

# MUNICIPAL PUBLIC RELATIONS: ETHICAL FRAMEWORK

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## **Introduction to Public Relations:**

“Public Relations is the attempt by information, persuasion and adjustment to engineer public support for an activity, cause, movement or institution”<sup>1</sup>, as described by Edward Bernays who has been regarded as one of the founder of the genre Public Relations. Sam Black, the famous British Public Relations professional has said that “the purpose of Public Relations is to establish a two way communication to resolve conflicts of interest and to establish understanding based on truth, knowledge and full information.”<sup>2</sup> These definitions of Public Relations clearly indicate that Public Relations, which is a management function, cannot excel without performance. P.R., the short form of Public Relations, therefore can also be described as performance recognition. The fundamental direction of ethical framework of the genre has also been derived out of this spirit that Public Relations activities should be based on actual achievements.

## **Municipal Public Relations:**

Municipal Public Relations emerged as a concept after the Second World War. Pan Dodd Wheeler's article 'Municipal Public Relations' has actually pioneered the concept of Municipal Public Relations in this genre. He also elaborated its purpose -“to establish and energize communication between city government and the citizen – using existing channels where available and creating new ones where necessary – in the interest of an informed public opinion.”<sup>3</sup> As a branch out of Public Relations, Municipal Public Relations aims at building a favorable public sentiment. The reason is well known and as Abraham Lincoln's statement pointed out that “with public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it, nothing can succeed.”<sup>4</sup> The goal of Municipal Public Relations, therefore, will have to be providing information to the citizens and inspire them to ensure their participation.

Harold S. Buttenheim, the editor of The American City magazine, recognized municipal government as a stronghold of democratic process. He said that the municipal bodies are closest to the people as they address their basic needs and also potentially most responsive to their desire. He also initiated a platform to provide better communication between city and citizen in the early 50's and found that Municipal Public Relations had to play extremely vital role to make it a success. Municipal Public Relations, he pointed out, as an organized effort to influence public opinion so that the citizen can be informed with fact that can ensure their participation in the programmes initiated

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by the municipal government. Municipal Public Relations can bridge the good municipal governance with the quality participation of the citizens.

Pan Dodd Wheeler, in his article mentioned earlier, had also pointed out a study of Government Public Relations Association of America to discuss the functions of Municipal Public Relations. The areas focused were - consultation with the legislative and administrative officials and advice them on the public relations aspect of city policy; maintaining close contact with the mass media and help them to get information easily; arranging for citizen tours and meetings, conducting surveys, supervising reports, writing letters, prepare posters, handling complaints, arranging for open house, displays and other special events; planning and writing employee publication and handbooks. In some cities municipal research can also be conducted to collect and prepare data on municipal government so that the officials, employees and citizens can utilize the information. Municipal Public Relations may also consider initiatives to arrange for advertising, fairs, displays, festivals and special promotion. Sam Black in his book Practical Public Relations has dealt with the main objects of Public Relations in Local Government. "There are four main objects of Public Relations in Local Government – (1) to keep citizens informed of the council's policy and its day-by day activities; (2) to give citizens an opportunity of expressing views on important new projects before final decisions are taken by the council; (3) to enlighten citizens on the way in which the system of local government works, and to inform them of their rights and responsibilities; (4) to promote a sense of civic pride."<sup>5</sup>

### **Ethics and its purview :**

Ethics, stems from the Greek word 'ethos' which means 'arising from habit', is a moral framework that governs an individual's behavior and conducting his/her activity and systemizes defends, recommends the concept of what is right or wrong. Individual's ethical understanding ultimately constructs the societal ethical framework. One has to remember that law is a structured system guided by rules and principles to govern a society, whereas ethics is a moral philosophy. Law can be defined as regulations established by a governing power which describe the way in which people are required to act in a society. Ethics, on the contrary, focuses on the judgement of value or quality. It considers the concepts of right, wrong, good, evil, justice and responsibility. It attempts further to define what is good or bad for the society and the individual with an intention to establish a set of duties that a person owes to himself and the others. Law enforces punitive action against the breach of law whereas ethics deals with individual's conscience and character. Law and ethics basically complement and supplement each other for the betterment of society. In Municipal Public Relations the ethical framework is a bit complex to understand because its operational sphere Municipal Governments are constituted on the basis of respective Acts following the law of the land.

