

Ethical Decision Making in Issues Management Within Activist Groups

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Public relations practitioners face many ethical challenges, specifically in issues management (e.g., Bowen & Heath, 2005; J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 1996). By its definition, issues management is concerned with defining issues and problems, manages them through internal and external communication with publics, and often confronts conflicting value systems among publics. Therefore, issues management is on the forefront of ethical decision making in an organization (Heath, 1990).

Deontology has been suggested as one of the major theoretical underpinnings for ethics research (e.g., Crawley & Sinclair, 2003; Smudde, 2005). Bowen (2004) proposed a normative theoretical model for ethical decision making in issues management based on Kantian deontology (autonomy, the principle of universality, duty, dignity and respect for others, and the morally good will) and two-way symmetrical communication. Support was found, but more research is warranted to examine the model in different organizational contexts. It is imperative to test the applicability of the normative deontological model (Bowen, 2004) in a new context—that of a non-profit activist coalition.

Demands for accountability, ethical transparency, institutionalization concerns, competing values and demands of various publics groups have made it necessary to examine the ethical basis of decision making in non-profit organizations (Dando & Swift, 2003). With its mission of problematizing the fiscal policies of the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the participating activist coalition was actually an issues management group engaging thoughtfully in the process of public policies on environmental, labor, development, peace, gender, and social justice issues confronting less developed nations in the world. Through a five-month participant observation in the membership groups of the coalition and 19 in-depth interviews with its issues managers and public relations practitioners, this study attempted to answer the following research questions:

- (1) What is the process of issues decision making in the coalition?;*
- (2) What is the underlying moral philosophy used in the issues management decision-making process?.*

This study yielded the following findings. Participants argued that decision making should be consensus-oriented and based on equal participation and continuous discussion. Unfortunately, the lack of consistent, dedicated, and enthusiastic input by member groups was a significant impediment to a more inclusive decision making process for the management of issues. Participants' valued equality – their emphases

on being against stereotypes, inequality, and biases was consistent with the deontological paradigm. Moral autonomy was a dominant theme that also emerged through discussion of the sovereign right of each country to decide its own macro-economic/fiscal policies. Transparency was another ethical consideration that the coalition used in its issues management. Overall, there was a remarkably high degree of congruence between the philosophical approach of deontology and the beliefs espoused by coalition members.

The data gathered in this study has far-reaching implications in the positive social role of issues management and public relations. The implications for both businesses and activist coalitions are enormous: more responsive organizations, better policy, and more inclusive and socially responsible private and government initiatives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Public relations practitioners face many ethical challenges, specifically in issues management (Bowen, 2002, 2004a, 2004b, 2005; Bowen & Heath, 2005; J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 1996; L. Grunig, 1992a; Judd, 1995; Kim, 2003; Kim & Choi, 2003). By its definition, issues management is concerned with defining issues and problems, manage them through internal and external communication with publics, and often confronts conflicting value systems among publics. Therefore, issues management is on the forefront of ethical decision making in an organization, and must communicate about those ethical judgments with publics (Heath, 1990). In this study, we investigate the ethics within the issues-management process of an activist coalition comprised of 60 member activist groups.

Previous ethics studies have covered a wide range of topics: codes of ethics (Kruckeberg, 1993; Payne, Raiborn, & Askvik, 1997; Roth, Hunt, Stavropoulos, & Babik, 1996; Skinner, Mersham, & Valin, 2003; Wood & Rimmer, 2003; Wright, 1993), ethical relativism (Kruckeberg, 1996), cultural influence upon ethical standards (Axinn, Blair, Heorhiadi, & Thach, 2004; El-Astal, 2005), public relations as conscience of the organization (Goodpaster & Matthews, 1982; Heath & Ryan, 1989; Ryan & Martinson, 1983), ethics as issues management (Hickson, 2004), social responsibility of communicators (Grit, 2004), and the impact of nationality and gender on ethical sensitivity (Simga-Mugan, Daly, Onkal, & Kavut, 2005). Research on ethics for use in applied and professional communication needs to rest upon a philosophical paradigm of moral philosophy so that decisions can be made analytically and can be well-grounded in solid conceptualization (Baker & Martinson, 2002; Starck & Kruckeberg, 2003).

