A Systems Model for Ethical Decision Making in Public Relations

ABSTRACT: Systems theory has been successfully used to characterize behavior in a myriad of disciplines. Its transformational model of describing organizational processes can, and has, been used to delineate the decision-making process fruitfully.

All that is needed to adapt this model to ethical decision-making is to identify the relevant inputs and the proper decision-making levels within the model at which these inputs should be considered.

This is an especially useful tool for aiding the public relations practitioner in an ordering of stakeholder claims and a balancing of obligations based on the role and function of the practitioner.

Dr. Bivins is an associate professor in the School of Journalism at the University of Oregon.

Social systems theory is a broad, multi-disciplinary approach to describing, explaining and predicting organizational behavior. It has proven to be a useful overarching theory, with practical applications for researchers and professionals working in various fields. Since the 1940s, researchers have developed the theory and extended its application to an extraordinary range of disciplines, including physical science, economics, philosophy, and engineering. However, to date, systems theory has only been used to describe the interactions
and interrelatedness of the various components that make up the environment of a system. It is my contention that this same approach can be used to order the decision-making processes of systems (and individuals operating within any given system), and, at the same time, enter into the equation the ethical analysis so important to modern public relations.

SYSTEMS THEORY

When social systems theory is applied to human communication, it becomes general systems theory and is extremely useful in describing organizational behavior. General systems theory is a radical departure from many other organizational concepts because it stresses the universality of organizational principles and the interdependence of all systems. It allows public relations to be conceptualized in its interrelationship with business, law, politics, etc., rather than in isolation. Its unique value also comes from its stress on process as an organizing principle.

Systems theory has been widely touted as an overarching or meta-theory which helps to explain how public relations operates in an organizational environment, and it is now so used in a number of introductory public relations texts.

Systems theory views a system as the culmination of a transformational process of receiving resources (input) from its environment, processing the input (throughput) and producing products or services that return to the environment (output). For public relations, input is commonly information. Information from the environment allows the subsystem of public relations to identify threats to the system’s stability or equilibrium. Throughput is the process of organizing the inputs and formulating responses. Output is released into the environment as public relations communication or action in an attempt to restore equilibrium. Also key to this process is the notion of feedback—information sought by the system to determine the effects of the output. Continuous feedback loops allow organizational systems to coordinate and adjust activities to maintain balance and promote survival.

According to Borden the highest level of systems complexity is the associative system which results from the interrelationships of cognitive (thinking) systems—human beings. He proposes that since organizational systems are made up of human beings who have organized for a purpose, the organization “may appear to have the same teleological behaviors as the cognitive level system.” In other words, organizational goals should bear a striking resemblance to the goals of those individuals who make up the system. Pearson argues roughly the same point when he suggests that

[1]he goals of social systems are not interpreted simply in terms of system self-preservation but are based on rational discussion among system members, the kind of discussion that perhaps Buckley had in mind when he suggested
human decision making was the exemplar in sociocultural systems of the general selective processes that take place in all systems. 8

Borden describes three types of associative systems that have direct bearing on decision-making as it pertains to relationships with other systems. 9

- **Participative-adjunctive** systems are those which have subsystems that are symmetrically independent. That is, they are independent enough that each could survive the loss of the other. This sort of relationship allows for extreme flexibility, yet may allow hedging in the areas of obligation and duty since loss of, say, System B is not crucial to System A's survival and vice versa.

- **Participative-subjective** systems are those that have subsystems that are asymmetrically dependent on each other. This implies that although System B may be dependent on System A for survival, System A may not be dependent on System B. This allows for some leveraging ability and coercion on the part of System A as well as hedging in the areas of obligation and duty.

- **Participative-complemental** systems are those in which the subsystems are so interdependent that neither can survive without the other. Two or more subsystems engaged in this type of coexistence must reach mutual understanding and compromise in order to survive.

It is important to note that these categories may not apply to a given relationship among subsystems all the time, and can, in fact, be situational. For instance, while a distributor of an organization's products may be related in participative-subjective way on issues that deal specifically with the supply of products, it may not be related in the same way on social issues the organization decides to propound.

