A Practical Model for Ethical Decision Making in Issues Management and Public Relations

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The deontological philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) provides a powerful framework for the analysis of ethical dilemmas. Kant’s philosophy is discussed and applied to what this research poses as the “practical model for ethical decision making” (see Figure 1). This Kantian model establishes an ethical consideration triangle and incorporates symmetrical communication. The issues management of 2 global organizations was used as an empirical test of the model and to refine it for practical implementation. I argue that rigorous analysis of ethical decisions and symmetrical communication results in ethical issues management.

Issues management is the executive function of strategic public relations that deals with problem solving, organizational policy, long-range planning, and management strategy as well as communication of that strategy internally and externally (Chase, 1977; Ewing, 1981; Hainsworth & Meng, 1988; Heath, 1997). Issues management frequently handles ethical dilemmas through the identification of issues, research, analysis, and the making of organization-wide policy decisions regarding those issues. This research examines that process at two global pharmaceutical firms and poses a practical model for ethical decision making based on the issues-management process used in those organizations.

The practical model asserted in this research is based on the deontological theory of Immanuel Kant (1785/1948, 1930/1963, 1793/1974, 1785/1993). A theoretical normative model for ethical issues management based on Kantian philosophy has already been developed (Bowen, 2004). This article tests that normative theory.
in practical application through empirical study and suggests a new, refined, and layperson-accessible practical model for ethical decision making (see Figure 1).

**CONCEPTUALIZATION**

Public relations scholars (Bivins, 1980; Curtin & Boynton, 2001; J. E. Grunig, 1993; J. E. Grunig & L. A. Grunig, 1996; L. A. Grunig, 1992; Kruckeberg, 1996; Pearson, 1989b, 1989c; C. B. Pratt, 1994; Wright, 1982) have argued the need for an ethical paradigm in public relations based on moral philosophy. Research (Bivins, 1989; Bowen, 2003; C. A. Pratt & Rentner, 1989) has found little academic training in ethics for public relations majors and journalism or communication students (Lee & Padgett, 2000).

C. B. Pratt (1994) asserted that the nature of public relations thrusts practitioners “into the vortex of organizational decision making” (p. 218) and that the counselor role of public relations means that practitioners must confront ethical dilemmas more often than other managers. If public relations practitioners are indeed acting as ethics counselors to the dominant coalition (Heath, 1994) or serving as the ethical consciences of their organizations (Ryan & Martinson, 1983; Wright, 1996), what background, education, or training in moral reasoning gives them the knowledge to do so? As Leeper (1996) contended, serious ethical examination among scholars and practitioners is warranted. Nelson (1994) explained, “The lack of a single common framework for deciding what is ethical and what is not thus ultimately influences the outcome of public policymaking and the reputation of public relations” (p. 225).

As the ethical conscience of the organization, public relations practitioners should be well versed in both moral philosophy and ethics. This research contributes to moral knowledge and allows practitioners an understanding of that philosophy and the analytical techniques applied by a deontological approach to ethical decision making. The practical model presented in this article can be implemented by persons with little or no training in ethics and can result in rigorous and methodical analyses of ethical dilemmas.

**Ethical Foundations of the Proposed Practical Model**

This research builds on the conceptual foundation provided in “A Theory of Ethical Issues Management: Expansion of Ethics as the Tenth Generic Principle of Public Relations Excellence” (Bowen, 2004). The normative Kantian model in that research was revised into the practical model presented here on the basis of empirical study in two organizations (Bowen, 2000). A conceptual framework of Kantian deontology is briefly reviewed as the basis for the practical model of ethical decision making.
FIGURE 1  A practical Kantian model of ethical issues management.
Beck (1963) defined *ethics* as “the division of universal practical philosophy which deals with the intrinsic goodness found in some but not in all actions, dispositions, and maxims” (p. xiii). The deontological school of ethics is based on a rational approach to decision making. Sullivan (1994) explained that the source of moral decision making is the *rational intellect* rather than rules prescribed by religions or lawmakers. Flew (1979) defined *rationalism* as the belief that by reason alone humans can gain knowledge of the nature of something. This view considers faith, habit, prejudice, and religion to be irrational and prefers ethical decisions to be guided by deductive reasoning (Flew, 1979). Rationalism and autonomy are conjoined in deontology, as discussed below. In public relations, autonomy can take the form of freedom from encroachment or sublimation to other organizational functions as well as the individual issues manager’s freedom to make moral choices.

**The Kantian protonorm of autonomy.** Kant (1724–1804) based his moral philosophy on the meta-tenet or protonorm of rational autonomy. Christians and Traber (1997) defined *protonorms* as “underlying presuppositions that are necessary for ethical reasoning” (p. xi). Protonorms generally span cultural and social boundaries to reflect a philosophical tradition that is universal in nature (Christians & Traber, 1997), meaning that it can be applied consistently across diverse circumstances.

In Kantian philosophy, a decision can be truly moral only if it is made by an autonomous, rational decision maker. Kant defined *reason* as “the faculty of principles” (Sullivan, 1989, p. 48). Rationality is the guide that Kant used to endow all humans with freedom of choice and a duty to fulfill the moral law. Kant held that even the most hardened criminal because of his or her capacity for rational thought, knows he or she is acting against the moral law.

Kant’s conception of freedom of the rational human agent was in opposition to the hegemony of the ruling aristocracy during his lifetime. The idea of moral equality based on each being’s rationality amounted to what Kant called a *Copernican revolution* in moral philosophy (Green, 1997; Kant, 1785/1948; Sullivan, 1989). In 1543, Copernicus used the Pythagorean theorem to prove mathematically that our planet was spherical and revolves around the sun, challenging religious doctrine that the earth was the center of the universe (Flew, 1979). Kant equated discovering the nature of morality through conjoining autonomy and rationality with Copernicus’s landmark discovery about the nature of the universe.

