

Course: Corporate Communication and Public Relations

Lecture 14: Ethics in corporate communication and public relations

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Objectives

By the end of this lesson, learners will be able to:

1. Define well ethics.
2. Explain effectively the professional code of ethics.
3. Discuss clearly mass media law in Rwanda.
4. Illustrate adequately ethical challenges in Corporate Communication and public relations and actions to be taken when they occur.

1. Introduction

Ethics in corporate communication and public relations is very significant for numerous reasons, all of which contribute to the long-term success and growth as well as the sustainability of a company and/or an organisation.

Maintaining a strong culture of compliance in the workplace requires ethical communication. When executed properly, ethical communications may strengthen the reputation of your business and lower total risk.

Professionals in public relations have an obligation to conduct themselves in accordance with industry best practices. As they manage their companies' brands and disseminate information to the public, public relations specialists must always act ethically.

2. Definition

Generally, in any profession, ethics refers to the application of moral principles and values in the workplace to enhance effective decision making and good conduct in a manner that is line with ethical standards, integrity, and a sense of accountability.

Ethics in corporate communication and public relations refers to the principles, values, and standards that determine and set guidelines for the conduct of individuals and institutions or organizations in their communications and collaborations with different partners and stakeholders for a number of reasons.

These ethical considerations are very important in upholding trust, credibility, and positive relationships with the public, clients, employees, and other relevant stakeholders.

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According to Beauchamp & Childress (2019) ethics refers to the principles, values, and moral guidelines that govern and influence the conduct of individuals or groups. It involves distinguishing between right and wrong, and it provides a framework for making ethical decisions and judgments. Ethics encompasses a set of standards that guide behavior, emphasizing concepts such as integrity, honesty, responsibility, fairness, and respect for others.

3. Ethics in corporate communication

Ethics in corporate communication refers to the ideals and tenets that govern information sharing both inside and outside of a firm, it is a crucial component of company operations. It includes a variety of tasks, such as information sharing across several channels, internal communication with staff members, and communication with external stakeholders like investors and consumers.

Corporate social responsibility and ethical behavior may have a big impact on a company. For instance, they could draw attention to the company's offerings, increasing revenue and earnings.

Ethics in communication help to build trust between the two sides, increase credibility, and facilitate better decision-making.

4. Professional code of ethics

A professional code of ethics is a collection of values and rules that specify the moral obligations and behavior required of members of a certain profession. The purpose of these standards is to guarantee that professionals behave honorably, competently, and in the best interests of the people they assist. Various professions have particular codes of ethics that are designed to address the particular obligations and difficulties that each sector presents.

The rules that guide an individual's or group's behavior in a business setting are known as professional ethics. Professional ethics, like values, offer guidelines for how one should behave with other individuals and organizations in such a setting. Professional ethics, in contrast to values, are frequently outlined in a set of guidelines that are followed by a specific group of individuals. This implies that members of a certain organization will adhere to the same standards of professionalism.

5. Universal ethical principles

Fundamental ideas that are thought to be relevant to all cultures, faiths, and intellectual systems are known as universal ethical principles. These values are supposed to direct people's and societies' moral decisions, and they are frequently seen as the cornerstones of moral conduct and decision-making. Although there may be differences in how these principles are interpreted and used, they usually provide a starting point for ethical conversations and they apply across all professions. The following are some of them:

- ✓ Honesty
- ✓ Trustworthiness
- ✓ Loyalty
- ✓ Respect for others
- ✓ Adherence to the law
- ✓ Doing good and avoiding harm to others
- ✓ Accountability

6. Codes of conduct

Professional ethical principles serve as the foundation for professional codes of conduct, which establish mandatory behavior requirements for members of a profession.

They also aim to outline the standards that society and the profession hold for their members.

Codes of conduct serve as recommendations for the minimal level of proper behavior that is acceptable in a professional setting.

Codes of conduct complement other legislation to improve the provision of high-quality services.

Professional codes of conduct provide benefits to:

- ✓ Public, by building confidence in the profession's honesty.

