

## **Student's Guide to Transparency**

Dr. Giselle A. Auger, APR, Assistant Professor of Public Relations, Duquesne University

Lessons from the Arthur W. Page Center for Ethics and Integrity in Public Communication

### **Rationale and Overview**

Transparency is not just a buzzword—it is a critical function of organizational reputation and stakeholder trust. Yet transparency is a complex concept. Merely providing information does not necessarily mean that an organization is transparent. For example, in the transcript of Chester Burger in the Oral History Collection of the Arthur W. Page Center for Integrity in Public Communication, Burger says of the U. S. government in World War II, “They didn’t tell everything. There were lots of secrets. But what they did tell was the truth.” In this module students will be directed to listen to stories such as this and to consider in what way such behavior is, or isn’t transparent. In addition to the concept of truthfulness, the concepts of authenticity, trust, and credibility will be addressed as they relate to transparency.

### **Module Instructions**

First, read the articles or sections of articles indicated under *Key Concepts* to gain understanding of the definitions and terms of transparency. Next watch video clips from public relations practitioners and answer questions based on those clips. Finally, read each suggested article under *Module Activities 2-4* and answer the accompanying questions.

### **Learning Objectives**

This module aims to increase understanding of transparency. Through interviews, readings, and questions, the module is designed to help students:

1. Comprehend the meaning of transparency and the integral parts of the construct such as participation, provision of substantial information, and accountability.
2. Understand ways in which transparent behavior can be unethical in obfuscating information or the truth.
3. Identify how transparent behavior is linked to organizational trust and reputation.

### **Key Concepts**

The following concepts are necessary for understanding the basis of transparency in public relations.

Before watching video clips or proceeding with *Module Activities 2-4*, please follow the following link to the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and read pages 1–9 of the article, [“Measuring the relationship between organizational transparency and employee trust”](#) by Rawlins (2008).

Make sure to read through the questions in Table 1, particularly #14–28, which identify characteristics of transparency.

For greater understanding, please read one or both of the following short pieces, which provide synopsis and commentary about Rawlins’ study. The first [“Linking Trust and Transparency”](#) comes from the Institute for Public Relations (IPR) and the second [“Trust and Transparency Go Hand In Hand: Brad Rawlins' research shows that doing things right isn't nearly as important as doing the right thing”](#) from KDPaine & Partners.

When you have completed the reading, define transparency, and identify the various component parts of transparency such as *accountability*.

## Module Activity 1: Watch Video Clips

The following videos of interviews with public relations practitioners have been selected from the [Arthur W. Page Center for Integrity in Public Communication](#) because they address the issue of transparency or related concepts such as trust, credibility, and authenticity. The videos are located in the Center's [Oral History Collection](#). Each video includes a transcript and the relevant sections of the videos and transcripts are identified by interview questions. Some transcripts do not use a numbering system and students will need to count each interviewer question to attain the relevant section.

### [Oral History—Ethics in Public Relations](#)

1. <a href="#">Angela Buonocore</a> Interview Question #5	7. <a href="#">Jon Iwata</a> Interview Question #5
2. <a href="#">Edward Block</a> Interview Question #10	8. <a href="#">Alan Marks</a> Interview Questions #8, #9
3. <a href="#">Peter Debreceeny</a> Interview Questions #6, #8, #9	9. <a href="#">Helen Ostrowski</a> Interview Question #5
4. <a href="#">Chester Burger</a> Interview Questions #5, #12, #15	10. <a href="#">Kurt Stocker</a> Interview Questions #5, #6
5. <a href="#">Roger Bolton</a> Interview Questions #35, #46	11. <a href="#">Emmanuel Tchividjian</a> Interview Questions #6, #7
6. <a href="#">Bruce Harrison</a> Interview Questions #3, #5, #10	

## Module Activity 1a: Video Clip Questions

The following discussion questions are designed to encourage critical thinking about transparency in public relations. After watching the video clips, please answer the following questions.