The imperative of autonomy pervades Kant’s entire philosophy. On the basis of the rationality of an agent, that person must make decisions according to his or her independent, autonomous, moral judgment. The Law of Autonomy stated that “A moral agent is an agent who can act autonomously, that is, as a law unto himself or herself, on the basis of objective maxims of his or her reason alone” (Sullivan, 1989, p. 48). Kant added that universality is the key on which the Law of Auton-
omy rests; he called this “the idea of the will of every rational being as a will which makes universal law” (Kant, 1785/1964, p. 98).

Autonomy is essential to ethical decision making because it frees the decision maker from the subjective concerns of personal desires, fears of negative repercussions, or other biased decision-making influences. Therefore, autonomy is the freedom to make a decision based on what is morally right in a universal sense rather than self-interested concerns. Kant (1785/1993) explained autonomy thus:

> We cannot possibly conceive reason conscientiously permitting any other quarter to direct its judgment, since then the subject would attribute the control of its judgment not to reason, but to an impulse. Reason must regard itself as the author of its principles independent of extraneous influences; consequently, it, as practical reason or as the will of a rational being, must regard itself as free. (p. 213)

By virtue of having a rational will and moral autonomy, Kant categorically obligated all beings to fulfill their duty to the moral law. Autonomy facilitates the freedom from encroachment and enhances the boundary-spanning role valued by public relations. Furthermore, a rational approach is already used in issues management as part of the public relations process discussed by Dozier (1992) who stated: “Managers make policy decisions and are held accountable for public relations program outcomes. … They facilitate communication between management and publics and guide management through what practitioners describe as a ‘ratio-nal [italics added] problem-solving process’” (p. 333). This rational process means applying a methodical analysis to varying decision alternatives, eliminating the influence of bias, and making a logical decision solely on the basis of doing what is right in an objective sense.

The practical model of ethical issues management (see Figure 1) posed in this research begins by asking issues managers to address the Kantian protonorm in the “Autonomy Section” of the model. For the purpose of practical implementation, the model asks to decision maker to rule out prudential self-interest, greed, and selfish motives by posing the questions “Am I acting from the basis of reason alone? Can I rule out political influence, monetary influence, and pure self-interest?” If the answer is “yes,” then the issues manager can proceed to the next step in the model for analysis of the ethical dilemma and on toward decision making. If the answer is “no,” then subjectivity has been revealed and the decision maker must step aside and defer the decision to another issues manager or a group decision-making process. The model then proceeds to the most rigorous test of deontological philosophy: Kant’s categorical imperative.

The categorical imperative. Kant’s (1785/1964) categorical imperative declared: “Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law” (p. 88). Using the rational will and autonomy of
moral agents, the categorical imperative adds the element of universal application to the moral test. In saying that the categorical imperative is universal, an absolute standard of moral principles is used that applies consistently across time, cultures, and societal norms. Kant (Paton, 1967) maintained that “the principle of moral action must be the same for every rational agent. No rational agent is entitled to make arbitrary exceptions to moral law in favour of himself” (p. 135).

The categorical imperative includes the principle of reversibility; that is, would the decision maker see the merit of the decision were he or she on the receiving end of such a decision? Sullivan (1994) explained universal and reversible norms through the questions: “What if everyone acted that way? Would I be willing to live in a world in which everyone acted like that?” (p. 48). Paton (1967) noted that a reciprocal obligation between persons is implied in the categorical imperative.

Contrary to common perception, Kant did not disavow the consequences of an action. He argued that expected consequences were not the determining factor of whether a decision has moral worth. Paton (1967) explained Kant’s argument:

> We must not judge an action to be right or wrong according as we like or dislike the consequences. The test is whether the maxim of such an action is compatible with the nature of a universal law which is to hold for others as well as for myself. (p. 76)

Kant’s argument for the morality of actions undertaken from duty is in opposition to the utilitarian school of ethics. Utilitarianism (Bentham, 1780/1988; Mill, 1861/1957) bases morality on the consequences of an action, with ethical actions being those that create the greatest good or happiness for the greatest number of people. Utilitarianism has two primary schools of thought: (a) act utilitarianism and (b) rule utilitarianism. Act utilitarianism evaluates individual actions by the amount of good produced by the action, not by past cases; it is the most frequently used form of utilitarianism. Rule utilitarianism attempts to discern general guidelines for types of actions, based on producing the greatest good, generalizing from past cases (De George, 1995). Both forms of utilitarianism decide the morality of a decision by predicting its consequences. Thus, utilitarianism is a teleological- or consequentialist-based philosophy in opposition to Kantian deontology’s nonconsequentialist, duty-based approach. Utilitarianism is frequently used in a cost–benefit analysis, but it must be used cautiously because of the well-known pitfalls of applying this paradigm (Posner, 2002).

In opposition to utilitarianism’s worth in producing the greatest good for the greatest number, Kant placed the highest worth on performing one’s moral duty, defined through rational decision making. He afforded the highest moral worth to actions undertaken from duty rather than from compulsion or law. The consequences of a decision are considered but are not the main decision-making impetus on which the moral agent bases a decision. Therefore, the categorical imperative provides a norm of morality that helps the decision maker understand his or her
duty in a situation by allowing the agent to universalize the moral principle. If the principle cannot be universalized, becomes self-contradictory, or is one the decision maker could not accept on the receiving end of the decision, then the principle fails the test of the categorical imperative.

For example, the maxim “I will lie only in instances where I cannot get caught” becomes both impossible to universalize and self-contradictory. The liar cannot universalize this principle because if all people lied in that situation the truth would become impossible to discover. Moreover, it is doubtful that the liar would want to live in a world in which all others also lied because then his or her own lie would be impossible to believe because all are liars. A lie is successful only if there is an assumption of truth on the part of the receiver.

