

CIPR

CHARTERED INSTITUTE
OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

Integrity

Setting the CIPR
Code of Conduct
in context

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Why does the CIPR have a Code of Conduct?

Professions are generally defined by their specialist knowledge, gained through education, experience and individual personal development. Some professions, such as law and medicine, have barriers to entry and legally prescribed standards, but the underpinning notion of a set of common standards of professional conduct is fundamental to all professions.

In the Royal Charter awarded to the CIPR in 2005, the primary object for the Institute is “to promote for the public benefit high levels of skill, knowledge, competence, and standards of practice and professional conduct on the part of public relations practitioners”.

By-law 12 sets out the expectation that members shall exercise their professional skill and judgement to the best of their ability and discharge their professional responsibilities with integrity. By-law two binds all members to a code of conduct, which it is the responsibility of the Board of Directors to decide upon. The Charter Regulations set out how possible breaches of the code should be investigated and, if appropriate, punished.

This recognises the CIPR as a regulator of the professional conduct of its members. By joining the CIPR, members make a positive choice to be regulated. Because the CIPR is a member-led professional body, public relations is a self-regulating profession.

The benefit of regulation

The value of the CIPR code of conduct can be understood on various levels.

To the member, it is a signal of their professionalism. It should make them more valuable to their clients or employers than practitioners who are not members.

To the clients or employers of members, it is reassurance that their contractor or employee upholds published standards of conduct and can be held accountable for them by an independent authority.

For the profession as a whole, the CIPR code of conduct provides an important standard by which expectations can be established and shared and a point of difference with other professions such as marketing, which set their own professional standards.

For the stakeholders in public relations, it provides a substantial basis for the claim that it is a profession.

Professionalism and the Code of Conduct

The CIPR broadly interprets “professionalism” as signifying technical and ethical competence on the part of the individual practitioner.

Technical competence is the ability of PR practitioners to apply appropriate skills and knowledge in pursuit of the objectives of their clients or employers.

Ethical competence goes further and requires practitioners to apply their technical competence in a manner that complies with professional ethics.

The CIPR Code of Conduct provides the basis for making those ethical judgements day-by-day.

Members are expected to know and understand the standard of professional conduct set out in the code – and the consequences of failing to meet those expectations.

This is why ethics is a central component in the assessment of Chartered Public Relations Practitioners. All CIPR members are bound by the code of conduct; Chartered Practitioners have additionally been assessed for their knowledge, skill and experience of making ethical judgements in a professional context.

According to the Professional Associations Research Network (PARN) ethical competence is “a key distinguisher between simply having skills and having a true sense of professionalism.”

Professional ethics and personal choices

Ethics is broadly concerned with right and wrong conduct. We encounter ethics in three main ways: the law, personal ethics and professional ethics.

The law decides for us which actions are wrong.

Where there is no law to direct us, our personal ethics guide us in making a decision. As individuals, we develop an understanding of right and wrong throughout our lives. This is sometimes called a ‘moral compass’.

For example, you might be offered a job in an industry which, though entirely legal, is controversial – such as tobacco, or gambling. All things being equal, you have a choice. If you decide to take the job you are exercising your personal, not your professional, judgement.

You may consider such a role to be unethical, but another person may see it differently and you are no more or less professional as a result of this specific choice.

Professional ethics is specifically concerned with how you carry out your job.

This does not mean that you cast off professional ethics whenever you leave the office. The CIPR Charter Regulations stipulate, for example, that members may be expelled if they are convicted of a crime of dishonesty. The crime need not be related to their work; if they are dishonest in any sphere of life, they have failed a basic qualification for being a professional.



Professional ethics and professional choices

As a professional, you are expected to make informed ethical decisions. It would be unprofessional (incompetent) to claim that you were ignorant of the standards that govern your profession. The implication of making an informed decision is that you have considered the Code of Conduct and decided on a course of action that is consistent with it.

If you judge that a course of action would be unethical, you should not carry it out. Further, you should not allow it to be carried out without first making a positive effort to prevent it. The Code of Conduct holds you personally responsible for the actions of colleagues, subordinates, business partners or subcontractors who answer to you (whether or not they are themselves members of the CIPR).

This has two implications.

1. It may mean speaking out, which can be difficult, particularly at the start of your career or if you feel vulnerable (your client or employer may threaten to take action against you).