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- ✓ Clients, by providing greater transparency and certainty about how their affairs will be handled
- ✓ Members of the profession, by offering a framework of assistance for deciding what may be "grey areas" and resisting pressure to act incorrectly.
- ✓ Profession as a whole, by offering a shared comprehension of appropriate behavior that fosters collaboration and permits more equitable disciplinary measures
- ✓ Any other person and/or organisation dealing with the profession, by enhancing an easy process that is more reliable and easier to deal with.

7. Mass media law

The term "mass media" describes a wide range of media that use mass communication to reach a sizable audience. Regulations enacted by legal authorities to regulate the use of mass media are known as mass media law.

Mass media law in Rwanda is controlled by a number of laws and rules that seek to uphold media professionalism, safeguard freedom of expression, and assure ethical and responsible journalism. The government of Rwanda put up significant legislation and rules pertaining to Rwanda's mass media.

The law no 04/2013 of 08/02/2013 relating to access to information establishes the rights and responsibilities of media practitioners and governs media operations in Rwanda. It establishes guidelines for ethical journalism while advancing media independence and freedom. Additionally, it creates the Media High Council (MHC), a regulatory organization tasked with monitoring media activities and upholding media ethics.

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Furthermore, the Rwanda Utilities Regulatory Authority (RURA) was created as a regulatory agency in charge of monitoring the media and telecommunications industries in Rwanda in order to ensure compliance.

It manages complaints about media services, keeps an eye on media operations, and makes sure license criteria are met.

In Rwanda, press law and media regulations are provided for print, broadcast, and online media by the press law and related laws. These rules include things like hate speech, inciting violence, defamation, and privacy protection.

a. Defamation

In legal terms, defamation is the act of making false statements about someone to a third party with the intent to harm that person's reputation. Defamation has two legal subcategories: libel and slander.

Rwandan rules against defamation attempt to strike a compromise between the right to free speech and the preservation of people's reputations. The act of making untrue claims about someone that damage their reputation is referred to as defamation.

b. Invasion of Privacy

The term "invasion of privacy" describes when someone's right to maintain the confidentiality of their private affairs, activities, or personal information is violated. Although many legal systems acknowledge the notion of privacy as a basic right, different nations may have different laws pertaining to invasions of privacy.

In Rwanda, the Constitution of the Republic of Rwanda recognizes and defends invasions of privacy as essential rights. The legal framework in Rwanda pertaining to privacy rights is mostly drawn from constitutional provisions and fundamental legal concepts, notwithstanding the existence of specific statutes addressing invasions of private.

The following is an overview of privacy rights and invasion of privacy in Rwanda:

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i) Constitutional Protection

The right to privacy is guaranteed by article 23 of the Rwandan Constitution. Every individual is guaranteed the right to the privacy of their home, family life, correspondence, and communication. The foundation for Rwanda's protection of private rights is this constitutional article.

ii) Data Protection

Rwanda has put in place data protection laws to protect people's private information. Both public and private enterprises must abide by the law on the Protection of Personal Data, when it comes to the collecting, processing, storage, and use of personal data. This legislation gives people the right to access, correct, and safeguard their personal data as well as requirements for data controllers.

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iii) Confidentiality of Communications

The Rwandan Penal Code clarifies provisions that protect the confidentiality of communications. It is illegal to intercept, record, or disclose private conversations without the parties' consent, with some exclusions for legitimate law enforcement operations.

iv) Reputation Protection

Defamation laws in Rwanda generally deal with injury to an individual's reputation, however invasion of privacy may also involve reputation-related issues.

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A person's legal right to privacy is violated when it is violated by a range of obtrusive or undesired behaviors. Invasion of personal privacy, opening and diverting correspondence, installing devices for unauthorized interception, gathering personal information in computers, and recording and publishing personal information are among the offenses listed in the Rwandan Penal Code that safeguard the right to privacy.

c. Copyright act

A person immediately acquires copyright to an original work when they fix it in a physical medium.

A wide range of works are protected by copyright, including: audiovisual productions, including movies, TV series, and internet videos. Both music compositions and sound recordings.

