Public relations is about the balance of client representation and advocacy without harming public interest. A PR professional’s job is essentially to advocate the client to the public in a way that is mutually beneficial, but this task can be nearly impossible at times. In Robert D. Wakefield’s case, he could not consciously support his client the way the organization was requesting without harming the public.

The school district that Wakefield was working for decided to shut down a public high school without the knowledge or opinion of the public audience that the closure would directly affect. As a PR professional, Wakefield educated his superiors to the benefit and necessity of having a community member present throughout the decision making process, but his plea for openness and transparency was rejected with much disapproval. Eventually, a community member was allowed to be present and the school was still shut down, but Wakefield risked his job in order to do his job properly and remain firm in his conviction that the public should not be kept from having a say in a decision that would have an affect on them. He went against his company and the unethical situation that they were presenting in order to benefit the public and advocate the consumer.
Wakefield seemed to be thinking in a communitarian way—he did what was best for the community and what he would want other members of the community to do. His employers however were working in a way that was almost totalitarian. The leaders did not allow messages to be shared that would harm their cause. They required that Wakefield keep this major change out of the public eye instead of preparing for the public’s response to the idea of closing a school. If they would have instead asked Wakefield to prepare press releases and conferences in order to further inform and calm the public after the news came out that the school would be closing so that the community distaste would not be a large issue, he would have been able to act within the ethical parameters of public relations and do his job. By asking him to keep his mouth shut they attempted to force him into unethical behavior.

Ralph Nader is credited with officially defining the term “whistle blower” as, “‘the act of a man or woman who, believing that the public interest overrides the interest of the organization he [sic] serves, publicly ‘blows the whistle’ if the organization is involved in corrupt, illegal, fraudulent or harmful activity,” (Dryburgh, 156). Whistle blowers affect public policy by bringing issues to light through media interaction. Wakefield’s intentions were pure. He wanted to bring an issue to light instead of hiding it in deceit. His motives were pure, but not all those who blow the whistle are as honest as he. “The motivation of whistleblowers can lie somewhere between pure altruism and revenge, and one question for (Whitehall) legislators is whether paying for information will increase either the quantity or the quality (or both) of the material provided, and whether it will lead to the uncovering of dubious activity that would otherwise lie dormant. Another way of putting this question is whether the desired ends can be achieved without creating a moral hazard,” (Kirk, 1). Wakefield did not stand up against his superiors in
order to obtain a financial stipend, but rather to benefit the public. This is a sign of a truly ethical whistle blower, who has no intention of personal reward or revenge--an issue that presents an ethical dilemma in itself.

**Case Study #2- James Hitesman v. Bridgeway Inc.**

In certain cases, the search for ethical recognition and pursuit of justice in one aspect of life can cause a person to compromise their ethics in other areas. This is exactly the case with James Hitesman, the nurse who blew the whistle when he recognized patient mistreatment at the nursing home where he was employed.

According to an article on NJ.com, New Jersey resident James Hitesman was working as a nurse at Bridgewater Nursing Home--a part of Bridgeway Senior Healthcare--when he noticed an “inordinate rate of infection among patients,” (Wichert) at that facility. After bring this issue to the attention of his superiors and feeling as if his concerns were not properly addressed, Hitesman brought the issue to attention of “various government agencies” (Espinosa) while using an alias in order to remain anonymous. According to the published decision of the court (Espinosa) Hitesman attested to, “A licensed or certified health care professional may assert a claim against his or her employer pursuant to the Conscientious Employee Protection Act (CEPA), N.J.S.A. 34:19-1 to -8, based upon a reasonable belief that the employer's conduct "constitutes improper quality of patient care[.]" N.J.S.A. 34:19-3a(1) and c(1). The statutory definition of "improper quality of patient care" includes the violation of "any professional code of ethics." N.J.S.A. 34:19-2(f),” (Espinosa). According to this law, Hitesman did not act outside of ethical parameters; he was doing his ethical duty. After Hitesman brought the issue to the
attention of health care authorities, the New Jersey Network picked up the story and it became an issue of public attention. Hitesman was fired from his nursing job with Bridgewater. After being fired, Hitesman claimed that his action in contacting health care authorities was for the purpose of “whistle blowing” and ensuring proper patient care and therefore brought the issue to the attention of the court. When the court addressed his case though, the decision was made that, “plaintiff's (Hitesman) proof, and specifically his reliance upon a professional code of ethics not applicable to his employer, was sufficient to support a liability verdict in his favor. For the reasons that follow, we conclude that, as a matter of law, plaintiff failed to prove the first element of his CEPA claim,” (Espinosa) (Feldman). Hitesman did not provide sufficient proof that improper care was taking place, but the real ethical dilemma came with the defendant’s--Bridgeway Senior Healthcare’s--reason why Hitesman was actually fired. It was stated that Hitesman, “was ultimately fired because he removed the confidential administrative logs,” (Wichert) from the healthcare facility. In his desire to uphold the professional code of ethics for nurses, Hitesman broke another law and disregarded another ethical issue by stealing from his employer and releasing confidential information to the public.

