Teacher's Guide to Transparency

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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 Format

Students will read sections of Brad Rawlins' original research article on transparency as well as synopsis and commentary on that reading provided by Frank Oviatt and by Katie Delahaye Paine to gain understanding of the definition and terms associated with transparency. Next students will watch video clips from public relations practitioners and answer a series of questions on those clips. Finally, students will be directed to read a report and two articles and answer accompanying questions. The content under *Module Activities* can be used for grading or to aid with class discussion.

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 students watch video clips or proceed with *Module Activities 2-4*, they will follow the 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). Students are also asked to make sure to read through the questions in Table 1, particularly #14–28, which identify characteristics of transparency.

Students are then directed to 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.

Upon completion of the readings students are asked to define transparency and identify the various component parts of transparency such as *accountability*.

Definition of transparency (Rawlins, 2008):

The deliberate attempt to make available all legally releasable information – whether positive or negative in nature – in a manner that is accurate, timely, balanced, and unequivocal, for the purpose of enhancing the reasoning ability of publics and holding organizations accountable for their actions, policies, and practices.

Components of transparency

Participation

Includes characteristics such as asking for feedback, making it easy for stakeholders to find information, and considering stakeholder needs in decision-making.

Accountability

Organizations should take responsibility for their actions, be open to criticism, provide more than one side of an issue, and provide information than can be compared to industry standards.

Substantial Information / Provision of Information

Organizations should provide information that is complete, reliable, accurate, easy to understand, timely, and that can be compared to previous performance.

Secrecy / Secretiveness

Organizations that are secretive are not transparent. They provide only part of the information, omit important details, are slow to provide information, and the information provided may be difficult to understand.

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

Module Activity 1a: Video Clip Questions

The following discussion questions are designed to encourage critical thinking on transparency in public relations. After watching the video clips, students are asked to answer the following questions. If may be helpful to allow students to refer to the transcripts of videos to answer questions. You can use the additional information provided to help with grading or facilitating class discussion.

1. How is transparency connected to trust?

In the article students read under *Key Concepts*, Rawlins (2008) explores the importance of trust and its interconnectedness to transparency. Characteristics of trust are competence, goodwill, and integrity.

Emmanuel Tchividjian's video clip highlights the importance of trust and the interconnectedness of transparency to trust. Firstly, he notes that trust is essential for the establishment of relationships—without trust "the value of the exchange is very, very low." Such relationships may be with journalists, clients, the government, or media and once you have violated that trust, in other words, violated the goodwill inherent in the relationship it is very rare to regain it. Next, he introduces ideas consistent with the concepts of *accountability* and *provision of information* that are part of transparency when he suggests that maintaining or building trust comes from "being truthful, being open, being transparent, being able to say when you don't have the answer or when you can't deliver the answer, being able to say it." Moreover, "The reaction to the mistakes you make also is essential in keeping that trust. People accept that you make mistakes; we all make mistakes. People will forgive you for mistakes, but they would be much harder to forgive if you try to cover it up, lie, or blame someone else. That's harder to forgive." (See video clip interview questions #6 and #7, Emmanuel Tchividjian)

Similarly, Peter Debreceny discusses the need to rebuild trust in business and the way to gain trust is to earn it. Angela Buonocore suggests using common sense approaches to building trust and her suggested actions reflect the *substantial information* and *accountability* components of transparency. For example, she notes "it is just common sense—it's how do you build trust in your own personal relationships? Do what you say you're going to do. Listen to what other people have to say. Reflect. When you make a mistake, admit it. When something is not right, make the right steps to change it. Be

transparent." (See video clip, interview question #8 Peter Debreceny; and Angela Buonocore video clip interview question #5)

However, being transparent is not necessarily sufficient to build trust. As Kurt Stocker notes in his interview "transparency and disclosure will not create trust." To build trust stakeholders must understand the risks of products or the entire issue, not just a part of the problem or issue. Public relations practitioners must do more than simply disseminate press releases – they must make sure the information provided can be understood. (See video clip interview question #5, Kurt Stocker)

Stakeholders are not stupid and while it is appropriate to be concerned about trust in organizations, it does not mean that most organizations or practitioners should not be trusted. As Roger Bolton argues, "I think that public relations when it's performed well and effectively, it's done with that dedication to the truth. … Publics are smart. And publics deserve and will get the truth and if that's not what we're about, then we won't last long." (See Roger Bolton video clip interview question #46)

