

Fundamentals of Organizational Communication

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Values and Ethical Communication Behaviors

This chapter is designed to help you think about how values and ethics influence human communication within organizations. The chapter also introduces you to value and ethical dilemmas commonly encountered by communication professionals. The chapter attempts to contribute to the development of knowledge by defining values and ethics, identifying individual and organizational values, and establishing frameworks for evaluating ethical communication behaviors.

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Values in Organizational Communication

Richard Johannesen, in his important book *Ethics in Human Communication* (1983), stated that “values can be viewed as conceptions of The Good or The Desirable that motivate human behavior and that function as criteria in our making of choices and judgments.”



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Organizational Value Systems

Milton Rokeach (1973) defined a value system as “an enduring organization of beliefs concerning preferable modes of conduct or end-states of existence along a continuum of relative importance.” Based on the Rokeach definition, Leonard Goodstein (1983) contended that “in any organization, the members generally have a set of beliefs about what is appropriate and inappropriate organizational behavior. Furthermore, these beliefs can be ordered in importance in a reliable fashion by the members of the organization.” In other words, organizational value systems help organizational members understand what the organization holds as important and how the unique sense of the place should influence their personal decision making and behavior



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Organizational Values, Globalization, and Diversity

Diversity in values does not occur solely in the global business environment. As the workforce includes increasingly diverse cultural groups, organizations, often attempting to have their own distinct value systems, will increasingly reflect value differences and similarities across groups. These value differences and similarities are important for both individuals and organizations. A large body of research, for example, continues to demonstrate that value congruence (the similarity between individual and organizational values) between employees and their organizations has a significant affect on organizational commitment, employee work satisfaction, and turnover.

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Individual Values

The process of matching individual and organizational values also is complicated by the lack of individual understanding of how value systems relate to work life.



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Value Orientations

Beginning in 1960, Gordon Allport, Philip Vernon, and Gardner Lindzey suggested personal values can be described in terms of six orientations: **theoretical, economic, aesthetic, social, political, and religious**. Theoretical values focus on the discovery of truth, knowledge, and order, whereas economic values focus on the useful and practical and on material acquisition. We express aesthetic values in our concerns for artistic experiences and in our desire for form and harmony. We express social values in our relationships with others and our love and service commitments. Political values relate to needs for power, influence, leadership, and domination, and religious values relate to needs for unity and meaningful relationships to the world.

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Terminal and Instrumental Values

Milton Rokeach's (1973) value survey identified terminal and instrumental values. Terminal values can be viewed as concern for "end states of existence," or desirable goals, and instrumental values are desirable behaviors or modes of conduct that relate to and influence terminal values.

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Work Values

The personal values discussed apply to all aspects of our lives, not just the time we spend in organizations. Few attempts have been made to explore personal values as they specifically apply to work environments. Roger Howe, Maynard Howe, and Mark Mindell (1982) identified five value dimensions that they believed affect our organizational lives: **locus of control, self-esteem, tolerance of of ambiguity, social judgment, and risk taking.**

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Locus of Control

- The term 'Locus of control' refers to how much control a person feels they have in their own behavior. A person can either have an internal or external locus of control (Rotter, 1954).
- People with a high internal locus of control perceive themselves as having much personal control over their behavior and are, therefore, more likely to take responsibility for their behavior. For example, I did well on the exams because I revised extremely hard.
- In contrast, a person with a high external locus of control perceives their behaviors as a result of external influences or luck – e.g., I did well on the test because it was easy.

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The Self-esteem

- The self-esteem dimension relates to the value we place on recognition for work, positive feedback, and the use of our contributions. This value represents our concern for being trusted and perceived as making worthwhile contributions to the organization.