Practical implementation of Kant’s categorical imperative is addressed in the “Question Section” of the practical model (see Figure 1). Each issues manager should independently consider the three following questions and discuss them with the issue team. These questions are designed to invoke the universal nature of Kant’s categorical imperative as well as its reversibility to the decision maker being able to place him of herself on the receiving end of the decision. They are: “Can I obligate everyone else who is ever in a similar situation to do the same thing I am about to do?”; “Would I accept this decision if I were on the receiving end?”; and, to address rationality and autonomy, “Have I faced a similar ethical issue before?” These practical restatements of Kant’s categorical imperative allow issues managers to effectively apply an abstract concept to a practical problem.

Duty, intention, and respect for others. I further divided Kantian moral philosophy into the categories of duty, intention or a morally good will, and respect for others. These three categories roughly correspond to Kant’s three formulations of the categorical imperative.

Actions done on the basis of duty differ from actions inspired by inclination or self-interest. Kant argued that by people’s ability to reason and act autonomously, they are duty bound to act according to universal (categorical) moral imperatives. Sullivan (1989) explained, “The only incentive to act on the motive of duty, Kant writes, is the reverence or respect we feel for the moral law” (p. 133).

Therefore, Kant’s discussion of duty provided a means by which to analyze the goodwill, or morally worthy intentions. In 1785 Kant wrote, “Nothing can possibly be conceived in the world, or even out of it, which can be called good without qualification, except a GOOD WILL” (1785/1964, p. 154). Kant viewed a morally good will as a necessary condition for ethical decision making. Baron (1995) explained, “The good will is manifested in actions done from duty” (p. 183).

In his discussion of dignity and respect for others, Kant required that people be treated always as an end in themselves and never as a means to an end. He wrote (Kant, 1785/1964) “We must respect every human person as having objective and intrinsic worth or dignity” (p. 385). This maxim can be accomplished in public re-
lations by providing the knowledge necessary for people to make their own decisions, that are based on their own judgment, allowing them the dignity of an autonomous, rational agent.

In the practical model posed here, I labeled this phase of the theory the “Ethical Consideration Triangle” to facilitate its discussion among issues management teams. Each point of the triangle corresponds to one of Kant’s formulations of the categorical imperative: (a) duty, (b) dignity and respect for others, and (c) intention or a morally good will. Under each label is a question that explains the concept. The questions are: “Duty: Am I doing the right thing? Dignity and Respect: Are dignity and respect for others maintained? and Intention: Am I proceeding with a morally good will?”

Positioned inside the triangle, in arbitrary order, are the groups issues managers should consider with respect to their duty, dignity and respect, and intention. These groups are publics, stakeholders, self, the organization, and society. Issue managers should consider each of these groups with each point of the triangle, corresponding to an aspect of Kantian theory. Managers need to consider multiple groups individually, such as the various publics of an organization. These considerations lead the issues manager to conduct a thorough analysis of the perspective of each group involved in an issue. The publics should be tailored to customize the triangle to each organization and situation, allowing a sophisticated and complex ethical analysis that is unique to each case in which it is used.

**Symmetrical communication.** Symmetrical communication, according to J. E. Grunig (2001), is enacted when “practitioners use research and dialogue to bring about symbiotic changes in the ideas, attitudes, and behaviors of both their organizations and publics” (p. 12). The symmetrical model (J. E. Grunig & Hunt, 1984) is an integrative mediation between advocacy and accommodation that involves mutual change and adaptation to new information. The public relations practitioner facilitates mutual change rather than acting only as an advocate of the organization, as seen in an asymmetrical approach (Dozier, L. A. Grunig, & J. E. Grunig, 1995; J. E. Grunig, 2001; J. E. Grunig, 1992a; J. E. Grunig & L. A. Grunig, 1992). L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, and Dozier (2002) argued that the symmetrical approach to communication is inherently more ethical than other approaches because it is based on dialogue.

Pearson (1989a, 1989c), extending the theory of Habermas (1979, 1984, 1987), argued that organizations have a moral duty to engage in dialogue. J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig (1996) included Pearson’s obligation of dialogue in their theory of communication ethics, using symmetry as a way of satisfying that obligation. Symmetry is an inherently ethical form of communication (Bowen, 2000; J. E. Grunig & L. A. Grunig, 1996) and its use as a component of this practical model of ethical issues management strengthens the model’s conceptual base.

The last phase of implementing the practical model posed in this research is to communicate ethical considerations to the groups inside the ethical consideration
triangle and to consider their input in decision making. Through such consideration, a more equitable and mutually satisfactory decision can be reached than with nonsymmetrical methods. The information gained from publics could play a vital role in the decision-making process of the organization. The communication should be ongoing and used to contribute to the decision-making process as well as to communicate with publics about the decision. Moreover, this use of symmetrical communication is consistent with Kantian moral philosophy. Kant (1785/1964) wrote “Thus ordinary reason, when cultivated in its practical use, gives rise insensibly to a dialectic which constrains it to seek help in philosophy” (p. 73).

The most important contribution of public relations to organizational effectiveness can be measured in the relationships built and maintained by the function. Use of the practical model posed here emphasizes the interdependency and ethical nature of those relationships. Use of this model should enhance the practitioner’s ability to maintain mutually beneficial relationships with publics.

Research Questions

On the basis of the theory just discussed, and an earlier, normative model of ethical issues management, I designed a practical model for ethical issues management (see Figure 1). That practical model was based wholly on the theory just presented but was tested and refined through the use of empirical study discussed in the next section.

