush of dishonor as those you work for, even if you weren't directly responsible.

No one else knew. As ethicist Deni Elliot says, “Ethics is a first person activity.” You know when you've done something wrong. You know if the people you work for are doing something wrong or are hiding a misdeed. As least you ought to know, especially if you are working in public relations. No matter what your standing within the hierarchy, you have a responsibility to your own integrity, regardless of who else knows.

Moral Excuses (Absolution)

But what if it really wasn't your fault? Most of us recognize a legitimate excuse when we hear one. Gibson suggests that the two most commonly accepted “excusing conditions” that allow a reduction in responsibility are ignorance involving fact and the inability to have done otherwise.⁴⁰ In legal theory, there are several explanations of criminal law's “excuse doctrines.” Chief among them is “causal theory,” which makes two general claims: The first is that the criminal law presumes that some human acts are caused by forces beyond the actor's control. The second is that the criminal law adheres to the “control principle,” the moral principle that actors cannot be blamed for conduct caused by forces beyond their control. According to causal theory, these two premises explain a host of the criminal law's excuses—including (for example) the involuntary act doctrine, the irresistible impulse defense, and the duress defense. The law grants these defenses, causal theory says, because (1) it presumes that the excused conduct is caused by forces beyond the actor's control, and (2) such conduct is not blameworthy.⁴¹

In fact, there are several widely agreed upon excuses that are typically accepted as valid when assessing accountability.

Excusable ignorance of consequences. People tend to forgive in instances in which the outcome of an action could not reasonably have been predicted. Note that this doesn't excuse one from knowing right from wrong.

“Traditional morality and jurisprudence typically excuse persons for ignorance involving fact. Both traditional morality and established law tend not to recognize excuses grounded on ignorance of principle.”⁴² What this does accept is that it is often difficult to predict the outcome of some actions. Utilitarianism, for instance, directs that outcomes be predicted, but does not insist that they be exhaustively predicted. One can make educated predictions but cannot foretell the future in the sense of owning a crystal ball.

Say, for example, that you own a garden store and you sell twenty-five pounds of fertilizer to a customer you have never seen before. He then uses it to make a bomb with which he blows up a local police station. Are you accountable? Unless there is a reasonable expectation that you could have predicted that particular use of your product, the answer is usually no. We don’t expect people to imagine every possible outcome of their everyday actions. No one would ever get anything done out of sheer worry if that were the case. However, we do expect people to make reasonable predictions, especially if they know their actions will affect other people. For example, a public relations campaign has been designed to bring attention to a suburban community in order to attract businesses to the area. As a result, businesses begin to move into the community; however, so does increased traffic (predictable), increased property costs (likewise predictable), and increased crime (maybe not so predictable). Can we say that the public relations firm is responsible for the increase in crime? We might—especially if there is a recognized history of crime being associated with community growth. Urban planners are acutely aware of such statistics. Why shouldn’t a PR firm be?

For the most part, people recognize a legitimate excuse when they hear one, and truly unpredictable consequences are usually recognized as such. However, a false claim of ignorance is likewise easily identified. For example, when the British sports gear manufacturer Umbro decided to name its newest running shoe the “Zyklon,” they ran into some unsuspected resistance. *Zyklon* literally means “cyclone” in German; however, a number of parties pointed out that during World War II, *Zyklon B* was the name of the gas used to exterminate millions of Jews in concentration camps. Umbro answered the outrage by expressing ignorance and claiming coincidence.⁴³

External constraints. *Constraint* refers to physical imperatives, lack of alternatives, and uncontrollable circumstances. For example, if a person is coerced into doing something that he normally would not do, we tend not to blame him for that action. A bank clerk who is robbed at gunpoint is certainly responsible for the money in his till, but is not accountable for its loss. This is a physical constraint. The same would apply in a situation in which a person is constrained by a lack of alternatives. For instance, a company is ordered to comply with new EPA regulations, but the technology

needed to comply hasn't been fully developed yet. The company cannot be held accountable for noncompliance until the technology is ready to go on line (as long as the company is attempting to comply in a timely fashion). Uncontrollable circumstances or, as we usually say, "circumstances beyond our control," is the third area of constraint-as-excuse. For example, if a person fails to make an important meeting because her flight was canceled, others can excuse her—even though they might be put out by the delay.

Remember, however, that causal theory holds people blameless only if their actions were truly beyond their control. If you miss a meeting because you were involved in an accident (your car was hit by someone running a stop sign), you can be held blameless. However, if you are the person who ran the stop sign, you are to blame—both for the accident and for missing the meeting.

Internal compulsion. The law holds, and most people agree, that some actions are caused by inner compulsion. This is actually another version of constraint, except that is not caused externally. For example, the law recognizes as legitimate such excuses as kleptomania (a compulsion to steal), pyromania (a compulsion to set fires), and some types of addictions (gambling, eating, etc.) not caused physically as are drug or tobacco addiction. While this particular category of excuses may not totally satisfy, people do tend to accept them as valid.

The point is that excuses are defenses against either having to take responsibility for an action or being blamed unjustly for an action. The former defenses are typically referred to as bad excuses, the latter as good excuses. Ultimately, excuses are *reasons* and are based on the rational ability of those in a position to judge to decide on the level of accountability. Excuses mitigate harm, but they do not erase it.

Personal Accountability

Although the various roles of public relations carry with them distinctly different sets of obligations, they have in common the overriding obligation to perform within an accepted moral framework. That framework may be provided by the profession (as a code of professional standards), by the organization for which a practitioner works (as a corporate code or simply by the corporate culture itself), or by personal ethical standards. Each of these plays a part in creating the moral ground from which a true professional makes decisions.

The degree of autonomy changes with the various roles and the environment in which public relations is practiced, greatly affecting accountability.

For example, the role of advocate carries with it a primary responsibility to serve the client's purpose. This, in itself, is not, nor should it be considered, necessarily negative. Loyalty is a much-desired characteristic in employees, and as long as the moral climate of the organization within which the employee operates is conducive to the well-being of most of the parties affected by that organization's actions, that loyalty is not misplaced. However, if responsibility and accountability are not equitably shared and if the process by which they are assigned is not transparent, then problems will arise. Less autonomous actors still have responsibilities associated with their roles; however, those responsibilities will typically be dictated by their clients or employers. This is especially important to understand if the public relations practitioner works within a hierarchically structured environment. The more bureaucratic the structure, the more likely that problems with assigning accountability will occur. We must realize that not every actor is blameworthy, especially if the actor's autonomy is limited by structure, process, or circumstance. Likewise, accountability for actions may be lessened as autonomy is eroded by either role or environment. However, lack of autonomy is not an excuse for avoiding accountability entirely. Only legitimate moral excuses hold actors not accountable, and only then under a fairly narrow range of conditions.

While tracing the lines of responsibility and accountability can be difficult, in the end, if one is responsible in any way for an action, then one must accept some degree of accountability. "Individuals are ultimately the authors and arbiters of their actions, for better or worse, and therefore retain ultimate responsibility for what they do."⁴⁴ While it is gratifying to see someone like Harry Truman willing to take ultimate responsibility for actions carried out on his watch, this type of magnanimity doesn't absolve others of their part in the actions that are calling for accountability. It is also difficult in these times to find a Harry Truman among those top executives who are so adept at making excuses and passing the buck. The role of public relations in general, regardless of environment, is not only to provide a professional service, but also to act with attention to the highest ethical standards. While there are certainly legitimate excuses that can be used, public relations professionals should have no need for them if they are doing their jobs properly.

Chapter 2

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