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Tolerance of ambiguity

Tolerance for ambiguity can be defined as the degree to which an individual is comfortable with uncertainty, unpredictability, conflicting directions, and multiple demands. In essence, tolerance for ambiguity is manifest in a person's ability to operate effectively in an uncertain environment. The extent of ambiguity may vary greatly and is generally linked to the underlying cause for uncertainty. Some people may be born with a natural predilection toward tolerance for ambiguity, while for others it develops over time through education and experience. And there are some who strive daily to simply eliminate ambiguity in their lives.

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Social judgment

Is a [self-persuasion](#) theory proposing that an individual's perception and evaluation of an [idea](#) is by comparing it with current attitudes. According to this theory, an individual weighs every new idea, comparing it with the individual's present point of view to determine where it should be placed on the attitude scale in an individual's mind.

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Risk Taking

Concerns the importance we place on quick rather than deliberative action and whether we prefer our own sense of job fulfillment as opposed to job security. Our risk-taking value influences the degree of security we require in work situations, our tolerance for ambiguity in decision making, and whether we are willing to attempt tasks we have not previously encountered or have few qualifications for accomplishing



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Ethics in Organizational Communication

Although we may not easily define what we mean by ethical behavior, most of us are aware that abuses are all around us. We know students who have engaged in plagiarism or cheated on exams. We may have committed these or similar behaviors ourselves. We hear the excuses as reasons: “Everyone is doing it and no one ever gets caught”; “I was desperate. I didn’t understand the material and the professor wouldn’t help”; “I can’t let my family down”; “I have to get a good job and a B won’t do.” The statements are troubling and the statistics are worse. In 2004 several research sources estimated that over one-third of undergraduate college and university students were using the “cut and paste” method of Internet plagiarism each year (McCabe, 2004). But the abuses certainly do not rest with students alone. The early years of the twenty-first century have seen a rash of corporate and government scandals. Enron, Global Crossing, Synergy, Xerox, Adelphia, Tyco, and WorldCom are but a few major corporations at which significant abuses resulted in the loss of billions of dollars, unemployment for thousands, and criminal charges leveled at leadership.



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Ethics in Organizational Communication

Alexander Lyon and Julien Mirivel (2011) provide a particularly disturbing example of communication ethics. Lyon and Mirivel describe, "...the ways in which Merck, a major pharmaceutical company, trained salespeople to communicate with physicians about its controversial pain drug, Vioxx. Between 2000 and 2004, approximately 60,000 people died while taking the drug ...we argue that Merck taught a communication approach that obscured physicians' ability to make a significant choice and unnecessarily put more patients' lives at risk"

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Defining Ethics

Moral principles that guide judgments about good and bad, right and wrong, not just effectiveness or efficiency.

When applied to human communication, ethics are the moral principles that guide our judgments about the good and bad, right and wrong, of communication, not just communication effectiveness or efficiency

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Making Ethical Decisions

Three general decision-making frameworks can be identified for their approaches to our subject of ethics: **utilitarian theory, theory of rights, and theory of justice**. First, utilitarian theory evaluates behavior based on outcomes or consequences for those involved. Second, the theory of rights emphasizes individuals' entitlements or privileges as members of a society. Finally, a theory of justice emphasizes balance or equity. These three perspectives are mostly a product of Western cultural values. It is important to note, especially in light of global environments, other cultures may have different values that define differently morally acceptable actions. Thus, ethics is not a concrete science. Even in our own culture, solutions to moral dilemmas are not always clear. Indeed the three perspectives that follow are potentially contradictory with one another.

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Utilitarian Theory

Utilitarian theory rests on the principle that our actions are judged by their consequences or outcomes. The statement “The ends justify the means” is often used to describe this philosophical viewpoint. Utilitarianism charges decision makers with determining the various possible outcomes in a given situation and then determining which will benefit the greatest number of individuals.