Two study organizations allowed me to collect data on their issues-management process and their ethics, and I used those data to reword, clarify, and strengthen the practical model so that it can be easily used by issues managers. In the empirical portion of the study, three research questions were addressed:

RQ 1: What is the structure of issues management and issue decision making in the organization, including access to the dominant coalition or CEO (e.g., autonomy)?
RQ 2: How prominently do issues managers consider ethics in their issues management decision making?
RQ 3: Does the organization rely primarily on a conceptualization of ethics based on utilitarianism or deontology?

METHOD

Sample Selection and Participants

The practical model was developed through longitudinal observation and 43 interviews at two global pharmaceutical firms. The normative model of ethical is-
sues management was used as a guide to construct the practical model, based on the comments of issues managers in the participating organizations.

To obtain this sample, *Hoover’s Handbook of American Business* (1997) was used to identify the major producers of pharmaceuticals distributed in the United States. Inquiry letters were sent to the top public relations officers of 21 corporations and followed up by a similar letter 3 weeks later and a telephone inquiry. Two pharmaceutical manufacturers out of the 21 invited to participate allowed me to collect data in their organizations. These corporations agreed to participate in this study after the initial mailings, several telephone conversations, confidentiality negotiations, follow-up mailings describing this study, the signing of legal documents, and screening meetings with both organizations. Scholars Thomas (1995) and Yeager and Kim (1995), who specialized in the study of executives, argued that a screening meeting is common before gaining access to a corporate setting. The majority of the 21 organizations contacted refused to respond to letters and telephone calls or stated that they do not participate in research projects. The participating organizations are both ranked highly in measures of ethics and reputation published in the popular press, suggesting that the organizations that declined participation might have wished to conceal ethical quandaries. The fact that both organizations that agreed to participate hold missions of excellence in ethics biases this research in favor of an organization that truly desires to engender ethical behavior rather than simply achieve a minimum standard.

Maintaining confidentiality was a necessary condition of access to both organizations in this study; therefore, they are referred to throughout this article as *Organization A* and *Organization B*. Organization A and Organization B were among the top five pharmaceutical and health care products manufacturers in the world; they provide a fertile ground to study issues management and ethical practice.

**Brief Description of Participating Organizations**

Organizations A and B are comparable in size, age, and products manufactured. Both are global organizations, founded and headquartered in the United States. The global workforce size of each organization is close to 100,000 employees. Pharmaceuticals manufactured by each organization can be found in almost every country of the world. Both of the organizations are housed in impressive facilities near major metropolitan areas, and both organizations have formidable security measures in place for gaining access to the location.

Organization A is consistently included in a popular publication’s ranking of best companies for which to work, and all interviewees reported that the company has pride in doing things the “right” way. Organization B is known worldwide for holding a strong commitment to ethics and is consistently recognized in public opinion polls as one of the most respected companies in the world.
Philanthropy and social responsibility are concepts both Organizations A and B regard highly in strategic planning. Both organizations have made significant charitable donations of medicines and other products around the world in the past few years. In Organization A, there is an unofficial ethics motto advising employees to “do the right thing”; in Organization B, there is an official ethics statement outlining core responsibilities. In summary, Organizations A and B endeavor to be morally responsible corporate citizens and have made a commitment to ethical organizational behavior.

Data Collection and Analysis

Research proceeded in a qualitative manner, with methods triangulated through using 43 interviews and longitudinal observation. The semistructured interview guide was constructed by referring to the interview expertise of many scholars (Fontana & Frey, 1994, 2000; Lindlof, 1995; McCracken, 1988; Spradley, 1979), and the observation guided by the advice of anthropologists and other researchers (Adler & Adler, 1987, 1994; Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994; Jorgensen, 1989; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

A university human subjects committee approved the research design and interview guide. Forty-three long interviews with issues managers were conducted; all participants signed informed consent forms. Most interviews were audio recorded with the consent of the participant and were later transcribed. Participants were self-described issues managers, most working in a public relations or public affairs department. They held titles such as corporate communications director (or manager) and vice president (or director) of public affairs; one held the title vice president of issues management.

I collected observation data by attending issues management meetings and training seminars, taking copious notes of those sessions, and writing theoretical memos (Wolcott, 1995) from the observed experiences. The data collection phase of this study lasted approximately 1 year and took place in the United States and in Europe. Data were analyzed using the method Miles and Huberman (1994) suggested for qualitative analysis: data reduction, data display matrices, and conclusion drawing. A reflexive approach was incorporated by asking participants for comments and feedback on my notes and conclusions. Both organizations were asked to comment on the model presented in Figure 1. Transcripts of interviews were analyzed for phrases and words related to the research questions, and exemplary quotes have been included in the Results section.

RESULTS

Three research questions were addressed to test the practical model of ethical issues management presented in this article. I wanted to ensure that the model re-
flected an accurate flow of the issues-management process, was easy to understand, and covered the theoretical areas discussed in the conceptualization. By using two organizations and basing the practical model on their comments and feedback, the model presented here could be adaptable for use across industries and in many diverse organizations.

The Issues Management Process and Organizational Structure

RQ 1: What is the structure of issues management and issue decision-making in the organization, including access to the dominant coalition or CEO?

This research question addresses organizational structure to determine whether the autonomy necessary for ethical decision making is allowed the public relations practitioner. The standard process for conducting issues management is also discussed in this research question, to provide information on how issues arise and how they are decided and managed. It is also necessary to discover what level of power public relations has in the organization and what level of access to the CEO and dominant coalition issues managers hold, and how frequently that access is used. These considerations have an impact on the level of autonomy of individual practitioners as well as the ability of public relations to have input into strategic decision making and planning (J. E. Grunig, 1992c).

