Creating mutual trust and respect

Organisations that thrive are those where the company culture promotes mutual trust and respect of colleagues, and this is as true in PR as it is elsewhere.

In this unit we will examine how you can create and maintain mutual trust and respect with your colleagues and external stakeholders.

In the workplace you may be required to work with stakeholders, both internally and externally, whom you do not personally like. By working through this unit you will be able to see how acting in a professional manner at all times means that you are able to show trust and respect to stakeholders and build positive working relationships in the absence of an emotional connection.
1 Building trust with stakeholders and colleagues

Character traits

Whether building trust with internal or external stakeholders, you need to exhibit the same qualities of professional conduct. These include:

- **integrity** – are you always honest in your dealings with others?
- **credibility** – can you be trusted to have the knowledge to back up your honesty, is what you are saying or proposing credible?
- **accountability** – are you always ready to take responsibility for your actions?
- **reliability** – can you be depended on to deliver what you have promised?
- **transparency** – are you always clear about what you say and are your professional workings always simple to understand?
- **courtesy** – do you always have the manners to listen to other people’s points of view, and remember to thank them for their input?

By exhibiting these character traits you will earn the respect of your colleagues and other professionals you come into contact with.

Codes of conduct

PR professionals have in the past been accused, perhaps unfairly, of not exhibiting the traits mentioned above. The CIPR (Chartered Institute of Public Relations) and other professional bodies have now included these traits in their codes of conduct.

In your organisation there may be other codes of conduct; these might be found within your contract. Often these codes include things such as client confidentiality and relate to how you need to keep client campaigns and communication confidential unless specified otherwise. Many internal codes of conduct will also list things such as the need to be on time to work, how to conduct interactions with colleagues and clients, and what personal conduct is and is not permitted within office hours – for example, making personal calls.

Creating an environment of trust with colleagues

Colleagues working closely together often form impressions based on what they see, so actions are important to building trust and respect within the team. Look at Figure 13.3.1 to see how you can create a positive impression.
Building trust and respect

Creating an environment of trust with your colleagues involves a much more personal level than previously discussed but the underlying concepts are the same. In order for you to build good relationships with your colleagues and earn their trust, you must monitor your working practices and behaviours, and ensure that you do the following.

- Always communicate information clearly and consistently in a timely manner when asked for it. At the beginning of your career especially, you will be a junior member of a larger team and other members in the team will be relying on you to complete your work so that they can complete theirs.
- Work together with other members of your team to support the whole team in the completion of a task. You can do this in both a reactive manner (by completing team tasks when requested to do so), but you should also look to do this in a proactive manner (by actively seeking out opportunities to help and assist others).
- Ask questions if you are unsure of the outcome you are trying to achieve. It is not a sign of a weakness to ask questions. Colleagues and line managers will be more likely in the long term to trust someone who looked for clarification of a point in order to complete their work to the best of their ability. When asking questions, ensure that they are open questions, enabling long, full responses, rather than closed questions, which allow only yes or no answers.
- Clearly agree to what is asked of you, showing understanding and that you were listening. Hold yourself to account to ensure you complete your task.
- Say no to things that you know you are unable to do. It is tempting to say yes in an attempt to appear helpful and professional whenever anyone asks you to do something. While it is good to have a can-do attitude, if you are unable to complete requests because of lack of knowledge or skills, people will be less likely to trust you with other tasks.
- Tell colleagues promptly if you are unable to complete assigned tasks in a timely manner or if you will be unable to fulfil agreements made.
- Consider the impact of your behaviour and actions on others. This can range from the basic professionalism of showing up to work on time and staying late at work to complete a task for a deadline, to the way that you speak to other people.
- Have empathy for others – try to put yourself in another person’s position and see their point of view.
- Show respect for others’ opinions and roles within the team. While it is acceptable to disagree with someone’s point of view, it is important to listen fully to their view point and assess if your view is relevant to the discussion at hand. If it is, you should put it forward without dismissing the other person’s viewpoint. All opinions should be respected until a way forward is found; at that point you must accept and respect the consensus opinion. It is also important to respect people’s individuality and be tactful. People may have different cultural and educational backgrounds from your own, and you must respect their views.
- Keep promises and honour commitments.

