PRESSURE MAKES DIAMONDS: STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP INNOVATION WITH READINESS AND INTEGRITY

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In an environment shaped by uncertainty, public scrutiny, and technological disruption, corporate leaders need new approaches to navigating complex challenges with integrity and purpose. This article presents insights from the first academic–industry panel on innovation in ethical leadership at the 29th International Public Relations Research Conference (IPRRC). Drawing on perspectives from scholars and practitioners, it explores what strategic leadership entails and the central role of ethics in aligning values, governing decision-making, and maintaining the readiness to manage pressure with poise and integrity.

UNDERSTANDING STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP

The true test of strategic leadership emerges under pressure. After all, pressure makes diamonds or breaks pipes, and leadership decisions often determine which outcome occurs. Tough calls are inevitable among competing priorities, conflicting tensions, and nonnegotiables (Voges et al., 2022). Those calls become even more difficult when corporate communication leaders are navigating crises and crisis spillovers (Voges et al., 2023, 2024).

Are you ready to shine through and stand still? Is your team prepared to engage with challenges? Will your organization overcome adversity rather than simply survive it? If the answer is "maybe," that tension can become a catalyst. "Maybe" cracks open the rigid shell of corporate governance, allowing fresh thinking, new approaches, and innovation to emerge.

So much research and training have focused on "leadership." In the first issue of *Corporate Communication Review* in 2025, when the crisis READINESS framework was delineated, "leadership" was a key link to the process of LEAP (leadership, evaluation, alignment, precision) that manifests READINESS for issues, risks, conflicts, and crises at individual, team, and organizational levels. This article takes a closer look at ethical leadership in managing complex issues, including crises, technological disruptions, and AI-driven changes.

BACKGROUND

This article is based on an ongoing scholar–practitioner collaboration between the University of Georgia's Crisis Communication Think Tank (CCTT) and Penn State University's Arthur W. Page Center for Integrity in Public Communication. The collaboration brings together academics and senior communication professionals to explore how organizations can strengthen strategic leadership in times of uncertainty. The insights presented here draw on discussions from the 29th International Public Relations Research Conference (IPRRC, 2026) and research published in the 2026 special issue of the *International Journal of Strategic Communication.*

Focus of the collaboration

- What characterizes leaders who navigate crises with readiness and integrity?
- How can governance systems align business objectives, people, and organizational values?
- Which leadership mindsets and practices help organizations remain resilient under pressure?

LIVING ETHICS IN A COMPLEX, MULTISTAKEHOLDER ENVIRONMENT

Corporate communication helps drive organizational success, especially when leadership is expected to navigate risk and public scrutiny in real time (Edelman, 2023; Zerfass & Huck, 2007). At the same time, trust in mass media is low – only about a third of Americans say they trust the media – and audiences continue to fracture across platforms (Gallup, 2024; YouGov, 2025). In the age of sticky crises, moral outrage, and crisis spillovers, organizations are confronted with the need to maintain integrity within societies where actors are not always human and information might be misleading, false, or manipulated. To act efficiently, effectively, and ethically, communication teams need to (1) understand boundaries – what they should and should not do; (2) ensure alignment across the team, communications leadership, and the organization at large; and (3) develop strategically thoughtful systems that encourage ethical discussions and offer space for practitioners to reflect on what they should do rather than develop systems that encourage them to simply *do something*.

Communicators may act unethically due to poor values or failures in their governing systems. Externally, they may also enter conversations shaped by misleading or false information. Both situations create reputational and relational risks, particularly when communicators knowingly contribute to unethical behavior, and raise an important ethical question: how can they participate without amplifying harm?

To counteract what feels like an ever-growing mudslide of risks and issues, organizations and their communication teams must make every decision through an ethical lens.

Ethics can be broadly understood across three dimensions:

1. Understanding what is right;
2. Identifying the values worth pursuing; and
3. Shaping the moral character needed to act well under pressure (e.g., DeGeorge, 2008; Comer & Vega, 2011).

As a governing force, ethics guides decisions about "what is right" but it requires more than a commitment to the concept. To turn the abstract into reality, organizations need to (1) define ethics beyond a list of values and (2) socialize the definition with their stakeholders to help set expectations. Corporate communication, along with internal communications, are paramount for the socialization of what ethics means for organizations. Without that alignment, employees and external audiences may develop expectations based on different definitions, leading to relationships that are built on fractured understandings.

It is crucial for corporate communication leaders to develop and nurture systems that encourage communication professionals to make ethical decisions. These systems extend beyond corporate communication and into bigger governing systems, such as sales processes, that together create a culture where ethics and moral courage are the foundation.

Ethics discussions and their systems risk becoming too normative – or, worse – becoming invocations of keywords and phrases without any resulting actions. Corporate leadership, communications statements, public figures, and individuals all use phrases such as "do what is right," "not in line with our core values," "community," "responsibility,"

and "integrity". But what do these concepts look like in practice?