Researchers have adopted various theoretical approaches to ethics (Rawls, 1971). Deontology has been suggested as one of the major theoretical underpinnings for ethics research (Crawley & Sinclair, 2003; Harshman & Harshman, 1999; Martinson, 1994; Smudde, 2005). This philosophy, conceived by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), emphasizes rationality and moral reasoning of human beings (Bowen, 2004a, 2004b, 2005; De George, 2005; Sullivan, 1994). Bowen (2004a) proposed a normative theoretical model for ethical decision making in issues management based on Kantian

deontology and two-way symmetrical communication (Dozier, L. Grunig, & J. Grunig, 1995; J. Grunig, 2000, 2001; J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 1992; J. Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Nevertheless, the implementation of Bowen's (2004a) model has not been widely examined in different organizational contexts.

Non-profit organizations are not established to preserve the interests of business owners or shareholders (Yang & Taylor, 2010). Instead, they are built on the basis of universal human rights (Yang & Taylor, p. 343). In other words, non-profit organizations are organized to function in the best interest of a public or in the interest of social goods (Beaudoin, 2004). Nevertheless, demands for accountability, ethical transparency (Dando & Swift, 2003), and institutionalization concerns have made it necessary to examine the ethical basis of decision making in non-profits. Competing values and demands may fragment the ethical standards of non-profit organizations. Further, organizational confusion or misstatements (Cheney & McMillan, 1990) and a few infamous scandals at non-profit organizations have cast a light of skepticism from publics and donors not vastly different from that caused by infamous corporate scandals such as Enron's (Bowen & Heath, 2005). Therefore, it is imperative to test the applicability of the normative deontological model in a new context—that of a non-profit activist coalition.

The Ethics of Issues

The authors build upon the deontological issues management process designed by Bowen (2004a, 2004b, 2005) and explore whether and how that approach exists within an activist environment. The deontological issues management process is conceptually based on Kantian deontology and J. Grunig's (1992) two-way symmetrical communication.

A Deontological Theory of Ethical Issues Management

Autonomy

Autonomy is one of the primary theoretical concepts of Kantian deontology (Bowen, 2002, 2006; Bowen & Heath, 2005; De George, 1999; Sullivan, 1994). Kantian philosophy stipulates that rationality within a decision maker is what enables her or him to make moral judgments autonomously (Sullivan, 1989). De George (1999) explicated autonomy by arguing that being moral is equivalent to acting rationally from the inside of a person. Kant acknowledged that rational human beings can reason in an independent way and make morally right decisions free from prudential norms that are based upon self interests and self advantages (De George, 2006; Sullivan, 1989). To act according to autonomy in practice, professional communicators should not be biased by their considerations of personal or organizational interests or advantages in ethical decision making.

The principle of universality

There are three forms of Kant's categorical imperative that deontological philosophers use to determine an ethical action; the most widely applicable statement refers to universality. Kant (1785/1964) stated that "act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law" (p. 88). Therefore, the categorical imperative stipulates that rational human beings act according to their objective maxims of reason that should be universal to all individuals facing similar situations across different time, cultures, and social norms (Bowen, 2004a, 2005; De George, 1999; Sullivan, 1994). The categorical imperative also suggests that making ethical decisions presupposes recognition of reciprocal moral obligations between people (Sullivan, 1994).

Duty, respect for others, and the morally good will

Like the nature of universality, duty is also embedded in the first formulation of Kant's categorical imperative (Bowen, 2004a, 2005). It is a moral duty for human beings to reason and make judgments based on objective and universal moral maxims.

Dignity and respect for others were expounded in the second formulation of Kant's categorical imperative (Paton, 1967). Kant (1785/1964) argued, "Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end" (p. 96). To respect the dignity, human beings should be seen as "an end in themselves" rather than "a means to an end" (Bowen, 2005, p. 197).

The third formulation of Kant's categorical imperative implies an important principle of intention or a morally good will (Paton, 1967; Sullivan, 1994). With a morally good will, autonomous agents act out of moral duty rather than prudential or biased personal concerns.