By following the above guidelines, you will build better long-term business relationships and earn the respect and trust of your colleagues.
Creating an environment of trust with external stakeholders

It is very important to stakeholders who have a vested interest in an organisation doing well that the organisation is well led and that there is a clear strategic plan for the future. You should ensure that the strategic plan of the organisation is communicated effectively to interested stakeholders. Stakeholder perceptions/ideas about the organisation, while influenced by communication, also have to be proven to be true when the stakeholder looks for further information about the running of an organisation.

Good communication is vitally important to building stakeholder trust. In particular, communication needs to be a two-way process. Stakeholders want to feel that their views are listened to and acted on. If an organisation is unable to act on its stakeholders’ views, they will want to know why.

When a stakeholder feels well informed by an organisation, they are more likely to trust that organisation. It is important that as a PR professional you manage the stakeholder communication process in the best possible manner. Communication should be:

- relevant and useful
- responsive to the needs of the stakeholder – not just generalised communication messages
- regular but short and to the point – the more often a stakeholder hears from an organisation, the more favourably they will feel towards that organisation and the more they will begin to trust it
- in the manner that the stakeholder has requested it (e.g. email, report or face-to-face meeting). Informal communications between an organisation and its stakeholders are central to maintaining strong relationships and building trust.

You need to keep up to date with your stakeholders. If one of your stakeholders is another organisation, then you will be dealing with a fluid marketplace of employees, as employees will come and go. It is vital that you create a database of your contacts within differing organisations with their various contact preferences listed – for example, if working with journalists you need to know that some prefer to be contacted only by email, while others prefer telephone conversations, but are only available to speak at specific times on specific days. When your stakeholder is a journalist, you should also be aware that they may work on several publications and may only be interested in very specific, targeted information, whereas other stakeholders may prefer a broader view. A detailed database will ensure you always contact the right person, at the right time, in the right way and with the right information; over time, this will build trust.

Stakeholder trust is ultimately built on day-to-day working interactions with an organisation and these are usually with the staff members or employees rather than the leadership team. As such, it is important that all employees understand who the stakeholders are and what the communication plan is. All staff members need to be consistent in their messages to stakeholders. Within your PR communication and issues management plans, you will have identified the questions and issues that stakeholders will have. It is now important to
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Communicate internally to ensure that those questions are always answered in a consistent manner from each area of your organisation.

Staff should also be experienced and knowledgeable. If stakeholders perceive this to be true of an organisation’s employees, they will be more likely to trust that organisation. Strong internal communication is required, and staff should be able to find any information that they might need quickly and easily. Having knowledgeable staff is sometimes referred to as ‘corporate memory’ (see Topic guide 13.1, page 4). Although employees move on from organisations, it is important that any communications they have made on behalf of an organisation are easily accessible to anyone taking over that role. If working with PR clients on a project basis, this corporate memory can usually be found in the client files, which should contain all communication messages prepared and used by the organisation.

When acting on behalf of an organisation, you will spend more time and focus on building relationships with the organisation’s stakeholders. When acting on behalf of yourself and your own individual business, you will focus more on building relationships with individuals; initially these will be your colleagues.

**Portfolio activity**

Summarise ways an environment of trust and mutual respect can be created with colleagues and stakeholders. Gather any examples (e.g. communication plans, regular reports, emails, etc.) and assess how these support the development of trust and mutual respect.

2 Reviewing and revising needs and motivations of colleagues and stakeholders

It is important to understand the needs and motivations of your stakeholders and how these might change over time. You can do this by reviewing your stakeholder’s likes and dislikes, the constraints they work within and the aims they have. With the results of this review, you should be able to identify where you may need to revise your plans or practices to better meet their needs. There are many variables in this area, but some examples are as follows.