This situation is a direct example of a lack of loyalty and a utilitarian form of pursuing the truth. Hitesman’s ultimate goal of upholding the ethics of medicine led him to disregard morality and laws of thievery, confidentiality, and business loyalty. The end result of making sure patients were properly cared for justified the fact that he stole confidential patient information--at least in his mind. The court thought differently. Hitesman also employed a pluralistic theory of value in his thinking--he did what was good for his cause instead of what was right in the eyes of the law. The value of his cause overrode the idealism of doing the “right thing.”
A study done on Australian nurses regarding confidentiality and whistle blowing within the medical field revealed four major themes within the realm of patient confidentiality. These themes were, “confidentiality as enforced silence, confidentiality as isolating and marginalizing, confidentiality as creating a rumour mill, confidentiality in the context of the public’s right to know,” (Lesley Wilkes, 658). This study directly relates to the Hitesman’s case because of his lack of regard for laws of confidentiality. The study found that medial professionals were likely to be silenced by their superiors in the medial field. This was found to be a frustrating issue for these nurses, who believed it “the public’s right to know” about happenings and medical issues (Lesley Wilkes, 660). Hitesman found the issue of spreading infection among patients at Bridgewater an issue that the public should know about, but his lack of information and his utilitarian approach to truth-seeking ruined his ethical pursuit in the end.

Interview

In order to get a professional opinion and input on the ethics surrounding loyalty to consumers and clients, I planned to interview Chelsea Van Arnam, the Senior Project Manager at RipeOrange, Inc., the digital marketing and event coordinating division of the Orange County Register. I arranged to interview Van Arnam because she holds a position that I would love to explore and potentially hold one day, as I am going to great lengths to become a professional event coordinator. I also knew Van Arnam as my supervisor in my current internship. As her employee, I have often been curious about what she considers to be ethical--as well as what she finds to be moral and just from a religious standpoint--in the line of work that we do at RipeOrange, Inc.
Upon arriving to do my interview with Van Arnam, I had another volunteer come forward who wanted to be a part of our ethical discussion. Kate Hein, a digital marketing strategist at RipeOrange, Inc. joined us for the interview.

In my opinion, both Hein and Van Arnam were logical and ethically-sound in the vast majority of their opinions that they shared. They gave a vast amount of input regarding what they would do if placed in a situation in which they felt they would be unable to perform their job, as Wakefield felt in Case 1, and how they would go about standing up to their superiors regarding the importance of proper PR. They also supported the court’s decision in *Hitesman v. Bridgeway Inc.* after learning the true reasoning as to why Hitesman’s employment was terminated and attested to the fact that Utilitarianism is not an ethical means of justice in the modern professional world.

One point that Van Arnam made in the interview was that if a professional chooses to leave a situation where they are not being allowed to do their job even after explaining its importance repeatedly, any other company that professional approaches for a job should respect them for remaining true to their ethical values. “I am qualified enough to go elsewhere and anywhere else I go should respect me for that decision,” Van Arnam said. I agree with that statement and I believe that to be one of the many benefits of PRSA--the Public Relations Society of America--and other professional groups that support ethical public relations.

The only thing that I was slightly disappointed with in this interview was one of Hein’s responses. Kate Hein is a professed Christian who is a part of a local church in Orange County. For this reason, I believed that she would display a slightly more faith-based approach to ethics that Van Arnam, who is not a professed believer, but she tended to separate her morality from her
ethical behavior. I especially noticed this in her comment regarding the first case. Hein said, “It’s (standing up for your beliefs and personal convictions) a risk, it’s a gamble but you need to do what you need to do for your family and for your personal fulfillment and if that’s a paycheck then there’s your answer, but if that is your integrity or your values or morality and those things are more important to you then that then you gotta do what you gotta do.” As a Christian, I feel as if there is never a situation in which disregarding your faith, convictions, and morality is a necessary or just thing to do. It surprised me that Hein thought differently. Acting in a way that is above reproach is not an easy thing to do, especially when the well-being of a family is at stake, but as Christians we are commanded to follow the Lord and trust that He will provide. I would leave a situation in which I was asked to disregard my personal convictions without a doubt. She also stated that conviction is up to an individual’s personal beliefs--this was supported by Van Arnam. I agree that people do not always have the same views on ethics and morality, but I think that many ethical situations are universal. Just because a person does not believe something to be wrong does not mean that it is right. Ethics are not dependent on personal belief, but the actions one takes regarding ethics are.

I was very pleased with the results of my interview and the feedback I received, even though there were a few responses to my case studies that surprised me. Getting to look into the minds of two professional women regarding their ethical values was so interesting and valuable and I believe that I will be able to relate it to my future career.
Collaboration

In order to improve this paper, I collaborated with Chelsea Seabert, a senior Journalism student who is also in Philosophy & Ethics of Media this semester.

After looking over my paper, Chelsea corrected some grammatical and mechanical errors--thank goodness--and suggested that I add more to the Interview section of my paper, as it is the part of the paper that holds the most weight. I did this by adding things that I appreciated about the interview instead of simply highlighting the areas I was disappointed with. She really liked that I had been able to interview two people and that I was able to relate their ideas of one another instead of simply to my own opinions.

On a less important level, Chelsea suggested that I attach my interview transcript separately as an appendix since it is nine pages of material and was bulkily inserted into my document.

I believe Chelsea’s feedback greatly improved areas of this paper!
Works Cited


Van Arnam, Chelsea, and Kate Hein. Personal interview. 19 Apr. 2013.