In Organization A, issues were managed proactively, with a sophisticated level of environmental scanning conducted on a regular basis. The issues management in Organization A was more symmetrical than the issues management in Organization B, because regular contact was maintained with groups in the organization’s environment, and this contact was used for environmental scanning purposes as well as relationship building and maintenance. For instance, one issues manager in Organization A described the company’s relationship with AIDS activists:

Our principle would be to have ongoing relationships with them. We would characterize the relationships as positive because the discussions continue. But the fact that you talk about the issue is a good thing and that’s what we have, over the past decade now, had as the underpinning of our relationship with the AIDS community.

The typical issues-management process in Organization A is formalized; it involves the use of a model. That model asks issues managers to handle issues by “establishing relationships of trust through communication, feedback, and learning.” The multiphase model is similar to the models discussed by issues-management scholars (Buchholz, Evans, & Wagley, 1989; Chase, 1977; Cheney &
Vibbert, 1987; Crable & Vibbert, 1985; Ewing, 1997; J. E. Grunig & Repper, 1992; Heath & Nelson, 1986; Jones & Chase, 1979; Lauzen, 1997), which generally include assessment, identification of issues, information gathering, strategy and prioritizing, action planning, implementation, and evaluation.

The first priority of both organizations once an issue was identified is to collect facts on the issue. Issues of any significance more serious than daily activity require an issues-management team to be assembled. The team normally consists of several issues managers, a product specialist or research scientist, an attorney, and someone from the finance department; data collection on the problem is likely ongoing. At this point the organizations diverge in how they handle the process, as I discuss in the next research question.

The issues management in Organization B was of a more reactive nature than that of Organization A. Organization B’s issues managers told me they do not maintain regular relations with members of the media or publics for the purposes of information gathering, but they “rely heavily on industry associations for such information.” Issues managers at Organization B were frequently informed of issues by media calls requesting comment on lawsuits or consumer complaints, placing them in a reactionary and less strategic mode than if issues had been identified, tracked, and planned for in advance. Organization B often had to engage in crisis management because of a lack of environmental scanning. Organization A is clearly more proactive in issues management than Organization B by maintaining symmetrical communication with publics, scanning for issues, and planning how to manage emerging issues.

Issue decision making in both organizations was reliant on group decision making in an issue team. One participant in Organization B explained, “For the most part we argue it out. I can remember two situations where you get to a point where you have to go up high to the CEO and say, ‘We’re deadlocked—make the decision.’” The structure of an organization and level of access to the dominant coalition can also affect how decisions are made, so that area was also explored in this research question.

Public relations was not included in the dominant coalition at Organization A, but the highest level public relations practitioner did exercise a direct reporting relationship to a member of the dominant coalition: the head of the legal department. The public relations vice president had been with the organization about 20 years, had 11 senior executives in a direct-reporting relationship, and managed a department of approximately 130 public relations practitioners.

In Organization A, the relationship of public relations to the dominant coalition was hindered because of the formal stratification of the organizational structure. Because public relations personnel reported to a member of the dominant coalition who is in the legal department, their input about the values of publics and stakeholders outside the organization might not be represented in issue decision making. This potential deficit left the organization open to ethical dilemmas arising
from failing to consider the interests of publics and stakeholders. Furthermore, sublimating public relations to the legal department was problematic in that the definitions of ethics used are not those based on moral philosophy or the deontological view of the organization’s ethics motto, as I discuss shortly. Instead, the ethics and values of the organization were relegated to legalistic norms based on retributive enforcement. Therefore, the organizational structure at Organization A was not ideal for issues management and posed some obstacles to ethical decision making.

Commenting on the lack of a direct reporting relationship to the CEO in Organization A, the vice president of public relations said: “I realize that about 80% of people in my position at other companies report directly to the CEO. But I think it works in this case because I have complete access to him whenever I feel it is warranted.” The vice president estimated that 75% to 80% of issues are managed by her and her public relations department and that only a small number of issues needed to come to the attention of the CEO.

Access to the CEO is available but is rarely used; a true ethics-counselor role was used infrequently. The access and contribution of public relations personnel are therefore hindered because the top issues manager might not always have the autonomy necessary to make ethical decisions.

At Organization B, the senior public relations practitioner was a member of the dominant coalition. The top issues manager had been with Organization B about 10 years and was a trusted decision maker and counselor to the CEO. Although the organizational structure of Organization B was decentralized, the top issues manager held an unquestionable amount of power over global issues management. This executive noted that decision making was participatory and collaborative throughout the organization and that “[telephone] calls outside of channels” were encouraged. The participant emphasized, “We try to promote a culture that has everybody focused on enhancing our total reputation.”

This issues manager relayed many instances of counseling the CEO on ethical dilemmas that had faced the organization and emphasized the executive’s role as a decision maker in a collaborative process. The participant told of instances of counsel to the dominant coalition on labor disputes, product tampering or failure, activist pressure, latex allergy litigation, and fatal misuse of various products. The second highest ranking public relations executive in Organization B also spoke of an effective and collaborative relationship with the CEO, including frequent access as needed.

The level of access to the dominant coalition at Organization B was sufficient for public relations excellence (J. E. Grunig, 1992b), in that it had a voice in the highest level of decision making. The organizational structure at Organization B was sufficient to allow the public relations manager the autonomy necessary for ethical decision making.
Prominence of Ethics in Issues Management

RQ 2: How prominently do issues managers consider ethics in their issues management decision making?

Organization A has an unofficial ethics motto, whereas Organization B has an officially adopted ethics statement to guide ethical decision making. Organization A’s motto is an informal quote from the founder, reminding employees that the organization exists to help people live better, healthier lives, not just earn money from its products. Organization A makes a judgment based on what the issue team thinks is best for business, for patients, and for the company, usually without explicit discussion or analysis of ethics. There is no mention of ethical analysis in the issues management model used at Organization A. One participant said, “We all have a clear understanding of what the right thing to do means, so we don’t sit around and ask ‘Is this ethical?’” Issues managers at Organization A made decisions without careful consideration of ethics, because ethical analysis was not the norm in issue meetings.