**Company policy**

Reviewing the policies of the organisation you work for and those of other stakeholders will help you better understand their goals and motivations and how you may need to revise your plans in respect of these in your role. Prior knowledge should help you avoid conflict. Understanding why people and organisations act and think as they do will also help you build an environment of trust.

**Hierarchy**

Understanding the status of individuals and departments within an organisation, and where you fit into this, will help you identify the needs and motivations of others, and how you relate to them as stakeholders. It may also reveal the chain of command required in decision-making activities, and therefore how and whom
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you may want to target with messages. Understanding relationships and hierarchy will ensure that you treat individuals, departments and organisations with the respect they deserve, in turn developing an environment of trust and respect.

**Individual roles**

Within all organisations, people change job roles and new teams and new team dynamics are created. When this happens you must be prepared to blend with your new team. Working practices may well change, as will people’s focus on roles within that team.

It is important to understand the individual roles that people carry out within an organisation. When you have a holistic (overall) view of the organisation and each person’s role within it, you help to create a culture of trust and respect.

As well as learning what people’s direct working roles are within a team, it helps if you can assess their working style. While teams will automatically generate a leader or implementer, they will also include a quieter coordinator who will bring the team together. Both roles are equally valid and important within a team, and by recognising this you help to create an environment of trust and respect.

**Developing mutual goals**

There are times – whether you work for an internal communications department, agency or especially as a freelancer – when you will need to work with different people on a project. There are often team changes and the process of agreeing common purpose is a fluid one. When there is a team change, you must be able to help new team members get up to speed quickly and efficiently. Initially this can be done by communicating campaign messages and ensuring that new team members understand what these mean and what you are trying to achieve. You may only be working with people for a short time before the team changes again or before your targets need to be met. Therefore you must create or revise SMART objectives to include new team members and to make best use of their expertise, or to make allowances for their knowledge shortcomings if they have arrived late on a project.

By creating and sharing mutual goals in this way, and by listening to each person, all team members are able to work with purpose and meaning, and to work to their strengths within a team. This creates a perception of trust and respect for the individual.

**Communication channels**

Maintaining good communication channels with stakeholders is vital in creating an environment of trust and respect. You need to be able to communicate changes to stakeholders, and explain how they may be affected. In turn, stakeholders must feel that they can feed back changes and issues which occur to them.

Communication channels you may need to maintain include:

- internal: e.g. team and individual, escalating issues
- external: e.g. communicating change, speaking with clients and receiving feedback
- social media: e.g. sharing a message with the public and receiving feedback from them.
Communicating change

Within PR campaign planning, it is sometimes essential to make a decision to change an aspect of the plan that is not working. When you do this, clear communication with all involved is vital to ensure good stakeholder relations and maintain an environment of trust and respect. You must initially communicate the change, and why it needs to be made, to your line manager (account or director). If the change affects other internal stakeholders, they must be made aware quickly so that they can re-evaluate their workload or their role within the campaign. Once you are sure how to proceed and all stakeholders have agreed to the new plan, you have to get the plan agreed externally with the client. After you have been through the process of clearly explaining changes and people’s roles internally, you should have a clear understanding of how to best explain the change to your client, remembering that they are external stakeholders and will have their own relationships to manage.

Troubleshooting

A smooth-running project is most often one in which colleagues and stakeholders have mutual respect and can trust that other team members are getting on with their tasks as planned. Fixing issues within a project or getting a failing project back on track is key in maintaining trust between stakeholders. Troubleshooting involves searching for the cause of an issue, identifying it and addressing it. In addressing issues you will demonstrate that you respect the overall aims of a project and the needs of the stakeholders with a vested interest in its successful completion.

Emma Wilkinson works as a senior account executive at a large multinational agency based in London. The agency has seven specialist divisions; Emma works within the Health division, which itself is further split into three divisions.

