

# 16

## Communication Ethics

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### Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, you will be able to understand -

- ◆ Significance of ethical communication
- ◆ Characteristics of ethical communication
- ◆ Factors influencing ethical communication
- ◆ Ethical dilemmas in communication
- ◆ Guidelines to handle communication dilemma

*"Because instant information has to be given, it becomes necessary to resort to guesswork, rumours, and suppositions to fill in the voids, and none of them will ever be rectified, they will stay on the readers' memory. How many hasty, immature, superficial, and misleading judgments are expressed every day, confusing readers, without any verification? The press can both stimulate public opinion and miseducate it. Thus, we may see terrorists turned into heroes, or secret matters pertaining to one's nation's defence publicly revealed, or we may witness shameless intrusions on the privacy of well-known people under the slogan: "Everyone is entitled to know everything."*

Alexander Solzhenitsyn

### 16.1 Significance of Ethical Communication

Ethics are those moral principles, which guide the conduct of individuals' and ethical behaviour in the context of an organization implies such decisions which are taken after giving due thought to their impact on the stakeholder and society as a whole:

When an organization communicates internally, it shapes the values of its employees; when it communicates externally, it influences the perception of the external public. Ethics plays a crucial role in communication. The word ethics encompasses the entire spectrum of human conduct viz.

1. Colleagues,
2. Staff and workers,
3. Shareholders,

4. Customers,
5. The community,
6. The government,
7. The environment and even,
8. The nation, and its interest.

Communication has always been of critical importance to the success of companies and corporate reputation is one of a company's most valuable and enduring assets. It plays a central role in the achievement of key business objectives such as creating shareholder value, attracting, retaining and motivating high-quality people, enhancing reputation with all audiences, marshaling stakeholder support on public policy issues, creating consumer preference for products and services, and minimizing the impact a crisis can have on a company's financial position and business prospects. Ethical communication is fundamental to responsible thinking, decision making, and the development of relationships and communities within and across contexts, cultures, channels, and media. Ethical communication enhances human worth and respect for self and others. Ethical communication is fundamental to responsible thinking, decision making, and the development of relationships and communities within and across contexts, cultures, channels, and media. Ethical communication enhances human worth and dignity by fostering truthfulness, fairness, responsibility, personal integrity, and respect for self and others.<sup>1</sup> while unethical communication threatens the quality of all communication and consequently the well-being of individuals and the society in which we live.

An ethical communication:

- includes all relevant information,
- is true in every sense and is not deceptive in any way.
- accurate and sincere. Avoids language that manipulates,, discriminates or exaggerates.
- does not hide negative information behind an optimistic attitude .
- does not state opinions as facts,
- portrays graphic data fairly.

In a nutshell ethical communicators have a "well developed sense of social responsibility. "One is honest with employers, co-workers, and clients, never seeking personal gain by making others look better or worse than they are, don't allow personal preferences to Influence your perception or the perception of others, and act in good faith.

Organizations, like people, should strive for ethical behavior. No one can completely guarantee that a corporation or its employees will behave ethically; yet acknowledgement of occasional failures does not reduce the fundamental ethical responsibility. This philosophical

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<sup>1</sup> The National Communication Association

position implies certain actions in three basic areas: cultural, policy, and personal. Ethical organizations are created and sustained by individuals of personal integrity, operating in a culture of principle, and governed by conscientious policies.

#### **16.2 Factors Influencing Ethical Communication:**

*1. Every Communication Decision has some Ethical Aspect to it, Acknowledged or Not.*

There are countless complexities involved in the communication process, but communicators initially face three simple choices: to speak, to listen, or to remain silent. Each choice implies an ethical decision.

In a message the sender chooses to disclose information, motives, or feelings to others. That choice inevitably involves an ethical element. Clearly, some messages should not be sent, such as those involving "insider information." To do so gives certain people an unfair advantage in the marketplace. But should one share a rumour about an organizational change with a colleague? Such actions are commonplace and appear to be less objectionable than insider trading.

The timing and mode of communication add another layer of complexity to the ethical dimension.

Remaining silent might seem like the safest way to avoid ethical dilemmas. But even here there is no safe haven. Remaining silent in the face of unlawful behavior or a potentially harmful situation presents a serious ethical decision. Silence signals consent or perhaps tacit agreement,

*2. The Ethical Nature of Communication must be Considered within the Context of Who, What, When, and Where.*

Suppose fellow employees discussed a project they were working on. This may seem perfectly ethical on the surface. After all, such discussions actually foster effective interdepartmental relationships; a worthy goal indeed. The problem may be that the discussion took place in a crowded restaurant and a competitor overheard the conversation. When the employees are confronted, they may reply, "What did we say that was wrong? We were not talking to a competitor." But this is, of course, the wrong question. The issue does not concern what was said or even who they were talking to. The ethical issue revolves around where the conversation took place. Herein lies the complexity of ethical issues-evaluations must be made on more than one dimension. Ethical communicators are not concerned with just who or what or where or when, but with all four dimensions simultaneously.