### **Ethics in Public Relations:**

International Public Relations Association (IPRA) which took concrete shape in November 1949 actually laid down the code of professional conduct in its general assembly in Venice in May, 1961. The nodal body of the Public Relations practitioners has prepared updated Code of Conduct in 2011 to address the changes taken place with the time passing by. After the 1961 Code of Venice, the 1965 Code of Athens and the 2007 Code of Brussels also were laid by IPRA to shed lights on the ethical framework of the public Relations practice as a whole.

The codes have been formulated with the intention of attaining high professional standard. The thrust areas of all such codes have been to create an environment where the profession of image

building becomes transparent and based on real achievements instead of fabricated portrayal of achievements. The codes have been in observance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It has proposed to act with honesty and integrity and sought to establish the moral, cultural and intellectual conditions for dialogue to ensure an environment where expression of own view would be easy. It has emphasized on openness and transparency and discouraged professional conflicts of interest. Public Relations professionals have also been advised to honour confidential information provided to them and be responsible for ensuring the truth and accuracy of all information provided. They have been further advised to guarantee every effort for not disseminate false or misleading information intentionally, exercise proper care to avoid doing so even inadvertently and initiate prompt corrective measures if any such thing has happened. The ethical purview does not approve obtaining information by deceptive or dishonest means, nor does it approve serving an undisclosed interest. The ethical codes states without any hesitation that direct or indirect financial offer or other inducement to public representatives or the media, or other stakeholders for image management is absolutely uncalled for, it further disapproves any action which would constitute an improper influence on public representatives, the media, or other stakeholders. It also has disapproved securing success by deceptive means.

The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), another important organization of this fraternity, also has emphasized issue of upholding practices in the profession. It has shed lights on this issue for serving the public good, and they have converged on the basis of a special obligation to operate ethically. They have very precisely stated that “We serve the public interest by acting as responsible advocates for those we represent. We provide a voice in the marketplace of ideas, facts, and viewpoints to aid informed public debate”<sup>6</sup> They have focused on maintaining highest standard of accuracy and emphasized on advancing the profession through regular professional development, research, and education. They have further expressed their intention to remain faithful to those they represent, honoring their obligation to serve the public interest. They have notified in their codes to handle fairly with clients, employers, competitors, peers, vendors, the media, and the general public. They have registered respect to all opinions and support the right of free expression. They have documented their support for a democratic society by stating “protecting and advancing the free flow of accurate and truthful information is essential to serving the public interest and contributing to informed decision making in a democratic society.”<sup>7</sup> They further have focused on healthy and fair competition among professionals to preserve an ethical climate even while fostering a robust business environment. They have expressed intention to maintain open communication environment to foster informed decision making in a democratic society and without any hesitation appropriate protection of confidential and private information for strengthening the public's trust in the profession.

#### **Ethics and Municipal Public Relations:**

Municipal Public Relations has to be ethics bound for long term benefit. Since it fosters the bond between the municipal bodies and public of the concerned localities the performance recognition would play the key role. It deals with the interaction of the citizenry with the municipal body, with municipal regulators, and the legislative (elected or/and appointed) and regulatory bodies of local government. So illogical image building would not only be unethical but it would definitely be counterproductive. One also should not overlook that people expect copy book presentation from the government and want them to be ethical. In Municipal Public Relations the biggest challenge will be to establish control on bureaucratization and in the process of portraying the organization it

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has to be reflected properly. In the process of announcing project or benefits for the citizens, Municipal Public Relations must not forget the seven Cs of communication which additionally would help the organization to be perceived as ethical in nature. The message should be CANDID, it has to be CLEAR so that it can not only communicate the information but the intention also, it has to be COMPLETE so that people can understand the issue more or less entirely, it has to be CONCISED so that it can attract the viewership in magnetic fashion, it must be CONCRETE and CORRECT so that it can be credible and it must be presented in a COURTEOUS so that it can create an environment that the organization is liable to serve public interest.