The intent of making an ethical decision is in the minds of the issues managers at Organization A, but the rational analysis of ethics such a decision would call for is not in place. One participant at Organization A explained:

I mean seriously, ethics is difficult for me to articulate. I don’t think I would have been here as long as I was, from either from their perspective or my perspective, if there wasn’t some shared understanding of ethics. But I don’t know that on a day-to-day basis, I would really sit back and say, okay is this an ethical decision? How do I handle it?

Another issues manager at Organization A echoed the idea this way: “I don’t deliberate. I’m a big boy. I understand these issues and there’s only one way to do things at [Organization A]. It’s the right way.” This issues manager had the intention or morally good will called for in deontology. However, the executive does not deliberate about what the right thing to do actually is, and so he could make a hasty or ill-advised decision. Furthermore, publics and stakeholder interests are not being considered regularly in Organization A’s response to issues.

This research found little support in Organization A for a formal analysis of ethical issue implications and a low level of desire to increase the prominence of ethics in decision making. However, Organization A’s ethical consideration of high-visibility issues illustrates that the issues managers know the important role ethics can play in such decisions and that they have the capability of conducting a formal ethical analysis if they had a model or guidelines to use.

Organization B’s level of ethical decision making is more analytical than that of Organization A. Issues managers consider ethics prominently and consistently in
the issue decisions faced at Organization B. The organization has a formally adopted ethics statement delineating the values through which employees should make decisions. The multiparagraph statement spells out responsibilities in four broad areas. The first responsibility referenced consumers, including patients, doctors, nurses, suppliers, and distributors. The next focus was on employees and maintaining open employee communication. The next broad responsibility highlighted community relations, taxes, and philanthropy. The final point referenced responsibilities to stockholders, research, and development. Participants explained that these four broad areas are arranged in descending order to signify the level of importance of each public to the organization. It is interesting that Organization B’s ethics statement did not include a responsibility to self. It is possible that an ethical responsibility to the self is assumed in the section on employees, but that duty is not explicitly defined.

In addition to the ethics statement, an advanced deontological model of ethical decision making is used at Organization B to thoroughly analyze the ethics of a situation before arriving at a decision. The decision-making model is worded in lay terms, but it is a sophisticated deontological model. Two forms of Kant’s categorical imperative are represented in the model through the questions used to represent duty, dignity and respect, and intention. However, there is no explicit challenge to view the decision from the receiving end as there is in the practical model posed in this article. Organization B spends time considering the issue in regard to its ethical ramifications, using the issue decision-making model, the priorities outlined in its ethics statement, and debating the ethics of the options.

Participants in Organization B said that analysis of ethics was normally conducted in issues-management meetings, and I observed such analyses in four group issue meetings. Issues managers repeatedly turned to the ethics statement of Organization B for guidance in their decision. Several team members in each meeting mirrored the sentiments of one operating company president, who said, “What would the ethics statement have us do?” The observed discussions evidenced a high level of ethics training and understanding, and the issues managers were certain that deciding the issue ethically was their goal. I concluded that the issues managers in Organization B considered ethics thoroughly and from a deontological standpoint in their issues-management meetings. Consider the following explanation from an issues manager at Organization B:

Interviewer: Let me just ask you—in general—when you’re making an issues management decision of some sort what role does ethics play in that decision? Where does it come in?

Participant: It comes in right at the beginning. You know you want to do the right thing. Sometimes it’s difficult to know what that right thing is because you don’t have much information but you want to try to do the right thing because there’s customers, employees, com-
munities, all these groups out there that you have to think about when these issues arise.

Participants stated that ethics was a prominent factor in the decision making at Organization B, perhaps the most prominent factor in many instances. Illustrative of the high priority of ethics in the decision-making process is one issues manager’s argument: “My main consideration was always what’s the right solution.” Ethics is a primary factor in both the individual and group decisions of issues managers at Organization B.

Organization B produced and implemented a consistent and methodical way of analyzing ethical issues, whereas Organization A has not yet embraced the importance of ethical analysis, except for issues of highest magnitude. At Organization A, each issue is approached by individual ethical frameworks, depending on who is managing the issue.

Ethical Frameworks: Deontology Versus Utilitarianism

RQ 3: Does the organization rely primarily on a conceptualization of ethics based on utilitarianism or deontology?

Both organizations operate under the deontological intention of a morally good will, or “doing the right thing.” At Organization A, ethics are of an individual nature, meaning that each person uses his or her personal values to decide what is ethical. Organization B’s approach to considering the ethics of each decision kept the issues managers coherent with the organization’s goals and priorities as specified in the deontological ethics statement.

Organization B is more well developed than Organization A in regard to the conceptualization of ethics that issues managers use. Organization B has a unified approach to ethics, and it is of a deontological perspective. Organization B’s deontological ethics statement clarifies that making a morally sound decision is more important than financial or other concerns. An issues manager elucidated:

It just really does come down to these discussions on what the ethics statement says and what the ethics statement would have you do. These happen all the time. Now it’s very, very often when one of these questions come up someone says, “you know, this is an ethics statement question.” The statement says this is the way it has to be. And that is what we try to aspire to.

The ethics statement is deontological because it commands perfect and imperfect duties to the publics and stakeholders around the organization, as well as sets the priorities among those groups for the company. One issues manager made a classic deontological statement: “Our first concern is always to do the right thing,
not about the consequences or what might happen, but just doing the morally right thing.” Another elucidated, “When I dissect all of this I probably think first how did this happen and why did this happen? What’s the right solution? You have to stand by your convictions.”