Two-way symmetrical communication

Two-way symmetrical communication is argued to be the most ethical way of practicing public relations because its collaborative/symmetrical nature enables an organization to accomplish its goals and simultaneously to be ethical and socially responsible (Botan, 1993; J. Grunig, 2000, 2001). Smudde (2005) indicated that two-way symmetrical communication is a key ingredient of dialogic and ethical public relations because it communicates open and honest information and actively seeks feedback rather than attempting to manipulate perceptions of an organization.

Activist Coalitions and Their Decision Making

L. Grunig (1992b) conveyed a policy perspective in her definition of activist groups, noting that “Whether they are called pressure groups, special interest groups, grassroots opposition, social movements, or issue groups. . .they all allude to collections of individuals organized to exert pressure on an organization on behalf of a cause” (p. 504). Other scholars make distinctions between quasi-governmental civil society organizations (Lehman, 2008) versus interest groups as non-political and pressure groups as political (Thomas & Hrebenar, 2008). In their decision making, the identification and definition of an issue is the beginning of a complex interplay of communication and decisions between member organizations, representatives, and headquarters of the member coalitions. The group must then discuss and decide the optimal objective of the coalition, what research should be conducted , and determine issue alternatives before initiating a communication campaign (Hainsworth, 1990; Heath, 1997; Heath & Nelson, 1986; Jones & Chase, 1979).

Often the environment of activist groups is too turbulent to be known with certainty, regardless of how much research is conducted. Group decision-making processes are complicated by what decision theorists term decision making under conditions of uncertainty (Biswas, 1997). Optimal decisions are difficult to make in a group environment, unless the conditions of dignity and respect of all viewpoints and maintaining moral autonomy are met for each participant in the decision making process (Bowen, 2005; 2006). Sims (1994) argued, “Pressure toward conformity. . .is the main factor that leads individuals to make and own defective decisions” (p. 56). Therefore, it is absolutely vital that varied perspectives from all member organizations of an activist coalition be sought. Moral autonomy should be encouraged by fostering debate and difference, and respecting the unique perspective, analysis, equity, and rationale of each person and group involved.

Research Questions

A paucity of research exists on the topic of cooperation among activist groups in forming coalitions in developing nations, and the extent to which these groups engage in policy analysis, issues management, and ethical decision making (Elliot-Teague, 2008). This research seeks to fill that knowledge gap by examining an international coalition of activist groups gathered around ending economic inequality in less-developed nations. Our study seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the process of issues decision making in the coalition?

RQ 2: What is the underlying moral philosophy used in the issues management decision-making process?

METHOD

Sample Selection

The *Washington Peace Center Activist Guide* was used to identify potential participating organizations. A non-profit activist coalition committed to the promotion of global justice responded to our inquiry email. The coalition asked for an access interview (Thomas, 1995) during which questions about the purpose, procedures, and confidentiality of the present study were raised. The coalition granted access after the interview and an exchange of further information.

Participating Organization Overview

The activist coalition consisted of about 60 faith-based, solidarity, women's rights, and other types of organizations committed to global equity and justice, with about 50 of them based in the United States and the remaining 10 from the Global South, mainly, those developing countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The causes associated with social justice are many, often involving conflicting values and negotiation of ethical dilemmas (Brooks, 2008). As its mission of problematizing the fiscal policies of the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) entails, the coalition is actually an issues management group engaging thoughtfully in the process of public policies on environmental, labor, development, peace, gender, and social justice issues confronting less developed nations in the world.

Participant Observation

We used ethnographic method because that is one of the most appropriate methods for research that examines in depth the complexities of communication as a process of continuous information exchange and human interactions (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Participant observation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was conducted over 5 months in the membership groups of the coalition. The researchers observed how those leaders and managers interacted with one another in their routine meetings and activities, such as social events they collaborated with local community leaders and leaders of religious groups. Data collection focused on how the decision makers at the coalition took into account the considerations, perspectives, or interests of all parties involved and communicated to them the decisions that have been made. Field notes were coded with regard to the research questions and were analyzed qualitatively for emergent themes and patterns.

In-Depth Interviews

The 19 in-depth interviews (Czarniawska, 2001) were structured to determine from among the various perspectives of issues managers what dominant means of ethical analysis was used in making decisions at the coalition. The interviews ranged from

approximately 30 minutes to two hours in length. In total, about 24 hours of interviews were completed and transcribed.