1. How is transparency connected to trust?
2. How do Internet technologies such as social media contribute to the need for transparency?
3. How are media relations, credibility, and transparency related?
4. In what way is authenticity linked to transparency?

### **Module Activity 2: Visit a Website**

First, follow this [link](#) to Google's mission statement. Next, follow this [link](#) to the *Google Transparency Report*. Please review the site generally, paying closer attention to the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) in each section of the report. Next, answer the following questions:

### **Module Activity 2a: Answer Additional Questions**

1. What characteristics of transparency are covered in the report?
2. How does the report tie-in with what interviewees talked about in their video clips? Give an example.

### **Module Activity 3: Reading**

Please follow this [link](#) to the article by Pasquier and Villeneuve. Read the article and then answer the following questions.

### **Module Activity 3a: Answer Additional Questions**

1. Detail some of the ways, or barriers, that organizations use to block or obfuscate transparency.
2. What was one of the examples given wherein an organization behaved non-transparently?  
What was the type of barrier they used?

- Using the example you provided above, discuss whether you think the organization was justified in using the barrier, or whether they should have behaved differently.

### **Module Activity 4: Reading**

The following two articles come from *Public Relations Tactics*, a publication of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). Please follow this [link](#) to article one, and then follow this [link](#) to article two.

After reading the articles answer the following questions.

### **Module Activity 4a: Answer Additional Questions**

- How will social media continue to evolve and impact both the practice of public relations and transparency in public relations?
- How did the Nevada school district embrace transparency successfully into their communication with stakeholders?

### **Additional Readings**

Kerezy, J., & Saghy, K. (2008). Seeing is believing: Improving credibility in an age of transparency. *Public Relations Tactics*, 15(3), 18, 23.

Menon, K. U., & Goh, K. T. (2005). Transparency and trust: Risk communications and the Singapore experience in managing SARS. *Journal of Communication Management*, 9(4), 375-383.

Rawlins, B. (2009). Give the emperor a mirror: Toward developing a stakeholder measurement of organizational transparency. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 21(1), 71-99.

Webber, E. (2007, April 30). No need to bare all: PR should strive for translucence. *Advertising Age*, 78(18), 8-8.

### **Additional Resources**

Arthur W. Page Society (2007). *The Authentic Enterprise*. Available from <http://www.awpagesociety.com/images/uploads/2007AuthenticEnterprise.pdf>

Echo Research and International Business Leaders Forum (2010). *A world in trust: Leadership and corporate responsibility*. New York: Echo Research.

Edelman (2010). *2010 Annual Edelman Trust Barometer*. Available from <http://edelmaneditions.com/wpcontent/uploads/2010/11/edelman-trust-barometer-2010.pdf>

Edelman (2012). *2012 Annual Edelman Trust Barometer*. Available from <http://www.scribd.com/doc/79026497/2012-Edelman-Trust-Barometer-Executive-Summary>

## References

Campbell, V. (2012). A transparent trajectory: How a Nevada school district reinvented itself with communications. *Public Relations Tactics*, 19(10), 11-11.

Google. (2013). *Google Transparency Report*. Retrieved from <http://www.google.com/transparencyreport/>

Oviatt, F. (2007). Linking trust and transparency. *Institute for Public Relations*. Retrieved from <http://www.instituteforpr.org/2007/05/linking-trust-and-transparency/>

Paine, K. D. (2007). Trust and transparency go hand in hand: Brad Rawlins research shows that doing things right is not the same as doing the right thing. *The Measurement Standard*. Retrieved from <http://kdpaine.blogs.com/themeasurementstandard/2007/09/greater-transpa.html>

Pasquier, M., & Villeneuve, J-P. (2007). Organizational barriers to transparency: A typology and analysis of organizational behavior tending to prevent or restrict access to information. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 73(1), 147-162.

Rawlins, B. L. (2008). Measuring the relationship between organizational transparency and employee trust. *Public Relations Journal*, 2(2), 1-21.

Walton, S. B. (2010). Trendspotting: What you can expect in the coming year. *Public Relations Tactics*, 17(1), 10, 15.