Municipal bodies are the grassroots of democratic structure of our country in urban areas, just like Panchayats in the rural sector. These bodies have to meet up with the daily and primary needs of the community and therefore it lives to the closest corner of their heart in comparison to other administrative bodies. They deal with the fundamental aspirations of the people. Services provided by these local governments vary from primary necessities like primary education, maintenance of road, collection of tax and so on. On one hand the administrative bodies manage these diversified activities and on the other hand the assignment of the Municipal Public Relations team happens to be converging these into a favorable perception. They have to deal with not only general public on a daily basis; they have daily communication with people from several social strata, be it of the highest rank or a man to a person earning his food on a daily basis. So the range of these organizations' internal and external publics is huge and varied. Here lies the important role of Municipal Public Relations and its unique character reinforce why it should be in line with the ethical understanding of the society beyond the common understanding of the ethical framework on the basis of professional fraternity. As the activities of the municipal bodies evolve round the primary necessities of the community so it the key words for managing its image should be governed by sense of Principle, Rationality, Autonomy, Intention, Dignity and Respect. It certainly contains highest degree of personal touch among all forms of Government Public Relations. As the services rendered by the municipal bodies are regular in nature, even minimum hamper in service may generate grievance. The handling of any such negative has to be conducted with care and pragmatic intention. Municipal Public Relations, like other forms of Government Public Relations, has to be retrained while portraying promises. It should keep in mind that the modern cities are participatory in planning and existence, therefore campaign launched by the Municipal Public Relations team must portray the participatory spirit of the municipal bodies. Municipal bodies should take care of its heritage seriously. Heritages are not mere age old documents but the features belonging to the culture of a society including its tradition, language even the archeology. Heritage also imparts pride among the citizens and it also plays decisive role in their ethical understanding.

Municipal Public Relations team should take special care regarding the public policy issues as they are difficult to manage because they involve competing interests. While handling the matters of strategic public policy, mutual ethical responsibilities of both the municipal bodies and publics have to be duly highlighted. Ethics and Municipal Public Relations also overlap at the junction of a function known as issues management. Issues of the community have to be identified, monitored and analyzed regularly. Less emphasis in this sector may transmit the issues into emergency and mishandling of emergency situations may lead to institutional crisis. Another very important ethical parameter of Municipal Public Relations is environment issue. One should respect the assumptions, objections, or other points raised or felt by the publics in the community.

**Conclusion :**

Ethical framework actually constitutes of a systematic analysis which guides a person distinguishing right from wrong and helps him determining his/her action. In Public Relations also ethics plays a pivotal role to make a campaign acceptable, it has been constituted depending on values like honesty, openness, loyalty, fair-play, mutual respect and integrity. It has to be careful about false projection, spin-doctrine or espionage.

It is note-worthy that almost all organizations of Public Relations professionals have taken the issue of ethical framework seriously from long ago and adopted codes of ethics for their members. With the increasing visibility of Public Relations as a discipline, the importance of ethical reasoning in it has also been growing as a demand.

In Municipal Public Relations, like other Government Public Relations, the ethical understanding is undoubtedly more complex than the other arenas. The attribute of being public service has made the magnitude of ethical challenges involved in Government Public Relations enormously high. The implication of both success and failure in this discipline are deep rooted in impact. For a better tomorrow the discipline must progress toward a more 'self-aware' and ethically sound communication mode.

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