Data Analyses

All data collection and analysis procedures were approved by a university board for the protection of human participants. Field observation notes and interview transcripts were particularly useful in our data analysis. The 19 interview transcripts were coded for thematic patterns related to the research questions in the method that Glaser and Strauss (1967) recommended in their grounded theory approach to qualitative data analyses. Themes were persistent and recurring across interviews and participant observation notes.

RESULTS

RQ 1: What is the process of issues decision making in the coalition?

An international campaign with the main purpose of getting the WB and the IMF out of the Global South.

To understand the decision making structure of the coalition, its primary mission must be studied. The major issue the coalition worked on was to launch an international campaign against the macroeconomic policies of the WB and the IMF. The key decisions they addressed were: (1) How the coalition could connect its member organizations into a collective effort; and (2) whether the campaign should “shrink” (disempower) or “sink” (decommission) the WB and the IMF.

Interview participants remarked that the mission of the coalition is somewhat ambiguous and dual-faceted. Participants in the interviews expressed various ideas about what the goals of the coalition were. Misunderstanding of the goals impedes a meaningful decision-making process. As one participant explained: “As a kind of coalition, people need to have an understanding of what needs to be done towards the issue and towards our goal.”

A value placed on consensus, equal participation, and continuous discussion.

Participants argued that decisions in the coalition should be consensus-oriented and based on equal participation and discussion. It shows a value placed on dignity and respect that is deontological in nature by encouraging the input of all members in decisions. As one participant argued,

I think you could look at the experience of the IMF strategy meeting. We considered perhaps a couple of options; this was the only option that seemed to have support from different people. And at the end, as you may remember, we offered a space and said, ok, does anyone disagree with that? Let us know... please say something now? And no one really objected. That's ideally how decisions should be made.

Another participant identified equal participation as the basis of meaningful issues management: “We do not just want the organizations to be there. We want them to have a voice share. We want to have conversations and every organization could participate in.” Another participant explained that for truly meaningful issues management, “The process has to be one by which no one is coerced.”

Lack of a meaningful decision-making process due to passivity, role conflict, elitism, informality, and misunderstanding.

Despite the agreement among participants in the core value placed on equal and autonomous decision making, that approach did not appear to be routine procedure in the coalition. Participants identified the lack of consistent, dedicated, and enthusiastic input by member groups as a significant impediment to a more inclusive issues decision making process. One participant explained that a truly meaningful decision making process was difficult to achieve when member organizations were unenthusiastic about participation: “The difficult side of the process is that some people are quite happy to be quiet... [But] we need people to speak up whenever they like, specifically when they have concerns.” Participants argued that member organizations of the coalition should participate in decision making actively, more importantly be committed to the decisions that have been made, and take actions to implement the decisions. “The basic principle is people need to be responsible for their decisions. That’s prerequisite.” In addition, member organizations of the coalition were involved in role conflict on how to balance being an individual organization with being a member organization of a larger coalition.

Some participants problematized the informal decision-making that the coalition practiced and criticized the possible dominance of “loud” voices: “The informal decision-making process at the strategy meeting was sort of decision by attention. It’s like the loudest voices and the most powerful and prominent voices dominated in the whole meeting.”

A related problem was that decisions were often made by only a few people who were in positions of official power. Elites can be very influential in the decision making process of the coalition because of their reputation as being knowledgeable and experienced: “What could happen is that one person has a reputation that he has knowledge, expertise, or experience. So what he says will be taken seriously. So that does inevitably influence the decision making process.”

The presence of an informal decision making process posed a great challenge for meaningful issue decision making in the coalition. Participants spoke of the difficulty in the decision making process, such as this manager, who said:

The decision-making process of the coalition needs to be more formalized. What is the structure? Who is included? Being included... what does that mean? What are you going to commit to? What are the actions you are going to take?

The issues decision making process at the coalition was haphazard, random, and often not inclusive in the deontological sense. Refining and reinvigorating the mission of the coalition, acting on the common core value of inclusiveness, and generating participation from all perspectives in issues decision making would improve the process at the organization, enhancing both effectiveness and ethical consistency.

RQ2: What is the underlying moral philosophy used in the issues management decision-making process?

Deontological concepts in a commitment to the mission of the coalition as responsibility and duty.