#### **16.3 Organization Values and Communication Ethics**

A key element in any communication activity is the values of the organization. Values are the principles and ideas that people or organizations strongly believe in and consider important. When people are in doubt about decisions, they frequently rely on deep-seated values to help them make the right choice. In organizations, reliance on shared values makes setting goals

easier in the face of the competing ideas, desires, and objectives of individual employees.

One can get a good idea about the values of an organization by examining its vision and mission statement. These statements are short descriptions of the purpose of organizations and the directions they try to take to achieve success. Many organizations post their vision and mission statements in several places so that employees know what the organization values

On the surface, ethical practices appear fairly easy to recognize. But deciding what is ethical, can be quite complex. Under the influence of competition, job pressure, peer pressure, ambition, financial gain (both personal and corporate), business people sometimes make unethical choices. For example, a recent survey revealed that 20-30% of middle managers had written deceptive internal reports. We are also aware of many companies selling products without disclosure of side effects. An ethical dilemma involves choosing among alternatives that aren't clear-cut (sometimes conflicting alternatives are both ethical and valid, or perhaps your alternatives lie somewhere in the vast gray area between right and wrong). Suppose you are president of a company that's losing money. You have a duty to your shareholders to try to cut your losses and to your employees to be fair and honest. After looking at various options, you conclude that you'll have to layoff 300 people immediately. You suspect you may have to layoff another 100 people later on, but right now you need those 100 workers to finish a project. What do you tell them? If you confess that their jobs are shaky, many of them may quit just when you need them most. However, if you tell them that the future is rosy, you'll be stretching the truth.

## 16.4 Ethical Dilemmas In Communication

Some of the ethical dilemmas faced while communicating are:

- *Secrecy*: Secrets are kept for both honourable and dishonourable reasons; may be used to guard intimacy or to invade it. Here then lies the challenge for the manager: to determine when secrets are justifiable and when they are not. When the clamp of secrecy tightens too much, the result is lack of innovation.

On the other hand, organizations have a legitimate need to protect certain information. If competitors, for example, gain access to proprietary research and development, they can produce that product for a much lower net cost because they do not have to pay the research and development expenses.

- *Whistle-blowing*: Any employee who goes public with information about corporate abuses or negligence is known as a whistle-blower. Corporations and managers legitimately expect employee loyalty. Greed, jealousy, and revenge motivate some whistle-blowers. Some are simply misinformed. Some confuse public interest with private interest. Certainly the community has a right to know about corporate practices that are potentially hazardous, yet courting the whistle-blower too aggressively can be problematic..

- *Leaks:* A leak is like anonymous whistle-blowing; one distinction being the propriety of the leak; namely, that the person who leaks information cannot be cross-examined. This often casts doubt on the credibility of the claim. The accused does not know who or why a person has chosen to release certain information. Politicians have used leaks for years to, stall a plan, or defame an opponent. Employees may also leak information to the press for honourable or dishonourable reasons. Leaks may cause organizational plans to be altered or forgone altogether. Leaks can be a form of political manoeuvring in the organization or a way to sabotage the career of a colleague competing for a job.
- *Rumour and gossip:* Rumours and gossip seem to be an inevitable part of everyday corporate life. Even though rumours and gossip often travel through the same networks, there is a distinction between the terms. Rumours tend to focus on events and information, whereas gossip focuses on people. Even though managers usually treat the information as "yet to be confirmed," it may cloud judgments about that employee. The information has a way of creeping into performance evaluations and promotion decisions, even if unintended.
- *Lying:* A lie is a false statement intended to deceive. Of all the ethical dilemmas discussed thus far, lying would appear to be the least morally perplexing. Most would agree that "one ought not to lie." Yet lies in business are more common than many would care to admit. Lying breaks down the trust between individuals, shaking the foundation of ethical communication.
- *Euphemisms:* By definition, a euphemism is using a less offensive expression instead of one that might cause distress. For example using the expression "passed away" instead "died" is one of the more common examples. This usage is understandable. However, people frequently use these terms to obscure the truth. For example a purchasing agent has a far easier time accepting a "consideration fee" than a "bribe." Petty office theft gets passed off as merely "permanently borrowing" the item instead of "stealing."
- *Ambiguity:* *Ambiguity*, like secrecy, can be used for ethical or unethical purposes. Language itself is made up of various words that carry values. So by using words in certain ways, one can influence others' behaviour and expectations. Because all language contains some degree of vagueness, communicators are to some extent held responsible for possible misinterpretations. This means that one must be aware of the probabilistic nature of communication, and need to consider not only their intentions, but also how their messages might be misunderstood.