Emma works as a team with two junior account executives and two account assistants who are junior to her, and with an account manager and senior account manager directly senior to her. Additionally there are account directors who oversee the department. As part of her role, Emma also needs to communicate with agency staff at other locations and her client, as well as the media and medical staff.

When working on large campaigns for international clients, Emma believes that setting clear goals and targets is essential for all members of the team as this enables them to understand clearly what they are working towards. Within her working role she is tasked with setting smaller tasks for the junior members of the team to enable these targets to be met. Emma believes it is vital for her to communicate to the account assistants how important their work is within the overall campaign, as often one of the tasks she requests of them is to monitor competitor behaviour and this can be a relatively dull task with little relevant outcome. However, it is essential to the team, and the client, that this is done.

Emma herself is occasionally asked to work late to complete work by her account manager. She is happy to do this because she respects her account manager and believes she would not have asked Emma to finish the work unless it was really needed.
3 Respectful interactions with colleagues and stakeholders

Self-analysis

Self-analysis is a means of helping yourself to learn from experience by providing a structure for reflecting, reviewing and drawing helpful conclusions from events that have happened and actions that you have taken. It can be difficult to undertake self-analysis, but developing your self-awareness can assist you in gaining the trust and respect of your internal and external stakeholders. It is also just as important to analyse situations where everything went well as where things did not.

Start your self-analysis by reflecting on a work activity you have undertaken recently. Answer the questions below.

1. Did you enjoy the activity?
2. Was the activity easy or difficult? Why?
3. What was the hardest part of that activity?
4. How could you have improved your role in that activity?

Personal SWOT analysis

The next and more individualised tool is a personal SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis. You can list anything in your personal SWOT that falls under the headings, but as a starting point here are some questions to ask yourself.

**Strengths** – consider these from your own point of view, but be as objective as you can.

- What would your line manager see as your strength?
- What working achievements are you most proud of?
- What activities do you excel at? Are you particularly good at any specific work-based activity such as languages?

**Weaknesses** – again be objective, but be realistic; it is your weaknesses you can learn most from; by identifying them and owning up to them you can start to conquer them.

- What do you avoid because you are not very good at it?
- What are your negative work habits (are you often late for work, late at finishing pieces of work, disorganised, etc.)?
- Do you lack experience in any of the tasks you are being asked to undertake?

**Opportunities** – these are often linked to your strengths.

- Is there a problem with your colleagues’ working practices that you could identify and create a solution for?
- Is one of your colleagues leaving or changing roles? If so, could you take on some of or their entire role?
- Have you built your stakeholder relationships to a positive point where you can access good advice, or are there any good networking opportunities you could take advantage of?
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**Threats** – these are things that may hinder your progress at work.
- Are any of your colleagues competing with you for a job role or responsibility?
- What obstacles do you face in getting involved in other campaigns and projects?
- Do you have any past experience of trying and failing to achieve your goals? How could this be affecting you?

You should now use your SWOT analysis as a way of improving your working practices. You should build on your strengths and opportunities and work to minimise your weaknesses and threats.

**Listening skills**

In order to demonstrate that you respect the views and actions of others, you must first improve your listening skills. As stated throughout this unit, good clear consistent communication is important in working with colleagues and stakeholders. However, good listening skills are also vital for you to show you understand your stakeholder’s or colleague’s point of view, and so that you can take part in valuable two-way feedback to ensure you meet your objectives. When taking part in a dialogue with a colleague or stakeholder, you must ensure that you keep an open mind while listening, and carefully listen to all their points as they speak. Some colleagues might be happy for you to take notes while they speak whereas others would prefer your full attention – you should check this with them beforehand.

**Checklist**

To demonstrate you are a good listener, you should:
- ✓ make eye contact with the speaker to show you are listening
- ✓ give the speaker verbal and non-verbal clues to show you are listening; nod your head at the appropriate times, smile and try not to use closed body language such as crossed arms or quizzical looks
- ✓ respond appropriately with noises such as ‘hmmm’, to show you are listening
- ✓ keep quiet until the other person has finished speaking
- ✓ paraphrase (repeating in your own words) what the speaker has said to show understanding before responding.