Overall, participants expressed a deontological belief system based on justice, duty, autonomy, equality, and concern for good intention. These views and values are consistent with the deontology rather than the collectivist value of a utilitarian approach or the personal character basis of virtue and situation ethics. For instance, one participant commented,

To define ethics, you have to have a kind of moral sense; we haven't said anything specific about ourselves, but there are two things I have mentioned, which are the basis of our moral philosophy: categorical imperatives and deontology. In terms of the work we do, what we are trying to do is just being morally intuitive of ourselves.

Congruent with deontological beliefs of justice, participants often spoke about a need for justice. Some participants interpreted ethics as being committed to the goal of the coalition, a more socially just world. For example, one participant said,

In the context of the coalition, I think everyone in the meeting room should have a sense of ethical responsibility towards working in good faith to achieve our goal...We work for economic and social justice because it is a matter of equality, a matter of something that we think is wrong, our duty to do that.

A clear value on having a voice in decisions, autonomy, equality, duty, and the dignity and respect involved in the categorical imperative emerged in both observational data and interviews across all participants. This evidence allows the authors to conclude that the underlying moral philosophy of the coalition is highly based on deontology and is highly congruent with the principles and research in the conceptualization of this research.

No differences in ethical value systems.

Some participants argued that there were no differences in ethical value systems of the member organizations because they came to the common platform (the coalition) for a common goal. For instance, one participant said, "All the members in the coalition agree on the same principles. They may have slightly different interpretations or definitions of these principles. But generally, I think we have agreement on what the principles are."

Other participants said even if there were some differences in approaches to issues or ethical value systems, the differences did not come into the discussions within the coalition:

I think people may in fact have different ethical systems, but practically I don't think they would bring them in discussions. Yeah, they may have different approaches, knowledge, and come from their own loyalties. But I don't agree there are fundamental differences.

Overall there is a high degree of consistency among the values of members and in the decision making values regarding issues of the coalition.

Being ethical as being against racial stereotypes, gender inequality, class and other types of biases.

Participants' emphasis on being against stereotypes, inequality, and biases are consistent with the deontological paradigm consisting of such key tenets as autonomy, equality, dignity, and respect. Participants described being ethical as going through "an assessment process" in which members of the coalition should ask such questions as "Does the decision further our goal of combating gender oppression and class oppression?" and "Is the decision reflecting any of the negative social sides, reflecting any of the racial stereotypes, gender biases, and class biases?" As one participant commented in his interview:

I also think that having a sense of racial equality and gender equality; I think that's kind of the coalition's ethics to me...you have to embody your belief in racial and gender justice, the gender equality in terms of principle to have an effective coalition. You're working on an issue that mostly affects people of color, mostly affects people in poverty countries, or only affects people in poverty countries.

There are participants who argued that other types of biases or inequality should not be acceptable in an ethical decision making process: "No organizations are silenced because they are small; no organizations are silenced because they are new; no organizations are silenced because they are from the Global South."

Respect for sovereignty and a right of policy space.

A dominant theme that has emerged in the in-depth interviews and the discussion at the strategy session is the sovereignty right of a country to decide its own macro-economic/fiscal policies. Participants argued for autonomous decision making of countries in the global South rather than their being pressured or coerced financially to follow policies that were not seen as beneficial to them. Although the arguments were made in terms of justice and sovereignty rather than the more common terms from moral philosophy of duty and autonomy, the underlying values and beliefs the participants expressed were consistent from the perspective of deontology.

In arguing for decisional and moral autonomy, the communicators routinely related the issue to one of power—both in terms of influence and in terms of financial power. They argued that autonomy was necessary for ethical decisions to take place. Participants in the interviews identified it as an important ethical principle that countries and organizations in the Global North can never set an agenda or direction for those in the Global South. As one participant argued,

It's not like we are going out, for instance, to Africa and say stop the project and that's not what you necessarily do...people in Africa are ready to renounce the project, they are ready to say stop, stop, stop.

Attendees at the strategy session also suggested that African countries that were affected by the macro-economic policies of the WB and the IMF should be respected as independent and autonomous entities with dignity. Those countries should be allowed to decide their own economic goals, policies, and the way the policies help them to achieve their goals. Again, the core belief in dignity and respect for all persons, organizations, and countries is a core value in deontological philosophy, demonstrating an adherence to that paradigm among participants.