This legislation creates Rwanda's legal foundation for copyright protection and conforms to international norms, such as the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights and the Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works.

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Rwanda has a copyright law that safeguards a variety of intellectual property types.

Precisely, copyrights fall under the following categories:

- ✓ Literary works.
- ✓ Musical works.
- ✓ Computer programs.
- ✓ Dramatic and dramatico-music works.
- ✓ Choreographic works.
- ✓ Audiovisual works.

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- ✓ Works of drawing, painting, sculpture, lithography, tapestry and other works of fine art.
- ✓ Works of architecture.
- ✓ Photographic works, including works made by means similar to photographic process.
- ✓ Works of applied art such as handicraft.
- ✓ Illustrations, maps, plans, sketches and 3-D works relating to geography, topography, architecture or science.
- ✓ Works of Rwandan folklore.

d. Digital Piracy

The term "digital piracy" describes the unapproved duplication, dissemination, or utilization of digital property that is protected by a copyright, including books, software, movies, and music, without the owner's consent. Despite the fact that digital piracy is a problem everywhere, including in Rwanda, the country's government has taken action to prevent the practice and handle copyright violations.

The primary remedies are the 1996 copyright treaties of the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), which mandate that State members implement technological protection measures. In 1983, Rwanda joined the Paris Convention for the Protection of Industrial Property, the Bern Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works, and the Convention creating the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO).

8. Public relations

The goal of public relations (PR), a strategic communication strategy, is to establish and preserve a good rapport between a business and its different stakeholders.

Customers, staff members, investors, the media, governmental organizations, and the general public are a few examples of these stakeholders.

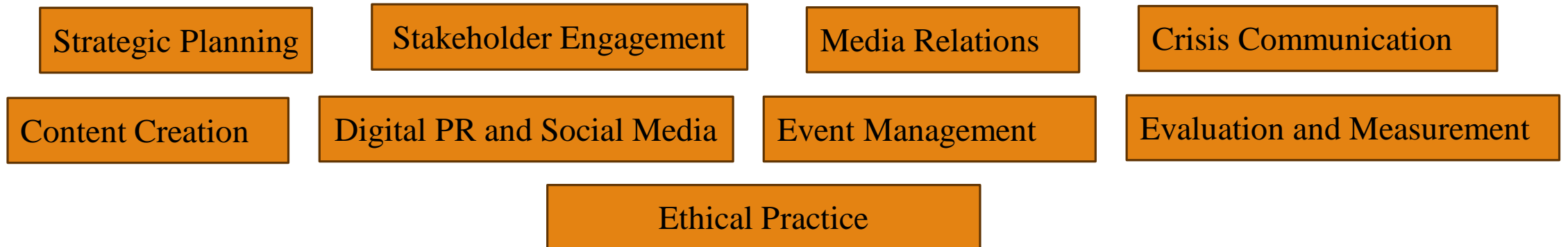
Developing a favorable public perception, enhancing reputation, and encouraging goodwill are the objectives of public relations.

a) Fundamentals of Public Relations

As a field of strategic communication, public relations (PR) aims to create and maintain a positive image, reputation, and relationship between a business or individual and its target market (consumers).

Public relations professionals use a variety of tools and techniques to shape public opinion, forge beneficial alliances, and effectively communicate significant concepts.

The following are the core components of public relations:



i) Strategic planning

Public relations begins with a strategic planning, where PR professionals analyses deeply the current situation, and set related objectives by identifying target audiences, and developing a roadmap to achieve the desired outcomes.

This includes crafting key messages, choosing appropriate communication channels, and setting measurement criteria for progress and success evaluation.

In public relations (PR), strategic planning entails creating and carrying out a detailed strategy to accomplish certain communication objectives that are in line with the overarching aims of a business.

It's a methodical process that entails evaluating the existing state of affairs, setting goals, determining target markets, and creating plans and techniques to successfully convey important ideas.

ii) Stakeholders engagement

Essentially, PR puts a focus on building and maintaining positive relationships with stakeholders, including but not limited to customers, employees, investors, media (local and international media houses where applicable), government agencies, community organizations, and the general public.