As the landscape evolves in response to broader technological and societal shifts, it becomes even more important for corporate communication professionals to:

1. Develop and socialize systems that align with its mission and values;
2. Align on the nonnegotiables and make explicit which tactics and practices are off-limits, even if they might "work" or are technically legal; and
3. Protect time – with it, practitioners can think about decisions beyond outcomes.

Ethics should be perceived as a strategic asset rather than a discussion that goes nowhere or a "wet blanket" on creativity. Instead, a strong systematic approach helps leaders and communications teams uphold and act on the values worth pursuing especially during times of pressure or crisis.

Too often, ethics is relegated to binary decisions such as lying versus truth telling. Ethics is the ultimate exemplification of the "gray area" in life. It is unlikely that the ethical decision is the "easy" one – if the decision was easy, then (almost) anyone would do it. In reality, scholars and philosophers debate various schools of thought – from utilitarianism to deontology, ethics of care, Nicomachean ethics, and more. Each approach provides a nuanced perspective on ethics, so corporate communication professionals still debate the value of tactics such as astroturfing, which some might consider worthwhile if the perceived end result would provide greater impact than the deception. Unsurprisingly, these debates raise questions of professional standards: Can corporate communications practitioners agree that tactics such as astroturfing are off the table – regardless of the perceived good they could bring to a cause or organization? Are we willing to excuse deceptive tactics if we like the outcome, or do we judge tactics on their own merits?

Good intentions can still be unethical if they distort the truth or treat people as tools rather than partners. If ethics is used to justify a desired decision or outcome to further a selfish end, then that is probably unethical. Practitioners need to develop a useful heuristic: if you can't, or don't want to disclose the practice, then that's a signal that something is wrong. Indeed, practitioners have called for greater transparency by implementing clear tactics at every level (Farmer, 2021), reviewing decisions through the organization's values (Nuñez, 2021), relying on values to shape culture (Scudder, 2013), and more. However, some of these approaches leave too much variability and too many presumptions for the general corporate communicator.

Ethical corporate communication relies on a strong commitment to a governing system built on protecting people with integrity. Scholars have developed a conceptual framework of alignment in the context of strategic communication (Volk & Zerfass, 2018), identifying three alignment types: (1) organization–stakeholder alignment, (2) communication–strategy alignment, and (3) communication strategy and activities alignment. All three can be measured at both vertical (cross-functional) and horizontal (intrafunctional) levels.

Alignment is widely believed to be a lynchpin to success (Seitz, 2023), but most practitioners focus on capital success as a primary alignment frame. Providing space – for both thinking and discussion – is a prerequisite to achieving ethical alignment within a corporate communications function. Corporate communication leadership must work with other organizational leadership (e.g., legal, HR, etc.) to define and set the ethics standard in a collaborative effort, resulting in governance systems for functional areas, such as corporate communication, that allow for deliberate discussions about actions and potential repercussions should a tactic be leveraged.

Communicators who do not treat ethical alignment as a key avenue to success risk developing cultures where practitioners leverage tactics that would have otherwise been deemed unethical and off limits for the organization. A consequences-based approach might justify withholding information while a duty-based approach would reject the notion of holding information back and push practitioners to tell the full story. If alignment is not discussed and set, then practitioners might not know which approach to take until it is too late. Further, in an age of misinformation, disinformation, and distrust, leaders must define and set a line on when persuasion turns into manipulation; a lackadaisical approach invites personal interpretations.

The bottom line? The repercussions of the action will more than likely be felt across the entire organization. Ethical alignment becomes more complicated, but not impossible, with the addition of artificial intelligence.

AI AS THE REPUTATION ISSUE LEADERS CAN'T IGNORE

Artificial intelligence (AI) has moved from the margins of experimentation to the center of daily work and personal life. Not a day goes by without AI being used, referenced, or quietly embedded in how information is produced and distributed. As AI tools scale – both as engines behind workflows and as pseudo-audiences in their own right – the risk of unethical corporate communication has grown just as quickly. With AI models that reinforce thinking rather than challenge it, it may be easier for a professional to believe a press release or a crisis statement divulges the right amount of information or has the right framing because of the model's encouragement when, in reality, a discussion with communications leadership or a strong ethical governing system would label the communications as unethical due to manipulation concerns.

In fact, an old but quite central ethical debate for corporate communication and public relations has been revitalized. Communications has dealt with the ethics of persuasion for decades but AI changes the equation due to the sheer speed, automation, and artificial nature of the processes, making it easier for persuasive tactics to turn manipulative. Unchecked processes and a lack of transparency with key stakeholders have the potential to shake a profession that is already burdened with the spin accusation. As a result, governance and oversight become key markers and guardrails for practitioners.

Governing systems, for example, policies that prevent AI-generated content from being presented as if a human created it, help keep organizations from using AI unethically across corporate communications and the business at large. Disclosure and transparency of practices become pertinent, and the disclosure heuristic becomes critical.