Organization A uses many approaches to ethics, and none seems to predominate because there is no organizational guidance, training, or codified values statement regarding ethics. A 4-hr training seminar in ethics was, at the time of this research, being designed for new employees, but that does not include all of the issues managers or older employees. One issues manager contended that “I don’t think we can give any specific training for ethics because each situation is different.” Issues managers in Organization A make individual ethical judgments in an effort to do the right thing, but they conduct no formal analysis of ethical issues and have no guidelines specifying the organization’s values. Another issues manager said “I didn’t have to learn how to be honest. And not to cheat. All these things you learn as a kid.” Although such statements reflect a moral intention of making ethical choices, they show an uninformed attitude about the extent to which moral philosophy and ethical deliberation can contribute to effective decision making. In contrast to the issues managers at Organization B, none of the participants in Organization A exhibited a familiarity with moral philosophy or decision-making frameworks based on ethics.

The majority of issues managers at Organization A prefer a deontological approach, but views of ethics within the organization are mixed. One issues manager at Organization A identified with the intentions and duty of deontology and critiqued the weakness of utilitarianism’s reliance on consequences:

I don’t think you know the consequences. See it’s funny because you can’t predict the outcomes. I find that with the media too. You can have ... are your intentions correct, is your position correct, and the outcomes and the consequences are unknown. Sometimes you hope you can predict them and when you are right, great. But there are many times when you just can’t so you have to focus on what’s the right thing to do and let the outcomes be secondary.

Another issues manager concurred: “The bottom line is, you always do the right thing.”

Organization A’s head public relations executive used a utilitarian approach, mixed with legalistic and deontological frameworks. In addition, the person to whom the highest ranking public relations person reported was the corporate ethics officer—an attorney who uses a legalistic approach to ethics. One issues manager said “Well, I think another good test for ethics is sometimes we talk to the lawyers.” A shortcoming of this approach is that what is legal does not define or necessarily indicate what is ethical.

Even though Organization A intends to use a deontological approach of “doing the right thing,” as opposed to the utilitarian goals of serving the greatest good or
creating the greatest happiness, there is no framework for analysis in place to help managers discover what the right thing might be. Having a disjointed approach to ethics is problematic, as seen in this statement from a participant: “It’s funny because I don’t ever feel as if I grapple with ethics. It’s not even … you know, it doesn’t come to mind.”

One participant explained that she held a deontological ethical framework but did not know how to use that framework to logically analyze the ethics of issues: “I think it’s almost instinctive. You either know the right thing or you don’t.” Issues managers at Organization A appear to infer that there is something inherently weak in deliberating the ethical implications of a decision, as if they have to automatically know the right thing to do or they are not moral people. This aspect of the organizational culture can be counterproductive in that it leads to rash decision making and then having to solve the problems such an approach might engender.

Combining deontology and utilitarianism in different situations, and connecting a reliance on individual judgments or legal norms, invites confusion. This approach to ethics leaves no single approach as the clear or safe choice for issues managers. Mixing paradigms to this extent might lead to confusion for both internal and external publics. Such an approach could also lead to Organization A gaining a reputation as an unpredictable or unreliable company. Although the issues managers try to make ethical decisions, that cannot be assured because of the inconsistent consideration given to ethics and the lack of formal ethical analysis on a majority of issues.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

The practical model posed in this article was tested successfully in an empirical setting. It does represent the general flow of the issues-management process in the participating organizations. The model captures the deontological paradigm of the issues managers and elucidates further deontological considerations for issue analysis. The ethical-consideration triangle brings to light many publics and stakeholders for consideration in the decision, and excellence theory (J.E. Grunig, 1992b) is incorporated in the symmetrical communication represented in the model.

Issues managers need a consistent and reliable guide to ethical decision making for use in issues management. To serve that need, the normative model (Bowen, 2000, 2004) was reworded for practical use. The practical model necessarily assumes that an issue is identified as the condition that leads the issues manager to the model and that the organization is approaching the issue decision making from a deontological perspective of using universal moral principles, rather than using consequentialist philosophy, such as utilitarianism, to decide the issue.

Minor revisions to the practical model were made according to the empirical study findings, and they were incorporated into Figure 1. The senior public rela-
tions practitioner at Organization A provided feedback on the need for simplification of the model and the requirement of a clear flow from item to item. The items were simplified, and the use of brackets was added. Changes were made to represent the model as a flow chart that is easy to follow; for example, “Start here” was added at the beginning of the model.

One issues manager suggested that more lay terms be included in addition to the philosophical terminology in the model, and those were added. The model was also made more accommodating by phrasing each of the requirements of Kantian theory as questions the issues manager can pose. For instance, to fulfill the requirement of autonomy, the issues manager poses the questions: “Am I acting from the basis of reason alone?” (ensuring rationality) and “Can I rule out political influence, monetary influence, and pure self-interest as subjective norms that might influence my behavior?” (eliminating bias).

Role of the Research Questions

The practical model integrated the issues-management structures at Organizations A and B by allowing for both individual and group consensus decision making. The research question examining the structure of issues management in the organization allowed me to ensure that the type of decision making actually used would be symbiotic with the practical model posed here. If the issues manager is autonomous, then he or she can make the decision or use a group consensus decision involving an issues-management team. If the issues manager is subjective, then a group consensus decision must be used.

The second research question explored the extent to which ethics was a decision-making consideration in the issues management of participating organizations. The disparity of findings between Organizations A and B proved significant. The use of an ethical analysis model at Organization B allowed an in-depth analysis of decisions that can lead to more effective and enduring solutions. Ethical analysis was encouraged as a part of the issues-management process at Organization B.

Organization A did not consider ethics explicitly in its issues management, unless the issue had progressed on to a visible crisis. Furthermore, there was a lack of ethical codification in the organization that led to individuals making decisions based on situational ethics and personal value systems rather than a unified organizational approach to ethics. One can conclude that a rational and consistent approach to ethics would be preferable because it helps to maintain trust and build ongoing relationships with publics.