Grunig has supplied a parallel to these system types in his description of the relationship of various publics to the functioning of an organizational system and the functions of public relations within that systems. 10 In his discussion of linkages, Grunig proposes that enabling linkages are those without which the organizational system could not survive. This could be representative of either a participative-subjective system or a participative-complemental system. For example, a state university could not survive without the input (monetary support) of a state legislature, giving the legislature leverage power in its interaction with the university. However, the relationship might be participative-complemental to the degree that the state and its populace would not sanction the demise of the university. Either of these scenarios should show the need for an adaptive component, such as public relations, in order that the two subsystems reach an agreement ensuring their mutual survival.
Another relevant linkage is the functional linkage which provides input to and takes output from the system. In most cases, this results in a participative-subjective arrangement in which the organizational system controls the balance. For example, although a company may need employees, it is usually able to pick and choose among a large number of applicants. Another example of this would be cases of union contracts with strike clauses but no “no replacement workers” clause. A company could, if it did not wish to negotiate, hire replacement workers and “fire” striking workers. The same is true for functional output linkages. An automotive manufacturer may extend or revoke dealership privileges at will, thus allowing it the leverage in the participative-subjective relationship. However, in the case of customers or end users of a product, the functional output linkage may be one of participative-complemental relationship.

Finally, normative linkages are roughly parallel to participative-adjunctive relationships in that they represent other systems that perform similar functions—for example, other automobile manufacturers in the automotive industry. All else being equal, the relationship among these organizations is one of relative autonomy.

**ROLE AND FUNCTION**

I have contended in earlier articles that the two primary roles of public relations are those of advocate and counselor, and that these roles subsume all of the roles proposed by other researchers. In addition, where the public relations practitioner works (in-house as salaried employee, or out-of-house under contract), also influences the autonomy of the practitioner and his or her ethical obligations in a decision-making situation.

Public relations advocates (typically working out-of-house, but sometimes as in-house employees), like their counterparts in law, work from a relatively subjective viewpoint in the interests of their employers/clients. Ideally, they do not have to subscribe to the values of the client, but instead must remain neutral to those values while pursuing “zealously” their client’s interests. Under this construction, the client makes the basic decisions and the advocate carries them out, utilizing his or her professional expertise. At the non-professional level of public relations technician, the same client/employer-practitioner balance is maintained with the client/employer making the decisions and the practitioner acting on them. The only difference between advocate and technician is one of level of expertise. Counselors (typically out-of-house), on the other hand, are roughly equivalent to in-house managers—both in level of autonomy and balance of decision making. It should be noted, however, that the more autonomous position is that of the outside counselor, since even the most valued managers must give up some autonomy to organizational control. Nonetheless, both out-of-house counselors and in-house managers may function most efficiently under what Bayles has called...
the fiduciary model of the client-professional relationship. In this model, the client’s purposes are analyzed by the professional, alternatives are canvassed and presented to the client along with a suggested course of action, and the client makes the final decision.

Within the two roles of advocate and counselor lay all the possibilities of the functions and purposes of modern public relations, including the historical interpretations of controlling publics, responding to publics, and achieving mutually beneficial relationships among publics. With these roles and functions in mind, then, what remains is to construct a systems approach that will help define the ethical stages of the decision-making process, and to describe how that process contributes to and benefits from that systems approach and further delineates role and function in public relations.

THE PROBLEM-SOLVING PROCESS

The most common approach to dealing with public relations issues (usually referred to as the problem solving process) is the four step model. The process, building on an approach developed in business and relying heavily on the Management By Objectives (MBO) concept, includes the following stages:

- **Problem definition/situational analysis**—During which the issue is defined in the clearest possible terms; and an in-depth analysis is made concerning the issue, the affected publics, and all other contributing elements in a system’s environment (social, political, economic).

- **Strategic analysis/Planning**—During which publics are prioritized, goals and objectives are set, strategies and tactics are delineated, messages are devised, media are chosen for dissemination of messages, and a budget and timetable set.

- **Implementation**—During which the activities associated with each of the objectives are carried out according to the timetable.