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Theory of Rights

The theory of moral rights asserts that all individuals have certain inalienable rights that are defined by society and that these rights must be respected in all situations, including the workplace. The most familiar rights for Americans are those found in the U.S. Constitution's Bill of Rights. Cavanagh, Moberg, and Velasquez (1990) suggested the following as commonly accepted basic moral rights: 1. The right of free consent. Individuals have the right to be treated only as they freely consent to be treated. 2. The right to privacy. Individuals have a right to a private life outside the purview of the public. 3. The right to freedom of conscience. Individuals have the right to refuse to do anything that goes against their moral or religious beliefs. 4. The right of free speech. Individuals have the right to speak freely as long as what they say does not violate others' rights. (The concept of others' rights remains subject to debate and various legal interpretations.) 5. The right to due process. Individuals have a right to a fair and impartial hearing to avoid a violation of their rights.

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Theory of Justice

The theory of justice requires that all decision makers be guided by fairness, impartiality, and equity if their actions are to be considered ethical. Thus, treatment of individuals should not be based on arbitrary characteristics, and any differential treatment should be defensible. Treatment also should be consistent and impartially enforced. For example, most organizations have experienced some form of employee reduction or downsizing. One of the ethical issues an employer faces is deciding which departments or individuals will be let go. Do you make the decision based on performance or seniority? The theory of justice would consider that whatever direction you take, you must be fair, equitable, and impartial. If organizations decide they will base layoffs on seniority, they must first develop a strong reason for their decision. Then, that criterion must be used in all termination decisions. Finally, any subsequent decisions that affect those who are laid off must apply equally to all (e.g., severance packages). The theory of justice has gained in importance with the advent of issues of corporate social responsibility, sustainability, and a host of highly visible ethical and legal abuses.



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Defining Ethical Communication

Daily we come into contact with situations requiring us to make judgments or choices about what is right, ethical, or moral. In the case of a compliment, we may spend little time debating what is ethical, whereas a decision to withhold information from the boss requires serious consideration and considerable worry. We all face the question of trying to determine ethical communication behavior. Our answers to ethical questions are based on our communication competencies—knowledge, sensitivity, skills, and values—and are related to our overall communication experiences. As previously discussed, ethical communication is an important prerequisite for effectiveness for both individuals and entire organizations.



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Evaluating Ethical Behavior

Karl Wallace (1955) developed a set of guidelines for the evaluation of behavior that he first applied to our political system and that Rebecca Rubin and Jess Yoder (1985, pp. 14–15) extended to the assessment of communication skills in an educational setting. These guidelines are appropriate for consideration in most organizational communication situations.

1. The habit of search. Ethical communication willingly explores the complexity of any issue or problem. This exploration requires generating valid information and evaluating new and often controversial findings.
2. The habit of justice. Ethical communication presents information as openly and fairly as possible and with concern for message distortion. Not only is information accurate, but information is also presented for maximum understanding. When we receive and evaluate information, the habit of justice requires that we examine our own evaluation criteria and potential biases that contribute to distortion in meaning.

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Evaluating Ethical Behavior

3. The habit of public versus private motivations. Ethical communication is based on sharing sources of information, special opinions, motivations, or biases that may influence our position. Hidden agendas are discouraged for both message senders and receivers.
4. The habit of respect for dissent. Ethical communication not only allows but also encourages opposing viewpoints and arguments. This habit of respect for dissent in an open environment supports generation of the best ideas through thoughtful examination, disagreement, and new idea presentation.



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Organizational Conundrums

The word conundrum refers to a problem or a puzzle. The organizational conundrums discussed here **illustrate the problems and perplexing dilemmas that routinely raise value and ethical issues for all organizational members.**

After reviewing the research identifying ethical concerns in organizational communication, Seeger, Sellnow, Ulmer, and Novak (2009) identified the following ethical issues: **privacy and voice, free speech, diversity, persuasion and coercion, change, power and domination, authority and control, organizational democracy, discourse and dialogue, legitimacy and corporate social responsibility, recruitment and socialization, ethical climate, and public relations.** Carl Anderson (1997) identified four organizational goals that are often framed as incompatible: economic performance, competence, the learning organization, and the organization as community. These incompatibilities are a foundation for ethical dilemmas.