The third research question was designed to ensure that a model based on Kantian deontology was appropriate for use in the participating organizations. Empirical study confirmed that both organizations were deontological in nature. Organization B had formalized its belief system in a deontological ethics state-
ment. Issues managers in Organization B explained that they believed their moral duty was to do what was right despite the consequences of the decision. Organization A did not have a formal ethics statement, but the preference among issues managers was a deontological approach. Although some issues managers in Organization A mentioned utilitarian concepts, the overarching yet unofficial motto was to “do the right thing.” Therefore, a deontological decision-making paradigm as posed in this article is appropriate for use in both participating pharmaceutical firms. It is likely that many other organizations, in the pharmaceutical industry as well as other industries, are primarily deontological and could adopt this practical model for ethical issues management.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This research developed a model for practical ethical decision making and tested and refined that model at two global organizations. The organizations participating in this research were large, employing tens of thousands, and both were based in the United States. These considerations could affect whether and how the model could be applied to smaller organizations or those headquartered in other countries. For instance, smaller organizations might not be as equipped to devote the time and resources necessary to conduct a thorough ethical analysis. Organizations headquartered in countries without a Judeo–Christian ethical basis (De George, 1999) might find implementing the model difficult. A particular challenge could come in trying to apply the model in collectivist societies, such as China because of its reliance on individual autonomy. Therefore, future research should test this model in non-Western businesses before attempting to implement in such organizations.

Furthermore, the sample studied in this research could influence the outcome of this study because of a volunteer bias in the two participating organizations. These two organizations hold ethics in high regard and desire to be ethical corporations. Because the organizations that agreed to participate are generally reputed to be the two most ethical in the pharmaceutical industry, one can assume that the participants felt little if any fear of taking part in this study. Caution should be exercised when extending the findings presented here to organizations with different ethical decision-making structures or less emphasis on ethics. This comparative case study is a study of exemplars rather than being generalizable across an industry.

The organizations that chose not to participate in this study might have declined because of trepidation about a researcher scrutinizing their ethics. One organization, so closed in structure that I could not ascertain the name of anyone in the public relations department, did not allow me to be connected with that department by telephone. Studying such an organization surely would provide counterpoints to much of the data in this study. Organizations with an asymmetrical world view are
closed and resistant to change; by not allowing access, they reinforce their status quo. Unfortunately, it is perhaps the organizations in greatest need of ethical counsel that chose not to participate in this research. Future research should include organizations that are less than exemplary in ethics, whose organizational cultures do not value ethics as central to the organization, or who place little emphasis on ethics in decision making.

**Why Should Organizations Use This Practical Model?**

Issues managers must integrate business decisions with ethics. To remain viable, businesses require decisions to be made, issue policies to be determined, and issues to be resolved. Issues managers are charged with the responsibility of analyzing issues and making the correct decisions. In the terms of many participants in this study, options are not black or white, but gray. The practical model allows issues managers to conduct a thorough, systematic analysis of the ethical aspects of a decision and to understand that decision, and its ramifications, from a multiplicity of perspectives. Regardless of which ethical paradigm is implemented, conducting a rigorous and methodical analysis of ethical decisions ensures that a more sound decision is made than if an informal approach to ethics had been used. Perhaps the larger question is whether an organization has a formal ethics program in place—complete with a decision-making model and ethics training for managers.

Most managers have little training in ethical analysis or decision making (Bowen, 2002). All issues managers bring a set of personal values they normally apply to the ethical part of a decision and therefore believe they have addressed the ethical issue. However, using individual values as a guide to organizational decision making is problematic. Such decision making undoubtedly leads to an inconsistent organizational approach to ethics and endangers the reputation of the organization as a reliably ethical company. The component of a rational analysis of ethical dilemmas is often lost when using individual ethical frameworks.

The lack of a rational and systematic analysis might leave unconsidered in the decision any number of groups from the ethical consideration triangle (see second half of Figure 1) of self, publics, stakeholders, organization, and society. Issues managers basing decisions on individual values also could omit viewing the decision from the perspective of any of these groups because an individual-values method does not require the decision maker to do so. Issues managers using the individual-values approach to ethical decision making should pose the questions: “Are we as a company being consistent in applying ethics to a decision? Are we addressing all the ethical issues inherent in a decision?”

Symmetrical public relations is an intrinsic component of the practical model. Dialogue between the organization and the groups in the ethical-consideration triangle can construct more enduring solutions to ethical issues than the organization
might be able to construct alone. An issues manager at Organization A explicated why considering the ideas of publics is important:

And it strikes me that when you make decisions you consider what the right thing is across many different audiences. And imbedded within that is the recognition that any decision that you make is a balancing of interests. The quality of the decision that you come up with is almost always better.

Such dialogue and collaboration often lead to mutually beneficial solutions, such as Organization A using bovine corneas from animals already used for food purposes to test an eye medication. These corneas were cheaper and more consciouis for Organization A, and animal rights activists could live with the decision because it meant no additional cows were to die for testing that drug. The symmetrical model is of great importance because it allows issues managers to gain knowledge of the issue from a perspective outside the organization and to incorporate that knowledge in its decision making. Philosophers (Baron, 1995; Habermas, 1984, 1987; Kant, 1785/1964) have agreed that dialogue is an inherently ethical form of communication.

The deontological branch of ethics argues “Do what duty indicates is ethically right.” A decision using a deontological paradigm is potentially more complex than one based on utilitarianism, wherein the philosophy directs a clear path of serving the self or the good of the greatest number. Deontology is based on the moral agency of the individual, and that aspect of the theory confers a great responsibility on the individual issues manager. With that responsibility comes a need to rationally and thoroughly consider the ethics of issues, and this practical model of ethical issues management provides a sound basis for that analysis.

REFERENCES