Beyond that, these policies can help keep people at the core of corporate communication. Right now, there are debates across the industry about creating content solely for AI – such as a press release – and treating AI engines as audiences equal to human stakeholders. But these practices beg the question: To what end? If AI begins driving our communication efforts to the point where it becomes the audience, have we lost our center? If corporate communicators believe that human-first tactics are a requirement, if not the primary predication through which choices and actions should be viewed, then any action that brings technology or AI to equitable or higher standings than humanity should be received with caution. A press release built for AI might not, by itself, be evidence that organizations place AI and technology above humans, but it should at least prompt this question: Where is the line?

ETHICS UNDER PRESSURE: INTEGRITY, ALIGNMENT, AND GOVERNANCE

Ethical leadership is not just about maintaining stability. Communicators must navigate moral complexity with speed and accuracy under monumental technological disruption, heightened social scrutiny, and fractured trust. They must also establish a strong ethical relationship with stakeholders in order to communicate during times of crisis or when the organization changes or evolves its stance on a core matter. Across the discussion, integrity, alignment, and governance emerged as central themes for understanding ethics amidst the current organizational and media landscapes.

Integrity

Integrity is the organization's foundation and a necessary condition for corporate communication. The fractured and complex stakeholder environment makes it tempting to stand for everything, leading to "us too!" communication that looks more like bandwagoning rather than actual organizational stances.

Alignment

Alignment is multi-level. Internally, organizations must align across departments (e.g., communication and legal); depending on the situation, communicators negotiate and align on expectations with external stakeholders but in ways that uphold the organization's commitment to integrity. A vital ingredient to alignment is understanding – it is difficult to align with someone you do not understand. To mitigate that, practitioners should conduct regular communication with stakeholders versus at stakeholders to better understand the audiences they serve. This practice can start with social listening, and extend to stakeholder interviews, focus groups, and town halls. Alignment should be a reflection of where the organization and various stakeholders stand as a result of values and actions on both sides. From there, it is ultimately up to communication leadership to determine an appropriate stance that draws from core organizational values.

Alignment does not mean an absence of disagreement or bending to the will or expectations of others. Alignment also, by itself, is not inherently ethical. Organizations and stakeholders can develop expectations around aims or goals that conflict with broader ethical obligations. Thus, the pursuit of alignment must remain subordinate to ethical judgment rather than a true end upon itself. Ethical communication might require misalignment: questioning priorities or resisting expectations and consensus. Therefore, communicators must have moral courage not only to build alignment, but to determine when alignment – either internal or external – would be unethical.

Governance

Ethics that remains an abstract discussion fails to fully impact decision-making across the organization. Systems that allow practitioners to:

- Have time to simply think;
- Compare options against core values, past decisions, and current motives;
- Document and update no-go tactics;
- Develop clear decision rights and escalation paths; and
- Move ethics from the abstract and into the strategic asset that it is waiting to be.

Ethical communication must be treated as a strategic system – built on integrity, alignment, and governance – that resists reshaping its standards around new technologies such as AI, even when under pressure from multistakeholder environments or facing sticky crises. Integrity, as a foundation, raises empirical questions: How do organizations define and operationalize nonnegotiables when facing competing stakeholder demands and polarized environments? Alignment, at individual, team, and organizational levels, requires more evidence about how cross-functional leadership (e.g., communications, legal, operations, and technology) can sustain ethical commitments when time is short and information is incomplete. Governance invites further study into which systems – decision logs, escalation paths, AI guardrails, stakeholder engagement protocols – actually improve ethical outcomes under pressure, rather than merely documenting intent.

QUESTIONS FOR ETHICAL COMMUNICATION

As we continue wading into the ever-disrupted environment, corporate communication practitioners need to continually assess:

1. **Integrity:** What does integrity mean to my organization? How do the organization's communications reflect that definition? What happens to that definition when pressure is put on the organization?
2. **Alignment:** How much is the corporate communications team aligned on what to do versus what not to do? Are those expectations aligned with broader organizational leadership? How much does my organization understand stakeholder expectations?
3. **Governance:** What is/are the primary governing systems for communications decisions and tactics? What happens if a tactic is perceived as unethical? Is there an avenue for discussion or space for reflection?

STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP SHINES THROUGH

This piece represents an initial response, offering conceptual and applied insights into ethical communications leadership in complex and cascading crises. Yet it also underscores how much remains to be explored: across sectors, cultures, regulatory regimes, and technological contexts, as well as across different forms of crises (e.g., sticky, spillover, etc.). Future research can help test, refine, and extend models and theories so that, in practice – when decisions are contested, visibility is high, and consequences are enduring – they help organizations and leaders maintain a clear ethical center.

We therefore call for a new generation of collaborative research that pushes the boundaries of ethical leadership in practice – not in theory alone. This work must be co-created with practitioners, grounded in real crisis experiences, attentive to AI and emerging technologies, and rigorous in measuring what actually drives trust, resilience, and responsible decision-making under pressure. The next wave of crises will not wait for organizations to catch up. Scholars and practitioners must work together now to ensure leaders are prepared not merely to respond, but to lead with ethics that are actionable, strategically embedded, and resilient when it matters most.

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MORE INFORMATION

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