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Organizational Conundrums

- Economic performance refers to the goal of profit, with its inherent measurement and assumption that some organizations will succeed while others fail. Competence refers to the tangible or intangible assets that yield sustainable competitive advantage. To improve the competencies supporting efficiency, methods such as restructuring, reengineering, quality control, process redesign, and downsizing have been increasingly employed. The learning organization refers to an organization's capacity to change strategies, tactics, or performance. The organization as community refers to the respect for rights and fulfillment of duty



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Value and Ethical Challenges in Organizational Communication

Although value and ethical issues can arise over virtually any type of communication, several recurring organizational communication situations have value and ethical implications. These situations—**voice and participation; representing skills and abilities; communication behaviors related to money; communication behaviors related to information collection, dissemination, problem solving, and decision making; personal communication behaviors; communication behaviors related to technology; destructive communication behaviors; planned organizational communication** (internal policies and decisions and external communication); and **communication behaviors related to courage, responsibility, trust, and ethics**—are frequently encountered by organizational members and communication professionals.



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Voice and Participation

- The culture and daily practices of organizations determine the types of inputs and feedback the organization is likely to receive from a variety of stakeholders. We refer to inputs and feedback as voice—the ability to speak to issues of importance with their value and ethical dimensions. Many, if not most, organizations have statements of basic ethical behavior. The evidence is clear that these statements have only marginally curbed ethical abuses. The issues are both complex and simple. Does an organization have clear opportunities for employees, customers, donors, and other stakeholders to provide input on concerns and change? Are stakeholders asked to provide input prior to major decisions? Do those challenging positions and actions receive a fair hearing? What happens to those who challenge ethical practices? Many organizational members know ethical abuses have occurred. Fewer believe they can either stop the practice or influence positive change. Organizational silence permits the continuation of abuses. The issue of voice and participation is both individual and organization-wide. Supporting voice and participating continue to be challenging because no one approach can address all potential circumstances.



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Representing Skills and Abilities

We presents our skills and abilities to potential employers when seeking a job. The way in which we communicate what we know reflects an ethical decision about fair representation of our abilities. Most of us have known someone who has told an interviewer about a skill that we knew the individual did not possess. Although we would say that this behavior is not strictly ethical, we know our friend is highly motivated and will attempt to do a good job if hired. Does this motivation make the behavior acceptable, however? What is the ethical standard we should apply? Once hired, we may attempt to seek good assignments designed to help us advance. How do we represent our abilities as compared with others in our work group? Do we keep information about mistakes from our supervisor to appear more competent than our peers? Do we blame others for problems even though we legitimately bear part of the responsibility? How can we behave ethically and still risk what others might think about our competencies if they know we have made a major mistake?



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Communication Behaviors Related to Money

One ethical question is whether general salary information should be available to all employees or whether salaries should remain confidential to individual employees. The communication of performance review and wage administration information also is a management communication decision with ethical consequences. Individuals communicate their ethical standards regarding organizational money when they use expense accounts, buy services or products for the organization, and establish department budgets. One way to examine our communication behaviors relating to organizational money is to determine whether we would approve of our behavior if we were the sole owner or head of the organization.

**Chapter
4****Communication Behavior Related to Information Collection, Dissemination, Problem Solving and Decision Making**

Most communication professionals are involved in collecting organizational information. They interview, conduct surveys, facilitate meetings, advise and counsel individuals, review documents, and in a variety of other ways generate data important to the conduct of their jobs. During data collection activities, professionals make ethical decisions concerning what should remain confidential, who has a need to know, how accurate the information is, and what the criteria for interpretation are. These same ethical issues relate to information dissemination. Should sensitive information be kept private, going only to affected individuals? Does a guarantee of confidentiality prohibit the use of the information, even though the organization could be improved if the information surfaced? Who has a need to know?