- **Evaluation**—During which the progress and effectiveness of the program is evaluated and decisions are made for its maintenance, revision, or discontinuance. (See Figure 1).

A quick glance at the process reveals its use of the transformational model of systems theory. It assumes that any issue requiring a response upsets system equilibrium. Discovery of the issue itself as well as most of the research into its causes and effects is gathered from the environment as input. The planning stage is the throughout process in which the information is digested and a response is
Figure 1. Four-step Problem-solving Model

devised, which ultimately appears as output to the environment. Feedback is then gathered as the environment reacts to the organizational output. This information is factored into the throughput process, and adjustments are made to the resulting output. This procedure continues until system equilibrium has been restored.

A system in a state of disequilibrium with its environment will usually either try to adapt to the changes, or attempt to control the environmental forces causing the imbalance. How a system reacts depends on whether it is receptive to change. Unchanging systems typically run the risk of becoming static and eventually ineffective as organizations. These are called closed systems. Open systems, by contrast, usually react to change—whether they accept the change or try to control it. While persuasion is the primary tool used to control an environment, both persuasion and information must be used in order for a system to adapt to
its environment, typically through negotiation and compromise. The entire four-step process is one of decision-making. Decisions are made at every stage as to the importance of certain types of information to a complete understanding of the issue; however, most of these decisions are reflective of accomplishing the goal of the organization and the restoration of balance in its environment. This process is time-tested and workable in almost all situations. It is certainly flexible enough for the insertion of ethical decision components at key points throughout the process.

THE ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING MODEL

Gandz and Hayes, working from a basic business decision-making model, propose a new model which factors into the equation two additional considerations: ethical consciousness and ethical analysis (see Figure 2). Ethical consciousness includes a consideration of stakeholder interests. These interests can be determined in large part by answering the following questions:

![Figure 2. Gandz-Hayes Model of Business Decision Making and Ethics](image-url)
• Who will be affected by your decision?
• How will each identified party be affected?
• How do the answers to each of these two questions affect your decision in terms of your objectives, the alternatives you have generated, the alternative you have selected, and the manner in which you will implement the chosen alternative? \(^1\)

The second consideration, ethical analysis, takes place once an alternative action has been chosen and consists of applying several ethical analytical frameworks to the choice: consequential, rule-based, and cultural. Weaknesses in any one of the various frameworks may be somewhat offset by comparison with the others.

By using this model as a starting point, and factoring in the various tenets of systems theory, a procedure can be developed that could act as a decision-making model for public relations practitioners, regardless of role or the function of that role.

VARIABLE OF A SYSTEMS MODEL FOR ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING

Before moving to a micro-level systems model of decision-making, we need to look at a macro-level construction based on the basic open-systems model as described by Cutlip, Center, and Broom (see Figure 3). \(^1\) In this model the process begins when input into the system indicates an emerging issue that either has caused or is expected to cause system imbalance. For public relations purposes, this usually takes the form of action taken by or information about stakeholders (defined here as any public affecting or affected by the organizational system). The effect is typically noted as an imbalance between what the organization views as its desired (ideal) goal state and its actual (real) goal state (i.e. what relationship it desires with its stakeholders versus what relationship it currently has). This sort of real-state/ideal-state analysis can and should be done periodically in an open system in order to monitor change in the environment. The decision-maker now requires further information concerning this imbalance in order to plan a response. Response, in the form of output, is then directed externally to the stakeholders, or internally to promote change within the organization itself—typically involving either a revision of its goals or a physical change in its structure or policies. The resulting actions may affect either the organizational system or its environment, or both. That is, the organization may choose to change internally in response to pressure from its environment (adaptation), or it may choose to attempt to change its environment (control). Typically, the more open the system, the more adaptive it becomes. Additionally, public relations practitioners within highly adaptive systems tend to function as managers/counselors, while those in controlling systems tend to function as technicians/advocates.
At the micro level, a more precise picture is needed of the process of decision-making. Despite the general usefulness of the Gandz-Hayes model, it may not be entirely adequate for the kind of depth a systems approach requires at a theoretical level. I have devised such a model, utilizing some of the steps of the Gandz-Hayes model, but editing it somewhat and combing various systems elements and additional ethical considerations (input) at the various stages (see Figure 4). For example, the Gandz-Hayes model lists possible stakeholders rather than describes a method whereby stakeholders may be identified. However, if we use Borden’s associative types combined with Grunig’s linkage model, we may arrive at a more practical method of identifying stakeholders by their importance to the organization. This, in turn, may give us a better scheme for weighting the interests of the various claimants who will be affected by our decision.