One interviewee maintained that autonomy could be fostered by insisting on equity:

Instead of relying on the IMF, African governments could draw on the cooperation of relatively capital-rich developing countries such as China, Venezuela, and South Africa to set up a regional institution that would serve as a lender of last resort, though, learning from its experience with the North and the IMF, it should insist on equitable, no-strings-attached arrangements with these countries.

According to the participants in this study, some countries have successfully opted out of the IMF. Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Bolivia, and some other countries in Latin America have been focusing on alternatives. These countries have held seminars and official summits to discuss what kind of economic institution can replace the IMF and assist their economic growth and social development.

Transparency.

Transparency is another ethical consideration of the coalition in its decision making process. This theme is again in congruency with the deontological paradigm discussed in the present study, particularly, related to equality, dignity, and respect. A manager argued, "An [ethical] decision making process is more ethical, more democratic, more open, and more transparent...and in the longer run, benefits the people involved in the coalition." Other participants concurred, "We want everybody to know who is saying what, who is doing what, who is willing to work on this, who is willing to be accountable for what they said they would do."

Transparency was also covered as an ethical issue at the strategy session. The attendees criticized a lack of transparency in the IMF's making macro-economic policies: "Citizens [in the US as well as in those affected countries] do not know how the policies are made in IMF." The attendees believed that affected countries should be respected as entities with dignity who can participate and bring input in the decision making process of the IMF. The value of dignity, autonomy, and respect was highlighted throughout the discussion with regard to the decision making issues of global economic institutions.

Ethics can be violated by practical concerns.

Some participants argued that activist organizations, for the sake of seeking and securing funds, spend a lot of time in working to achieve short-term, more practical goals, which may not be ethical. This finding evidenced the presence of ethical dilemmas and prudential influences in issues management of the non-profit coalition.

According to the participants, those member organizations of the coalition can get tangled up in the requirements of their grantors: "The grantors' requirements often times do not embody the mission of why you are doing the work." Participants emphasized the importance of autonomy, independence, and commitment to doing morally right things without taking into account prudential influences in issues decision making. Some participants suggested that consensus can sometimes be corrupted by people who block decisions unnecessarily:

If people are involved in a consensus decision making process that they actually don't agree, they are not going to commit to it. They go along with the whole thing, and at the end they say, hey, we wish to get consensus but we don't worry about it.

The real ethical decision making actually means that "at the end of a decision making process everybody is committed to working on, implementing, or contributing to the decisions that have been made. Most importantly, people have a commitment to working on it."

Human beings as ends rather than means toward ends.

There is a high degree of congruence between the philosophical approach of deontology and the beliefs espoused by coalition members. In fact, one participant explicitly indicated that deontology should be the moral philosophy of the coalition:

We still have some power and we have to use that power in ways, you know, as the formula of categorical imperative say, in ways that treat human beings never as means but as ends, right?...I would argue that it's about our ethics.

Clearly, the basis for this participant is a deontological paradigm of ethics. This manager indicated that in making decisions the categorical imperative was used as a guideline,

and specifically mentioned the second form of the imperative, which advises that people should be treated as ends rather than a means to one's own ends. Based on this interview and others, as well as the observation of meetings and daily operations at the coalition, the authors conclude that the primary basis of decision making in this coalition is deontological because of the high congruence displayed with participant comments and observations with the concepts forming Kantian deontological ethics.

DISCUSSION

The aforementioned findings showed that the participating coalition was clearly one which strived to excel in ethical decisions with regard to both its issues management and activism. Both of these functions were undertaken in a manner that demonstrated that ethics was valued by the coalition and a central feature in issues decision making.

The first research question explored the structure of the decision making process in the organization because of its potential impact on ethical deliberations. A finding of central importance is that the organization did not have a consistent, ethical issues decision-making structure. Interviews and observation both concluded that this situation posed a challenge for the organization. An issues management structure and process with concrete steps, such as the one offered in Bowen (2005) should be adopted, trained and implemented throughout the organization.

The authors can conclude from the data participants provided on the problems arising from this lack of a formal decision process that organizations attempting to manage ethical issues would be well advised to provide guidelines to that procedure. A formal strategy, an ethics statement, a flowchart, or other official guidelines might serve to make decision making more inclusive, participatory, and therefore ethical. Refining the mission of the organization would help our participating organization make more effective decisions, and we can advise based on these findings that a well-defined mission leads to a more rigorous ethical decision making process.