Speaking out does not necessarily mean becoming a whistle-blower in the press or issuing your resignation (though you may decide to do either or both of these things, in extreme circumstances), but it also does not mean doing just enough to give the impression of having taken action.

2. It may mean standing by your own professional judgement in the face of differing views from other professionals. Lawyers, for example, may advise saying as little as possible where a PR practitioner would recommend greater openness. If you think they are wrong, you must say so and act accordingly. As a professional, you are considered capable of weighing evidence, opinions and experience in order to form a judgement – and you have a duty to do so. Deferring to others is not a default: it is a decision, and it is up to you to make it.

In both of these instances, be firm, and be clear in your judgement and the basis upon which you have made it. Refer to the Code of Conduct, state your professional judgement and, if the objective itself is not unethical, advise alternative ethical courses of action.

Rarely are situations straightforward in professional ethics and there are always going to be grey areas. The CIPR can offer advice to you or anyone concerned about the ethics of a decision being made in public relations.

Ethics Hotline

If you are concerned about any action you are being asked to take, have any questions or even if you are concerned that you may be at risk of a complaint being made against you, The CIPR Ethics Hotline can advise you.

Contact: Martin Horrox: 0207 631 6969

The CIPR Code of Conduct

All members of the CIPR are bound by the Code of Conduct. They make the commitment on joining and renew this annually when they renew their membership.

Under the principles of the Code, members of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations agree to:

- Maintain the highest standards of professional endeavour, integrity, confidentiality, financial propriety and personal conduct;
- Deal honestly and fairly in business with employers, employees, clients, fellow professionals, other professions and the public;
- Respect, in their dealings with other people, the legal and regulatory frameworks and codes of all countries where they practise;
- Uphold the reputation of, and do nothing that would bring into disrepute, the public relations profession or the Chartered Institute of Public Relations;
- Respect and abide by this Code and related Notes of Guidance issued by the Chartered Institute of Public Relations and ensure that others who are accountable to them (e.g. subordinates and sub-contractors) do the same;
- Encourage professional training and development among members of the profession in order to raise and maintain professional standards generally.

The CIPR Code of Conduct

Interpreting the Code: Principles of good practice

At the heart of the Code of Conduct are four Principles of Good Practice:

- Integrity
- Competence
- Transparency
- Confidentiality

Integrity

Principle: Be honest, clear and straightforward in all dealings at all times.

What the code means as a minimum standard:

1. Illegal or misleading activity

Members must not be party to any activity:

- a. where the intention or effect may be to mislead,
- b. where the activity is illegal or contrary to this or any other relevant regulation or Code of Conduct.

They must not act for a client/employer who, after the member has made their best efforts to dissuade them, intends or continues to act in a manner intended to mislead, is illegal or contrary to relevant regulations or codes.

2. Accuracy

Information or statements provided or made at any time, whether to a client or employer, to a journalist or anyone contacted in the course of business, should be accurate and true. This means making a reasonable effort to verify statements and be clear about what you don't know to be true or accurate.

If the contents of the statements are beyond your professional or personal knowledge, 'making a reasonable effort' means conducting research (e.g. Contacting subject specialists, sourcing sound, referable material).

Likewise, no information should be omitted or obscured from briefings, statements or other material used where to do so would have the effect of misleading.

3. Identity of the client or employer

The identity of the client or employer or interest on whose behalf you are seeking influence should be clear at all times and in all communications.

4. Nature of interest

The nature of the interests of your client or employer should always be clearly represented at all times, and in all communications

5. Public support

Levels of public support for a cause, interest or a client or employer should always be accurately represented.

6. Possible impact of your work

Claims about the possible results of your work should not be exaggerated or extravagant.

7. Client expectations and activities

Work should not be accepted or should be turned down if the client has unrealistic expectations of potential results or outcomes; or if they are engaged in activity which is illegal or contrary to this or any other relevant regulation or Code of Conduct.

8. Bribery, inducements, gifts and entertainment

Members must not offer or give any bribe, or cause any other person to offer or give any bribe, to any person at any time. This includes inducements or incentives and excessive gifts or entertainment, where the intention is to bribe, solicit a favour or gain preference.

Members must observe rules, resolutions, codes of conduct and statutes in relation to any payments they may be party to, made to holders of public office, public servants, political parties and anyone working for them. They must take reasonable steps to ensure that the recipient of any such payments also observes any rules, resolutions, codes of conduct and statutes in relation to any payments.