As stated earlier, stakeholders in an associative system may be related to the organization in one of three ways: as totally independent; as either dependent or independent, but not as both; and as mutually dependent. For example, a particular stakeholder might be totally dependent on an organization for survival (a distributor of the organization’s product, for instance). Another stakeholder might not depend at all on that organization’s patronage or be especially affected
by this particular decision (a customer). Remember that these relationships can be, and often are, situational.

If we begin to sort stakeholders by relationship, we come up with a priority listing of which parties have the strongest claims on our actions:

- Those subsystems upon which we depend for major support have a stronger claim (Grunig’s enabling linkages).
- Those subsystems with whom we are mutually dependent have a stronger claim (typically, Grunig’s functional output linkages).
- Those subsystems that depend on us for major support have a weaker claim (Grunig’s functional input linkages).
Those subsystems that are totally independent from us and from whom we are totally independent have a weaker claim (Grunig's normative linkages).

In this ranking, the notion of claims is based on the necessity to maintain certain relationships over others. We need only define stakeholders based on their relationship to the organization, thus any ranking at this point will be made on a non-value basis. That is, no ethical values need be applied at this time. However, in the context of public relations, as with most formalized communication functions, we typically do have moral obligations to, at least, the following:

- **Ourselves**—to preserve our own integrity.
- **Clients**—to honor contracts, to use professional expertise on their behalf.
- **Organization/employer**—to adhere to organizational goals and policies.
- **Profession/professional colleagues**—to uphold the standards of the profession and, by extension, the reputation of colleagues.
- **Society**—to consider societal needs and claims.

The implications of these obligations will become increasingly clear as we progress through the decision-making process.

**INITIAL ETHICAL APPLICATIONS**

In the Gandz-Hayes model, ethical analysis (at least to the degree that theory is applied) is left to the “choice” stage of decision-making. While this is entirely logical, more needs to be done earlier in order to set the stage for the informed application of normative ethical sets at the analytical phase of the process. The key element in this process is type of input and the level at which that input is collected and analyzed. Pearson posits that in order to escape the functionalist trap of automatically assuming the efficacy of organizational goals and objectives, we must go beyond pure strategic reasoning and tap into a more ethical approach to decision making. This means that an organization “must take more inputs into account when they plan the strategies intended to secure organizational security and growth.” And those inputs must be of a different type: “input that is qualitatively different from that needed for environmental control.”

In a systems approach to decision-making, the process always begins when an issue or problem is detected as input into the system. In the case of a model in which the ethical component is strong, this element alone can be cause for system
imbalance. Therefore, in defining the issue—the “size-up” stage of the Gandz-Hayes model—the impact of the decision-maker’s values and principles needs to be recognized—a “qualitatively different” king of input that is in addition to the normal input sought at this stage of the process. Christians defines values as those things that “reflect our presuppositions about social life and human nature.”

Values cover a broad range of possibilities, such as aesthetic values (something is harmonious or pleasing), professional values (innovation and promptness), logical values (consistency and competency), sociocultural values (thrift and hard work), and moral values (honesty and nonviolence).

For example, among the values that should be prized by public relations people are such professional traditions as client confidentiality, truthtelling, and autonomy. Stakeholders such as employers or shareholders in company stock may value loyalty, team play, and profitability via the free enterprise system. Other affected parties may value charity, justice, and cooperation. Certainly, these values should have some bearing on a decision involving a strong ethical component. By recognizing these early on in the issue definition process, we admit to the possibility that there may be conflicting values involved.