2. How do Internet technologies such as social media contribute to the need for transparency?

It is no longer possible to hide from stakeholders until a suitable response can be crafted by communicators and approved by top management. Today, every person with a cellphone and internet access can document lapses of individual judgment or organizational misbehavior and post it within minutes to social media sites such as Facebook, YouTube, or Twitter. Organizations no longer have the luxury of time to ponder and respond. Yet, it is not the Internet or social media that created ethical challenges. As Peter Debreceny noted, these platforms "certainly throw in to sharp relief, the ethical challenges that organizations have because nothing is secret anymore. So in my view organizations

should be doing the right thing because that's the right thing to do. "(See Peter Debreceny, video clip

interview question #6)

Similarly, connecting to transparent components of *secrecy* and *provision of information*, Helen

Ostrowski asks in her interview, "What is one of the Page Principles, the first one? Tell the truth. So if

you're predisposed to lie or to misrepresent yourself or your company, it doesn't matter, pre or post-

Internet, you're going to do that anyway. " She suggests that while the behaviors may be the same,

social media has made lack of transparency greater and more immediate and has changed the

environment in which practitioners operate forever. She notes, "You really have no margins for error.

There's no place to hide. So actually that should be very liberating and it should be very good for public

relations. There are no more rocks that people can hide under, or if they can, not for very long." (See

Helen Ostrowski video clip interview question #5)

Alan Marks interview discussion also highlights the changing environment for practitioners and

organizations brought about by social media. It also highlights transparency's need for *participation*. He

indicates that social media requires executives to enter into the conversation with stakeholders

connected to their organization, listening and responding, rather than merely developing a message and

pushing it out. Says Marks, "I think more and more executives are getting that social media is not just

Twitter, or let's throw up a Facebook page. Social media is a way of operating and a way of

communicating, because it influences the way we connect with each other and the way we engage with

each other. " (See Alan Marks video clip interview question #9)

3. How are media relations, credibility, and transparency related?

For teachers:

Transparent behavior means providing information that is truthful, comprehensive, timely, accurate, and understandable. It means telling the truth about the situation and admitting when you have made a mistake. The media are important stakeholders to any organization. As Dubreceny notes, it is important to provide the media with a point of view about you or your organization in an honest and truthful way. He says "we absolutely have to be truthful and honest in our dealings with the media, individually and collectively." (See Peter Debreceny, video clip interview question #9; and interview questions #6 and #7, Emmanuel Tchividjian)

Similarly Chester Burger, explains how honesty, truth, and credibility are linked. He notes that the difficulty for public relations practitioners is not creating the message or disseminating the message but more a question of why anyone, including the media, should believe them. "Honesty. Everybody believes in honesty. Nobody believes in dishonesty, but I think that with public relations people, corporate people it's overwhelmingly important. Because your credibility that is most important." (See Chester Burger video clip interview question #15)

4. In what way is authenticity linked to transparency?

For teachers:

Like transparency, authenticity is key to building trust and credibility within an organization. Jon Iwata talks about how every company should be ethical, honest, and do the right thing; however great companies do more than just that—they are unique in some way. That uniqueness and organizational values are the core of their authenticity. And in the transparent world in which we live, for an organization to be authentic, those within the organization must be seen by stakeholders to be living the values, not merely giving the values lip service. (See Jon Iwata video clip interview question #5)

Similarly, Alan Marks suggests simply, "authenticity" when asked what the key to trust and credibility is for an organization. Authenticity is something that the Arthur Page Society has been advocating and it is essential, as is transparency, particularly with new communication platforms like social media. He notes "And so you've got to be authentic. You've got to come across as transparent and real and honest. Otherwise, somebody's going to call you out on it." (See Alan Marks video clip interview question #8)

Module Activity 2: Visit a Website

Students are directed first, to follow this link to Google's mission statement. Next, they are directed to 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. Finally, students are asked to answer the following questions. The answers provided are merely suggestions and may be used to facilitate class discussion or for use in grading.

Module Activity 2a: Answer Additional Questions

1. What characteristics of transparency are covered in the report?

For teachers:

The Google Transparency Report does a good job with the *participation* and *substantial information* components of transparency. The report details Google's responses to requests for removals from copyright owners and governments. It provides comprehensive information in the FAQ sections regarding both user requests for data and Google's responsibilities when given National Security Letters. The report also provides information under Traffic, that details how graphs are generated and data is measured.

2. How does the report tie-in with what interviewees talked about in their video clips? Give an example.

For teachers:

There are a variety of responses possible including those relating to transparency and Internet technologies, and to transparency and authenticity.

Based on its mission statement and the responsiveness indicated in the *Google Transparency Report*, students could argue that Google is authentic. According to Jon Iwata's and Alan Marks' interviews, authenticity is comprised of uniqueness and core organizational values that are demonstrated through actions and not merely given lip-service.