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Communication Behavior Related to Information Collection, Dissemination, Problem Solving and Decision Making

How accurate is the information, and is it subject to varying interpretations? Most experienced professionals know that their ability to handle these sensitive questions ethically contributes to their personal credibility. Even if ethical considerations were not important in and of themselves, practicing communication professionals find that the exercise of ethical standards is essential to their overall organizational effectiveness. Research on effective leaders supports this perspective



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Personal Communication Behaviors

This area, broadly described as our personal communication style, refers to the ethics of our individual behaviors, regardless of our job responsibilities. Do we, for example, behave autocratically, enforcing our will by refusing to consider the opinions of others and attempting to win at any cost? Is this autocratic preference ethical when it stifles the good ideas of others? Do we, as a result of high communication apprehension or a preference for conflict avoidance, refuse to participate in decision making even though we have information appropriate to the decision? When we are employed by the organization, is it ethical to withhold the best of our thinking? Does our style help others to examine issues critically, or do we use the power of our positions or the force of our personalities to get our own way? How can we examine the ethics of our approaches?

Most of us have been either victims or carriers of gossip. We find talking about others interesting and exciting. We may not be as excited when we know others are discussing our personal or professional lives.

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Communication Behaviors and Technology

Maintaining confidentiality and security of information for e-commerce is an increasingly complex organizational responsibility. Disclaimers on the Internet and in other publications describe organizational commitments to confidentiality. Yet leaks of confidential information are frequent, and identity theft from breaches of electronic confidentiality occurs for almost one in eight individuals every year. The breaking of confidentiality is a frequent and costly organizational occurrence. Indeed, the broad use of technology for purchases and exchange of important information carries both an ethical and legal responsibility for individuals and organizations.

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Destructive Communication Behaviors

A number of communication behaviors such as deception, invasion of privacy, aggression, incivility, sexual harassment, and discrimination are almost universally considered unethical. Unfortunately, these behaviors occur daily within all types and sizes of organizations. In describing destructive behaviors, Craig Johnson (2007) contended, “Like the dangerous aspects of ourselves, the shadow side of organizations must be acknowledged and confronted. There is little hope of transforming organizational systems unless we first address the behaviors that undermine any change effort.”

Lying is the most obvious form of deception and is a deliberate attempt to either provide false information or mislead others with only marginally truthful information. But deception also occurs when individuals remain silent even though they have information that could alter understanding in particular situations.



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Planned and Strategic Organizational Communication

Organizations regularly communicate a variety of policies and procedures with ethical implications. Hiring processes and decisions, promotional policies, assignment of work, and working conditions are all evaluated for their ethical consequences.

Do organizations genuinely open positions and promotions to the most qualified, or are those in a close network of in-group relationships most likely to succeed? Are all employees given opportunities for development and challenging work assignments, or do entire segments of the workforce have little challenge and opportunity? Are working conditions free of hazards both physically and psychologically? Are employees able to engage in free statements of their concerns and positions? The answers to these questions and others become the ethical climate of the organization.

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Planned and Strategic Organizational Communication

- Organizations also communicate ethical decisions to their external publics. The quality of products and services can be evaluated for ethical dimensions. Strategic organizational communication such as advertising, branding, public relations, and government and stockholder interactions is more likely to be governed by formal codes of ethics or legal standards and requirements than other aspects of organizational communication.
- Full disclosure of financial information is required for stockholder and government relationships, and public relations efforts are subject to ethical standards established by the journalism profession.

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Tips for Effective Communication

- 1. Evaluate your communication for its honor and respect for all persons.
- 2. Listen actively and ask for clarification when you believe you may not understand.
- 3. Ask others for input even when you are fairly certain you will disagree.
- 4. Provide information openly and honestly.
- 5. Encourage others to participate in difficult discussions.
- 6. Support civil disagreement.
- 7. Challenge behavior that devalues others.
- 8. Apologize for and correct personal negative behaviors.
- 9. Support others to confront wrongs.
- 10. Provide credit and support for ethical behaviors



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