**Principles** are those guidelines we derive from values, usually stated in positive or negative terms. For example, “Never corrupt the integrity of media channels,” would be a principle derived from the professional value of truthtelling in public relations. Or, “Always maximize profit,” might be derived from belief in the efficacy of the competitive marketplace. At this stage, it is useful to note any such principles that have been codified as a possible winnowing mechanism—what Fritzsche refers to as a conjunctive rule, specifying a minimal cutoff rule for a decision. An example of an ethical conjunctive rule might be, “any action that would involve lying will not be considered.” However, as Fritzsche suggests, this winnowing process is most effective at the stage during which alternatives are evaluated. The situation definition phase ends with a precise statement of the ethical issue or question.

**PRIMARY ETHICAL APPLICATIONS AND ROLE/FUNCTION**

At this point, the ethical analysis phase begins with a comparison of claims and obligations. Input into this process includes a thorough examination of the interests of all claimants, and a review of concomitant obligations. This is the point at which differentiation between the dual roles of public relations becomes important to the process, as each role brings with it certain inherent obligations. More importantly, however, is the effect of those obligations on the order in which claimants are addressed.

As already mentioned, advocates must act on their clients’ decisions to the best of their professional ability. Not surprisingly, chief among the values expressed by advocates and those who use them is the notion of loyalty. Most business
executives would argue that loyalty is *the* chief duties of an employee, and in fact, being a "team player" is highly regarded in the business world. Because of the past history of public relations as primarily an advocacy function, it has been long assumed that a public relations practitioner's first responsibility is to the client and, thus, as in the case of advocacy, consideration for other claimants is usually not factored as strongly into the ethical equation as that of the employer/client—the primary claimant. In other words, complete autonomy, a highly prized value of professionals, may take back seat to loyalty for the advocate.

For the public relations counselor or manager, however, autonomy may take precedence over blind loyalty to a client or employer. For the truly independent counselor, obligations to other parties must be more fully recognized. It could be argued that the practitioner-as-counselor's first allegiance is still to the client—but in a lesser degree due to obligations to other affected parties or stakeholders.

This is the point at which we must begin to balance obligations among competing claims, and is the point at which application of the various normative theories are most useful, since, for both the advocate and the counselor, a larger set of guidelines exists outside the normal duties of role function which dictate a broader scope of moral obligation.

**DEONTOLOGICAL THEORIES**

According to deontological ethical theory, the obligations assumed as part of a role, as well as codified standards associated with that role, are of prime importance in making moral decisions. For the advocate, deontological considerations might include whether an act is illegal or not, or whether organizational, professional, or other rule-based guidelines exist governing action in a particular case. Professional public relations practitioners acting in the role of counselor are *expected* to adhere to a code of ethics—both by their colleagues in the profession and, supposedly, by anyone hiring them in their capacity as professionals. As Bowie states, "After all, in hiring a professional it is presumed that one wishes to employ a person who meets certain professional standards and, unless specified otherwise, an employer accepts all the standards of professional behavior for the profession."24

Professional codes, such as the Public Relations Society of America's (PRSA) Code of Professional Standards for the Practice of Public Relations, may serve as a starting point. Meyer has suggested that the main benefit of codes lies in the work of "articulating a professional group's values" which, in turn, forces it to think about those values.25 However, he also cautions that "Written codes are often criticized for being of little help in making decisions. The values they list are obvious values, the behaviors enjoined are clearly bad behaviors."26 Thus, although professional or organizational codes may be useful in providing a first-line of decision-making (Fritzche's conjunctive rules), they are not completely satisfactory for making a final decision.

Winter 1992 377
Perhaps the most well-known system of deontological prescriptions is that proposed by Ross. He suggests a set of *prima facie* duties that, all things being equal, should be honored. These duties imply obligations that, Ross holds, are generally accepted as being binding on all people. These should be considered in conjunction with the list of claimants derived earlier.

1. **Duties of fidelity**—If you promise (explicitly or implicitly) to perform some act or to abstain from performing some act, then you are obliged to perform that act or to abstain from performing that act. For instance, most relationships, professional and personal, assume a duty to tell the truth—or, at least, not to lie. Duties of fidelity would also include remaining faithful to contracts, explicit or implicit; and keeping promises. This category also includes **duties of reparation**—that is, if you perform a wrong action with respect to another person, you are obliged to undo the wrong.