A good stakeholders engagement encompasses understanding their needs, concerns, and expectations, and that leads to addressing them through targeted communication efforts.

Building and sustaining strong connections with people and groups that have a stake in or are impacted by an organization's actions and results is a crucial part of the public relations (PR) responsibility of engaging stakeholders. Achieving PR's objectives of establishing goodwill, controlling reputation, and constructing trust requires effective stakeholder involvement.

iii) Media relations

PR professionals, in a company or organization, work closely with media outlets, journalists, and influencers to generate positive media coverage and manage the organization's reputation by spreading news related to what the company or organization is doing.

In order to strengthen media relations, PR professionals develop different contents to be disseminated through the media outlets. They can produce press releases and pitch stories, organize press conferences, and maintain media contacts to ensure accurate and favorable media representation to keep a positive image of the company or organization.

iv) Crisis communication

PR plays an important role in strategically managing and mitigating crises or adverse situations that may affect an organization's brand name.

In order to be successful in crisis management, the PR develops crisis communication plans, provides timely and transparent information, and manages the flow of communication to minimize negative impact and restore public trust.

This works perfectly when the PR acts promptly to address raised issues and always check if the organization's brand name is being attacked or not.

v. Content creation

PR professionals create regularly compelling content to engage target audiences and convey key messages effectively in line with the mandate of an organisation.

That content can be developed by producing press releases, articles, blog posts, social media updates, speeches, and other communication materials. The content should be crafted by considering the needs and preferences of different platforms and channels.

Content creation is the process that enables an organisation to develop and spread information to target audiences.

Ultimately, reputation management, connection development, and message delivery are all made possible by effective content.

vi) Digital PR and Social Media

Social media and digital PR are integrated elements of contemporary communication strategies that improve an organization's online visibility, standing, and audience involvement.

Nowadays, PR incorporates online platforms and social media to easily and reach and successfully engage with target audiences. Thus, digital PR strategies involve monitoring online conversations, managing online reputation, utilizing social media platforms, and leveraging digital tools to enhance communication efforts that contribute to boosting the corporate image.

vii) Event Management

In the field of public relations (PR), event management include organizing, coordinating, and carrying out events in order to accomplish certain communication goals and strengthen ties between an organization and its stakeholders. From this perceptive, events might include trade exhibitions, business get-togethers, community outreach initiatives, and product debuts and press conferences.

PR professionals often plan and execute the above-mentioned events to create opportunities for direct engagement with target audiences and brand their organizations.

Events help an organization to productively generate media coverage, build relationships, and create positive brand image.

viii) Evaluation and Measurement

Evaluation and measurement in public relations (PR) are vital processes to examine the efficiency of communication efforts, determine the impact on stakeholders, and gauge the success of PR campaigns.

In fact, measurement portrays insights into the value PR activities bring to an organization, helping practitioners improve strategies and demonstrate the return on investment.

Measuring the effectiveness of PR efforts is critical for a continuous improvement of strategies. PR professionals use numerous metrics and evaluation methods to assess the impact of their activities, such as media coverage, audience reach, sentiment analysis, and stakeholder feedback.

Obtained data helps refine strategies and demonstrate the value of PR initiatives vis-à-vis engagement of organizational stakeholders.

ix) Ethical Practice

Ethical practice is indispensable for maintaining trust, credibility, and positive relationships between an organization and its stakeholders. Basically, the ethical behavior ensures that PR professionals adhere to principles of honesty, transparency, and responsibility in their communication efforts to meet organizations goals and satisfy their audience needs.

PR professionals have to make sure that their communication is accurate, reliable, and respectful of diverse perspectives.

For a successful implementation of ethical practice, it's important to adapt strategies and approaches to specific industries, organizational goals, and target audiences for optimal results.

9. Objectives of Public Relations

Building and maintaining a favorable connection between a company and its stakeholders is one of public relations' main objectives. These goals include fostering mutual understanding and goodwill among diverse audiences, controlling reputation, fostering a positive public image, and supporting successful communication. Through focused and open communication initiatives, the purpose is to deliberately shape perceptions, build credibility, and assist in the accomplishment of more general corporate objectives.