Once you have shown that you have listened, you must act on what you have heard. Agree how you are going to implement your project and agree a time for feedback.

**Conduct and personal presentation**

The way you think, behave and present yourself will affect how you are perceived by others. Dressing appropriately and speaking to people in a polite, confident and business-like manner will demonstrate that you respect them. While undertaking self-analysis you should look at how your conduct and presentation could impact on others’ feelings of respect and trust.
Monitoring and exchanging feedback

Monitoring and assessment of performance related to trust and respect

You may be able to monitor the level of respect you generate in your interactions by looking at your performance, or your team or organisation’s performance in relation to measures such as:

- the ability to troubleshoot problems in a timely manner
- the ability to set realistic milestones, produce quality work and achieve deadlines within budget
- readiness to respond to requests, changes, new business, the needs of stakeholders, etc.

You can assess your own and your team’s performance in acting with respect by looking for:

- agreement of a common strategy or purpose which relevant stakeholders have had a chance to feed into
- the way in which a strategy is delivered and the success it achieves
- the ability to identify and follow up on issues and changes
- the way in which you assisted colleagues by anticipating their needs and when reacting to requests
- the amount of clear, relevant and mutually beneficial communication between stakeholders, whether conflict occurred and how issues were followed up.

Feedback

To ensure that you understand and improve the interactions you have with people, it is important that you obtain and record feedback on your interactions. One way to do this is to develop a feedback form which you can ask your colleagues, manager and stakeholders to complete. If necessary, provide them with evidence of your interactions with others, for example, emails, meeting notes and telephone conversation recordings.

It is important to listen to the views and feelings of your colleagues. As a member of a PR team you are expected to perform your part in a campaign to ensure that others are able to complete their work. In order to do this, you need to provide information to your colleagues about your work and whether it is meeting the required timescales and ask for and accept feedback on the quality of your work. It is important that you respect your colleagues’ views and advice; however, feedback should be a two-way process in order to be of true benefit.

When receiving feedback, you should establish if there was anything the organisation could have done for you to help you complete your tasks effectively – for example, were you given sufficient briefing information before undertaking research? Remember that it is important that you understand how the tasks you undertake build on and improve your core PR skills.

When receiving feedback, you should try to:

- accept the feedback unconditionally
- express gratitude for it
- not take it as a personal attack
• ask for clarification so you can really understand what is being said
• plan a time to review your actions in light of the feedback
• continue to ask for feedback.

**Acting on feedback**

In order to improve your work, it is important to continually make new SMART objectives and to plan time to receive feedback on how you are performing with regard to these. At the start of your career you will need to do this more frequently than you will when you are established in your career.

You will find that by keeping a record of how you have improved your working practices as a result of acting on feedback, you will receive more detailed work to do.

Acting on feedback at an individual, team and organisation level will show stakeholders that you are listening to them and that you respect their views and input.

**Portfolio activity**

1. **Review and revise the needs and motivations of your colleagues and stakeholders.** Have these changed during the course of a project? What has caused these changes?

2. Using your relationship-building plan to demonstrate that you have interacted with colleagues and stakeholders in a respectful manner, request feedback on your interactions from different people including your manager, other colleagues and stakeholders. Use the feedback to evaluate your plan and where necessary modify the plan and the way you show respect for the views and actions of others.

**Further reading**


**About the author of Topic guides 13.1 to 13.3**

Hannah Wright has worked in both public relations and teaching and training roles for the past 15 years. Her public relations experience spans in-house, freelance and consultancy roles working with brands as diverse as small local businesses to large multinationals. She has also been lucky enough to work in the exciting area of experiential marketing and large event management, which she has a strong interest in. She is a passionate believer in vocational education and her teaching roles encompassed the teaching of business and marketing vocational courses at tertiary level.