Competence

Principle: Maintain your professional knowledge and only accept work for which you are appropriately skilled or qualified.

What the code means as a minimum standard:

1. Professional knowledge and competent service

Professional knowledge should be maintained to ensure that clients and employers receive at least a competent standard of service.

2. Ensuring competence in others

Steps should be taken to ensure that others, working with or for members in any project, contract or context, are appropriately competent.

3. Continuing professional development

Committing to continuing professional development. This is not a requirement of membership of the CIPR, however it leads to becoming an Accredited or Chartered Practitioner

4. Professional limitations

Being aware of the limitations of their professional competence and be prepared to turn down work on an honest assessment of what would be involved if the requirements cannot be met within the resources at your disposal. This should take into account realistic opportunities for professional development and sub-contracting or similar arrangements.

5. Limitations of public relations

Where and when appropriate, making their clients or employers aware of the limitations of the practice in relation to their desired outcomes.

6. Law, rules, regulations and other Codes of Conduct

Members must be aware of and able to act in accordance with the relevant statutes and regulations that govern their professional activity and must advise their clients/employers where their activities may be misleading, illegal or contrary to relevant regulations or codes.



Transparency

Principle: Manage and avoid conflicts of interest, disclose financial interests where appropriate; and publicly disclose client relationships and other information in the public interest.

What the code means as a minimum standard:

1. Managing conflicts of interest

There are many situations in which a conflict of interest may arise. It is the responsibility of the professional to avoid them or manage them.

In particular it is not acceptable to represent two clients who have a clash of interests. Where such a conflict arises, practitioners should be clear about their obligations, disclose the conflict to each party and take appropriate steps immediately to remove the conflict (or remove themselves from it).

2. Disclosing financial interests

Professionals should disclose any financial interest in a supplier being recommended or engaged.

3. Disclosure of clients and employers

Where required, particularly in lobbying, professionals should act in accordance with their statutory and professional obligations to disclose on whose behalf they act:

- a. Statutory Obligations – lobbyists should act in accordance with any legislation requiring them to disclose their clients, in any jurisdiction in which they lobby.
- b. Professional Obligations – members of the CIPR who lobby should disclose their clients, employers or interests on whose behalf they lobby, whether or not the activity is paid-for, on the UK Lobbying Register.

4. Disclosing lobbying activity

Where required by law or regulation governing their activity in any jurisdiction, lobbyists should make disclosures required relating to lobbying activity, (as distinct from disclosing clients).



Enforcing the Code of Conduct

It is the Code, and the fact that the Institute can take steps to uphold it, that makes Members accountable for the standard of their professional conduct.

Anyone can make a complaint to the Institute if they believe a CIPR Member (or others for whom they are directly responsible) may have breached the Code.

Complaints process

We treat complaints seriously and carefully. For the sake of our Members, as well as the people who have complained, we must be fair, equal and rigorous.

If it appears that the Code has been breached, the CIPR's Professional Standards Panel (PSP) will investigate and either negotiate a settlement or adjudicate.

We resolve most complaints through informal negotiation ('Conciliation'). When this is not possible, a hearing is convened. Hearings are conducted by members of the CIPR and lay professionals, advised by the Regulatory Consultant and the CIPR's solicitor. The complainant and defendant may bring representation.

The hearing results in a report to the Board of Directors, which endorses the decision of the PSP. There is an appeals process.

For further information or advice on the CIPR Code of Conduct and the processes that support it, please contact:

Martin Horrox
Regulatory Consultant
martinh@cipr.co.uk
0207 631 6969

Outcomes

In certain cases the Institute's Board may expel a Member summarily, that is, without going through the Complaints Procedure: for example, if a Member has been convicted of a crime involving dishonesty or of any sufficiently serious crime, or has breached the rules of a regulatory or other authority by which they are bound.

Where a complaint is upheld, sanctions include a reprimand, a suspension of membership or expulsion from the Institute. Where a case is found not proven, it will be dismissed. Where the Code of Conduct is found to have been breached, decisions of the PSP are normally made public.

If the Committees decide that a CIPR Member has delivered substandard work to you, they may require the Member to return any fees you paid for that work. If the substandard work was part of a larger contract, the refund is limited to the value of that part of the contract. If you want further compensation, you will have to seek legal advice: the CIPR does not impose damages.