Students could argue that Google is also an excellent example of Internet technology that requires increased transparency. Its unique search engine algorithms make it difficult for organizations to hide. As an organization, the *Google Transparency Report* puts information on the Internet for anyone interested to find, read, or criticize – that is being transparent. (See Helen Ostrowski video clip interview question #5 and See Alan Marks video clip interview question #9)

Module Activity 3: Reading

Students are directed to follow this link to the article by Pasquier and Villeneuve, to then read the article and 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.

The following descriptions of barriers to transparency are borrowed from Pasquier and Villeneuve (2007, pp. 151–152).

Illegal Strategies:

- **Non-transparency** is characterized by the fact that an organization or some of its activities are legally exempt from the obligation of disclosing information.

- **Averted transparency** corresponds to the behavior of an organization which is subject to the law but which actively and illegally prevents access to information.

Legal Strategies:

- **Obstructed transparency** corresponds to the use of all legal means to limit access to information (self-censorship, irregular classification of documents, restrictions in the transparency of the processing of requests, etc.).

- **Strained transparency** corresponds to behavior on the part of the public body which, consciously or unconsciously, limits access to information, whether due to a lack of resources for processing the demands, unfamiliarity with the documents, etc.

- **Maximized transparency**: this form may *a priori* appear to be a panacea as it means that the organization makes all the information in its possession available. The public therefore does not even need to ask. However, it may also constitute an impediment insofar as that, if the interested parties do not have the registers, filing systems, etc., they often cannot access the information that interests them or have great difficulty locating it. In other words, too much transparency may destroy transparency.

2. What was one of the examples given wherein an organization behaved non-transparently? What was the type of barrier they used?

Students may select from a variety of examples. The article by Pasquier and Villeneuve (2007) provides examples for each type of barrier. These may be found within the text on pp. 152–156.

3. 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.

For teachers:

This last question is meant to be used for discussion, though it could provide the basis for an essay assignment. Many of the barriers indicated in the article are legal, though they are not transparent. Discussion could center around legal justification versus transparency. Additionally, discussion could entertain the effect of legal versus transparent behavior on public perceptions of the organization and the ramifications for reputation and credibility.

Section 3 of the article, which begins on page 157, explains the reasons for organizational resistance to transparency, and in section 3.3, the authors propose a new way of evaluating transparency that takes into account many of the concepts addressed thus far in the module and video clips such as disclosure and public perception of the organization's behavior.

Module Activity 4: Reading

Students have been directed to read the following two articles 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 students will answer the following questions.

Module Activity 4a: Answer Additional Questions

1. How will social media continue to evolve and impact both the practice of public relations and transparency in public relations?

Walton's article argues that public relations practitioners "must know how to use social media to anticipate and respond to issues." She suggests that the next movement in social media will be the importance of developing mobile social applications that allow retailers to notify consumers when they are in proximity to the retail location and also allow people to identify friends nearby. However, there may also be a retreat 'back to basics' to offset an over- reliance on social media.

Social media will continue to have a profound effect on the necessity for organizational transparency. Because organizations no longer control the conversation they must be vigilant, responsive and authentic. As Walton notes, "organizations will have to speak through their actions and values."

Overall, the most important effect of social media on public relations and transparency is the importance of organizational behavior –they must do the right things and do them right, if they are to succeed.

2. How did the Nevada school district embrace transparency successfully into their communication with stakeholders?

The school district employed all three critical components of transparency—*participation*, *substantial information*, and *accountability*. They provided extensive information on the budget process and opportunities for stakeholders of all kinds to participate in the process. Employees, management, community members, and legislators all had opportunities to promote their points of view, concerns, or questions. Information was provided in a variety of ways to ensure understanding among a wide variety

of stakeholders with varying levels of education. Social media, presentations, town hall meetings,

surveys, and site visits were some of the communication tactics used to deliver information and receive

feedback. The district was accountable for their use of funds, provided information as fully as possible

in a variety of formats to facilitate public participation in the process, and was responsive to stakeholder

questions, concerns, and recommendations. As the result of such transparency the Superintendent who

instituted the changes, won several awards including National Superintendent of the Year.

Additional Readings

Kerezy, J., & Saghy, K. (2008). Seeing is believing: Improving credibility in an age of transparency. *Public RelationsTactics, 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*. Retrieved 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*. Retrieved from http://edelmaneditions.com/wpcontent/uploads/2010/11/edelman-trust-barometer-2010.pdf

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

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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/

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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.