2. **Duties of gratitude**—If any person performs some service (favor) for you, then you have some obligation to the person who performed the favor. This would apply both to relationships between friends and to relationships between employer and employee. For example, if your employer treats you in an exceptional manner, above that normally expected in an employee-employer relationship, your obligation would deepen to honor your employer's wishes *beyond* the duty of fidelity.

3. **Duties of justice**—If any person merits a distribution of something (typically something that will result in pleasure, happiness or satisfaction), and you can bring that distribution about (or prevent an unmerited distribution), then you are obliged to distribute what is merited (or prevent/withhold what is not merited). In practice, this can often mean giving greater consideration to the claims of those who *deserve* it rather than to those who *demand* it, regardless of their position or power.

4. **Duties of beneficence**—If you can make some person better with respect to their state of existence, then you are obliged to do so. An example of this would be corporate philanthropy or the *pro bono* work of professionals. In a decision-making situation, this duty may oblige you to act when nonaction is preferred or recommended by others.

5. **Duties of self-improvement**—If you can make yourself better with respect to your state of existence, then you are obliged to do so. This can cover anything from preserving your own integrity to taking advantage of an advantageous situation for self-improvement.
6. **Duties of non-injury**—If you are in a position to avoid hurting someone, then you are obliged to do so. This contrasts with the duty of beneficence. Although not injuring others incidentally means doing them good, Ross interprets the avoidance of injuring others as a more pressing duty then beneficence. This may, in fact, be the most important of Ross’s duties, since it implies that the possibility of injury to any claimant to whom you are obligated must be assigned some weight. However, this very often results in a form of cost-benefit or risk-benefit analysis, which is counter to the underlying premise of deontological theory—that rules can, and should, be moral in and of themselves, and not based on considerations of outcome, the domain of utilitarian theory (discussed below).

Obviously, it is possible, in fact probable, that these obligations will conflict. Ross provides us with little guidance except to say that when obligations conflict, choose the more important one. For advocates, whether in-house employees or contracted professionals out-of-house, we can assume that the primary obligation is to the client/employer, thus, the duties of fidelity, especially as they refer to honoring contracts, are the most appropriate considerations. One of the implications of the contract between employer and employee or client and advocate is an assumption of loyalty. This exists usually in the form of a trade-off in which the employee/advocate receives certain benefits in return for work performed to the client’s or organization’s standards, and in return for loyalty to the client’s or organization’s goals. So, to object to certain elements inherent in the performance of one’s duty would seem, on the surface, to be in violation of the *prima facie* duty of fidelity to one’s primary claimant—in this case, the employer or client.

Advocates are quickly caught in a bind of having to honor primary duties of fidelity to clients/employers, and having to consider other claimants’ interests as well. It is easy to envision instances in which duties of justice or non-injury could conflict with duties of fidelity. Advocacy performed on behalf of a client or employer who is emphasizing a course of action detrimental to other parties, perhaps parties deserving of better treatment, would quickly conflict with duties of non-injury and/or justice.

By contrast, public relations counselors, as professionals, are serving as autonomous, objective advisors aiding a client or employer in the decision-making process. It is part of the function of a counselor to consider the claims of all potential stakeholders in an issue. For example, while a counselor is still obligated to serve client interests, he or she is also obligated to the profession (or the expectations of role associated with that profession). Such an obligation might outweigh client obligation, such as a professional obligation to serve the public interest overriding an obligation to a client whose actions might be contrary to that interest.

Whether advocate or counselor, however, practitioners quickly discover that
deontological methods alone won't suffice to weight claims and obligations completely. And, even after appealing to organizational and professional codes, and even after weighing obligations prescribed by Ross and others, practitioners may still have to appeal to a greater moral dictate.