In general, the aims of the company, the industry, and the particular situation all influence the objectives of public relations (PR). Nonetheless, there are a few basic goals that PR specialists usually try to accomplish. The following are some of the key objectives of public relations:

- ✓ Building and enhancing reputation
- ✓ Creating awareness
- ✓ Managing crisis and issues

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- ✓ Influencing public opinion
- ✓ Fostering stakeholder engagement
- ✓ Promoting products or services
- ✓ Managing internal communication
- ✓ Supporting marketing efforts
- ✓ Crisis preparedness and prevention
- ✓ Measuring and evaluating PR impact

In order to establish and preserve good connections, manage reputation, and accomplish corporate goals, PR professionals use these objectives as a guide when they develop and carry out strategic communication activities. PR professionals may pursue different specialized goals depending on the particular requirements and conditions of each organisation.

10. Scope of Public Relations

The scope of public relations (PR), in any organisation, encompasses a wide range of activities and responsibilities that are set to manage communication, build relationships, and maintain a positive image for an organization.

The scope of PR extends to various areas and can include the following:

1. Media relations
2. Stakeholder engagement
3. Internal communication
4. Crisis communication
5. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)
6. Public Affairs

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7. Digital PR and Social Media.
8. Event management.
9. Influencer relations.
10. Measurement and Evaluation.

Basing on the fact that the scope of public relations is dynamic, evolving with changes in communication technologies, societal expectations, and the business time and environment, PR professionals play an important role in shaping public perception, maintaining positive relationships, and contributing to the overall success and sustainability of organizations vis-à-vis the time, organizational goals and customer needs.

Ethical challenges in Corporate Communication and public relations

Ethical challenges in corporate communication and public relations (PR) are pervasive in the professional landscape and they can affect negatively the corporate image. They require practitioners to navigate a complex ethical terrain to apply a sustainable approach.

The challenges that can be encountered in an organisation include but are not limited to the following:

a) Truthfulness and accuracy

Balancing the need to present positive information with the obligation to be truthful and accurate. Ethical challenges arise when there is pressure to manipulate facts or withhold information.

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b) Transparency

Maintaining transparency in communication, particularly in cases of potential conflicts of interest, organizational challenges, or controversial issues. Lack of transparency can lead to a loss of trust.

c) Privacy concerns

Respecting individuals' privacy rights when gathering and disseminating information. Ethical dilemmas can emerge when there is a tension between the public's right to know and the protection of personal privacy.

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d) Selective disclosure

Deciding what information to disclose and what to withhold, especially in press releases or public statements. Striking a balance between organizational interests and the public's right to know is an ongoing ethical challenge.

e) Spin and manipulation

Avoiding spin or manipulative techniques that distort the truth or mislead the public. Ethical communication requires authenticity and honesty, even when faced with challenging situations.

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f) Crisis communication

Ethical challenges arise during crises when there is a need to provide accurate and timely information. Deciding what information to disclose and how to manage the narrative ethically is crucial in crisis communication.

g) Influence on media coverage

Ethical concerns may arise when attempting to influence media coverage through relationships, favors, or other means that compromise journalistic independence and objectivity.

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h) Social media use

Navigating ethical challenges associated with social media, including issues like the spread of misinformation, fake news, and potential manipulation. Responsible engagement in the digital realm is crucial.

i) Sponsorship and endorsements

Ensuring transparency and disclosure in cases of sponsorship or endorsements. The failure to disclose relationships with influencers or partners can lead to ethical challenges.

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j) Employee communication

Balancing the need for open communication with employees while respecting confidentiality. Ethical challenges may arise in communicating about sensitive matters such as layoffs or organizational changes.

k) Legal compliance

Ensuring that all communication efforts comply with applicable laws and regulations. Ethical dilemmas may emerge when professionals must choose between legal compliance and ethical responsibility.