In answer to our second research question, the authors can also conclude that a deontological approach was in use at the participating organization. A deontological approach contributes more rigors of analyses than that offered by other approaches to moral philosophy, such as situational, relativistic, or utilitarian ethics. The deontological basis of decisions in the organization gave it strength in that the values of member groups provided for consistent and rational decisions, maintaining the dignity, respect, and autonomy of all involved in or affected by the global economic policies.

A deontological paradigm seems particularly well-suited to an organization advancing "global justice" and the authors can see the benefit provided by equality and autonomy for economically disadvantaged publics. In addition, the inclusive nature of deontology showed a true advantage in this case when dealing with diverse values and power differentials between groups and organizations, and can be recommended for practical application in any type of organization facing discordance in values with publics and power differentials. The authors can also recommend that other organizations would

benefit from adopting a deontological approach to ethical decision making as a way to build relationships based on respect and autonomy with their publics.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Several participants identified a link between power and ethical decision making, both with the WB and the IMF and within the coalition. Berger and Reber (2006) have conducted groundbreaking research on the role of power in public relations, ethics, and the issues management process, but it has not yet been widely applied in scholarly studies. Future studies should apply the concepts of power advanced by these scholars in order to better understand the issues management process and its interactions with power.

Another area rich with potential for continued study is the application of group decision making research to an organization of membership groups such as the one studied here. Much more research needs to be conducted on the decision making process within such a complex organization in order to understand group dynamics, where communication fails, when conflict resolution is needed, and the power and control issues that impact organizational decisions.

Further, the coalition claimed that it does two-way symmetrical communication with its publics, for instance, advocates, ministers, parliamentarians, ex-ministers, and bureaucrats. How does communication about ethics flow between the coalition and these publics in using two-way communication? Can that process be improved?

CONCLUSIONS

The data gathered in this study has far-reaching implications in the positive social role of issues management and public relations. We can see that this non-governmental organization is an organization of activists, committed to social justice, equality and autonomy. These terms are naturally recurring themes in moral philosophy, and we can learn much about how to best manage the interaction of activist member organizations and the potential conflict that ensues when devoted activists pursue a broad social and political agenda. The implications for both businesses and activist coalitions are enormous: more responsive organizations, better policy, and more inclusive and socially responsible private and government initiatives.

The positive social role for public relations, including making possible a more responsible and responsive corporate and governmental policy arena, could lead to the practice overcoming the negative history associated with manipulation and spin. Public relations could play a fundamental role in forming a society of social justice, equality, ethical responsibility, management reflexivity and responsiveness, as argued in Bowen (2010a, 2010b, 2010c).

We have seen that the activist coalition employed many strategies endemic to best practices in issues management and public relations: They considered the ethics of

their decisions; they encouraged input from varied perspectives; they sought to increase the autonomy of publics; they attempted to engage in collaborative problem solving; and they maintained dignity and respect. These principles illustrate how public relations should be conducted across a large and decentralized organizational structure.

The organization we studied did not, however, hold a clear and consistent policy on ethics, nor did it have success with its group decision making process. It is also not clear how they as a coalition of activist groups managed decision making to determine the way it should operate in the interests of the publics. Problematic areas such as these highlight the importance of an organizational policy that is clear enough to lead and flexible enough to adapt to change in the environment. Issues managers and public relations practitioners should strive to create ethics statements, policies, or guidelines to assist everyone in such a broad and diverse coalition in knowing the standards, expectations, and principles that should guide issue decision making.

Group decision making processes are by their very nature dynamic and changing. Study of decision theory is always complicated by uncertainty and risk, two conditions that we can hardly escape in a complex global economy. Designing and testing guidelines for inclusion in group decision making could encourage members who are less willing to volunteer their participation to consider it a duty. Decisions made with consistent means of inclusion of all the member groups in the process should result in more thoroughly-reasoned and enduring decisions. The best and most ethical issues management arises from considering as many alternative views and perspectives as possible. Seeking to create these inclusive issues management teams in can lead to more effectiveness in both organizations and in the public policy arena.

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