TELEOLOGICAL THEORIES

Teleological ethical theory (often called utilitarianism after its most common form) provides us with guidelines which might serve to clarify the sometimes vague obligations of role, and fill in the gap left by incomplete or insufficient deontological prescriptions. The basis of utilitarianism is action based on probable consequences to all claimants. However, actions are based, not on prescribed duties such as those proposed by Ross, but on the principle of serving the "greater good." Theoretically, at least, this formula would drive such aberrations of utilitarianism as cost- or risk-benefit analysis, in that costs or risks would be balanced against benefit to the greatest number of claimants. However, advocates, and others without complete autonomy in decision-making, will soon discover that the greater good is often ascribed as that which benefits the organization or client—not a utilitarian concept, but an egoistic concept. This does not negate the efficacy of applying utilitarian concepts to ethical decision making, but it does make the activity itself difficult. Nonetheless, it should be remembered that the goal of most public relations advocacy is control of some factor in the environment, not adaptation. Thus a strong obligation to the client or employer is not only expected, it is necessary. And, as long as the result of that advocacy (what it ends up controlling) can be ethically justified as not being unduly harmful to any party, or being in promotion of greater good (i.e., a greater ratio of good to harm than any other alternative), then the advocate is on relatively moral ground.

It is part of the function of a counselor to consider all aspects of issues and potential outcomes of suggested actions. Naturally, the counselor can, and frequently does, subscribe to utilitarian ethical theory in predicting the possible and probable consequences of any suggested action on the concerned publics. However, since objectivity is also an expected trait of the professional counselor, it can be expected that the greater good should be determined with less consideration to client interests. As with deontological considerations, a professional will owe an obligation to the profession, and through the profession, to the greater public interest. It should also be noted that a counselor is, because of this broader consideration, more likely to recommend adaptation to environmental change than an advocate, thus, providing a potentially more equitable balance among competing interests.
DECISION AND EVALUATION

The final two steps involve rendering a decision based on the ethical analysis performed and monitoring the reactions to that decision. This decision usually results in communication and/or action which is then delivered as system output to the environment. Careful and attentive monitoring of the reactions of all stakeholders to this decision is essential, and the decision-maker must, and should, be prepared to defend his or her decision. If the steps leading up to the final decision have been carefully followed, defense of a decision with a strong ethical component should be simplified. The ultimate test of the value of this process is the ability to ably defend one's decision. There will never be complete agreement from all stakeholders, but at least the process itself can be cited as justification since the real value in this approach is in the analysis of the issue and the application of ethical concepts. If a modicum of system equilibrium has been gained, then the system can be said to be open and proactive, which is all that is expected of a successful system in interaction with its environment.

It is often wise to develop policy based on the outcome of this process, since such policies can then act as future deontological guidelines in similar situations.

CONCLUSION

The value in using a systems model for ethical decision making in public relations rests on its ability to delineate a complex process and to wed it to an already accepted model of organizational decision making. The efficacy of systems theory to decision making has already been demonstrated. I have attempted to apply that approach to analyzing the ethical dimensions often inherent in the process for public relations practitioners. Further thought could possibly uncover approaches whereby this model could be adapted to business decisions outside of public relations, and to decisions in other mass media and communication endeavors.

What is not clear, is whether the constraints associated with the role of advocate/technician are such that ethical decision making is circumscribed or whether, by using this model, the advocate may, indeed, appeal to higher principles than those that might be resident with the client/employer. What is clear is that the degree to which public relations practitioners view themselves as professionals is bound to have an impact on this process by a broadening of the responsibility base from which they operate. In the meantime, if the use of this model results in a more thorough exploration of the obligations and options inherent in ethical decision making, then it will, at least, be a step in the right direction.
NOTES

6. Ibid., p. 35.
16. Ibid., p. 666.
19. Ibid., p. 224
20. Ibid., p. 229
22. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
霸道图书馆

www.xuebalib.com

本文献由“学霸图书馆-文献云下载”收集自网络，仅供学习交流使用。

学霸图书馆（www.xuebalib.com）是一个“整合众多图书馆数据库资源，提供一站式文献检索和下载服务”的24小时在线不限IP图书馆。

图书馆致力于便利、促进学习与科研，提供最强文献下载服务。

图书馆导航：
图书馆首页  文献云下载  图书馆入口  外文数据库大全  疑难文献辅助工具