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l) Social responsibility

Balancing the organization's responsibility to shareholders with broader social and environmental responsibilities. Ethical challenges arise when corporate interests conflict with societal well-being.

m) Political influence

Ethical considerations come into play when engaging in political activities or lobbying. Transparency and fairness are crucial to maintaining public trust.

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n) Whistleblower communication

Handling communication related to whistleblower claims ethically, respecting the rights of those who raise concerns while addressing the organization's need to manage its reputation.

o) Accountability

Taking responsibility for communication outcomes, whether positive or negative. Ethical professionals acknowledge mistakes, rectify misinformation, and learn from challenges to improve future practices.

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In addressing ethical challenges there is a need to uphold different principles mainly the ones of honesty, transparency, and accountability.

PR professionals must continually assess situations, put forward ethical considerations, and make decisions that reflect the organization's values and goals as well as the expectations of its stakeholders.

12. What to do after an ethical challenge

After facing ethical challenges in corporate communication, it's very necessary for professionals to take immediate actions to address the situation, learn from the experience, and set preventive measures so that similar incidents do not occur again in future.

There are some important actions to consider:

1. Immediate Response

If the ethical challenge has immediate implications, take swift and decisive action to rectify the situation by addressing any misinformation, providing clarifications, and communicating clearly about the steps being taken to sort out the issue.

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2. Internal review

Conduct well an internal review to understand the root causes of the ethical challenge. Outline adequately any breakdowns in communication processes, decision-making, or ethical guidelines that led to the issue.

3. Transparency and accountability

Be transparent about the ethical challenge, acknowledging any mistakes or shortcomings. Be accountable for the situation and express a commitment to resolving the issue properly.

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4. Stakeholder communication

Inform relevant stakeholders, including employees, customers, investors, and the public. Keep them informed about any steps being taken and activities being carried out to sort out the faced challenge and set up preventive measures.

5. Apology and rebuilding trust

If appropriate, present a sincere apology to affected parties to express regret for any inconvenience and harm caused and explain concrete actions being taken to prevent similar issues in the future. A sincere apology can contribute to restoring trust.

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6. Ethics training and education

Strengthen the importance of ethical behavior within the organization through training and/or education programs. This will help to equip employees with skills and knowledge in line with ethical guidelines. Provide them with resources to support ethical decision-making in their daily work.

7. Policy and process review

Regularly review and update corporate communication policies and processes to limit any gaps that contributed to the ethical challenge. Ensure that guidelines are updated and they are with industry standards and best practices.

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8. Consultation with ethical experts

Where necessary, seek advice from ethical experts, internal or external, to gain insights into preventing similar challenges in the future. Ethical consultants or advisors can provide significant perspectives on ethical decision-making.

9. Continuous improvement

Promote a culture of continuous improvement, where the organization learns from past challenges and strives to enhance its ethical practices. Encourage open communication about ethical concerns and provide channels for reporting issues.

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10. Monitoring and evaluation

Conduct sessions of monitoring and evaluation to evaluate the ethical practices regularly. This involves periodic audits, assessments, or reviews to ensure ongoing compliance with ethical standards.

11. Crisis communication plan

Develop and/or improve a crisis communication plan that includes strategies for addressing ethical challenges. A well-prepared plan helps an organization to respond excellently and properly during times of crisis.

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12. Collaboration with stakeholders

Actively engage with stakeholders in a current dialogue about ethical considerations. Collaborate with external organizations, industry associations, or ethical committees for awareness of emerging ethical standards.

13. Legal compliance

Ensure that communication practices are in designed in line with legal requirements and industry regulations. Seek legal counsel if needed to address any legal implications of the ethical challenge.

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14. Employee support

Provide support to employees who may have been affected by the ethical challenge. Create a supportive environment that encourages employees to raise ethical concerns without fear of retaliation.

15. Documentation and learning

Document the lessons learned from the ethical challenge. Use these insights to refine communication strategies, decision-making processes, and ethical guidelines for future situations.

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By taking these proactive steps, organizations can not only address ethical challenges in corporate communication but also foster a culture of ethical awareness and responsibility. Learning from past experiences is crucial for building a resilient and ethical communication framework within the organization.

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Thank you!