## 16.5 Guidelines to handle Communication Ethics Dilemmas

Although some ethical dilemmas are more easily solved than others, all involve making evaluations and judgments about what is morally right and wrong, what is fair and what is not and what will cause harm and what will not. Ethical communication requires effective critical thinking skills, recognizing the importance of diverse perspectives, respect for the well being of self and others, taking responsibility for individual and group actions, and reflecting on the choices group members make.

**Legal Considerations:** One place to look for guidance is the law. If saying or writing something is clearly illegal, you have no dilemma: You obey the law.

**Moral Considerations:** Although legal considerations will resolve some ethical questions, one has often had to rely on your own judgment and principles. If your intent is honest, the statement is ethical, even though it may be factually incorrect, but if your intent is to mislead or manipulate the audience, the message is unethical, regardless of whether it is true. Looking at the consequences of decisions and opting for a solution that provides the greatest good to the greatest number of people.

**Maintain Candour** – Candour refers to truthfulness, honesty, and frankness in your communication with other people. Although revealing everything you know about a situation may not always be appropriate—for instance, providing all your information to adversaries during intense and sensitive negotiations will only compromise your position—

**Keep Messages Accurate** - When you are relaying information from one source to another, communicate the original message as accurately as possible. Ethical communicators do not take liberties with the messages they pass on.

**Avoid Deception** - Ethical communicators are always vigilant in their quest to avoid deception, fabrication, intentional distortion, or withholding of information in their communication.

**Behave Consistently** - One of the most prevalent yet noticeable areas of unethical behaviour is communicating one thing and doing another. You must always monitor your behaviour to ensure that it matches what you say to others.

**Keep Confidences** - When someone tells you something and expects you not to divulge that information to others, a sacred trust has been placed on you.

**Ensure Timeliness of Communication**- The timing of messages can be critical. When you delay sending messages so that others do not fully benefit, they can (rightly) assume that you have acted unethically.

**Confront Unethical Behavior**-To maintain a consistent ethical viewpoint, you must confront unethical behavior when you observe it. Public condemnation of unethical persons may not be necessary, but it is important that people understand that your own tolerance for unethical behavior is low.

### 16.6 NCA's Credo for Ethical Communication

The National Communication Association (NCA) states: "ethical communication enhances human worth and dignity by fostering truthfulness, fairness, responsibility, personal integrity, and respect for self and other

- ✓ Truthfulness, accuracy, honesty, and reason are essential to the integrity of communication.
- ✓ Endorse freedom of expression, diversity of perspective, and tolerance of dissent to achieve the informed and responsible decision making fundamental to a civil society.
- ✓ Strive to understand and respect other communicators before evaluating and responding to their messages.
- ✓ Access to communication resources and opportunities are necessary to fulfill human potential and contribute to the well being of families, communities, and society.
- ✓ Promote communication climates of caring and mutual understanding that respect the unique needs and characteristics of individual communicators.
- ✓ Condemn communication that degrades individuals and humanity through distortion, intolerance, intimidation, coercion, hatred, and violence.
- ✓ Commit to the courageous expression of personal convictions in pursuit of fairness and justice.
- ✓ Advocate sharing information, opinions, and feelings when facing significant choices while also respecting privacy and confidentiality.
- ✓ Unethical communication threatens the quality of all communication and consequently the well being of individuals and the society in which we live.
- ✓ Accept responsibility for the short- and long-term consequences for our own communication and expect the same of others.

### 16.7 The Advantage of Ethical Communication

Ethical communication promotes long-term business success and profit. However, improving profits isn't reason enough to be ethical; as soon as the cost of being ethical outweighed the benefits, ethical choices would no longer be possible. Surveys report that all employees want to work for organizations with high ethical standards.

Competent people are likely to search for organizations that maintain high ethical standards. When competent people migrate toward ethical firms, everyone benefits because both competence and ethics are perpetuated. Indeed, it is quite easy to make the argument that competence and ethics go hand in hand. They know that ethical practices are the only sure the level of ethical awareness has risen over the last few years. Many companies are reassessing

their communication budgets, moving away from traditional, functional approaches to public relations and public affairs and pursuing internal and external corporate communication strategies. The theory and practice arising from corporate communications lies at the heart of effective strategic management, planning and control. New digital media technologies are having greater impact on news management and the monitoring and evaluation of corporate identity, corporate advertising, organizational reputation and overall performance.