

**COMMUNICATION IN THE NEW ZEALAND
WORKPLACE**

THEORY AND PRACTICE

Edited by

Frank Sligo and Ralph Bathurst

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3.**Communication Ethics****Susan Fontaine**

For communication managers, the question might seriously be asked, is there anything that is more important to our conception of human being beyond the skills and values of communication and ethics? (Beckett, 2003, p. 44)

Would you tell your best friend if you saw their partner locked in a passionate embrace with a colleague? Have you lied or 'stretched the truth' in a job interview to make yourself look better or adopted a different persona in an on-line chat room? Have you ever told someone what you thought they wanted to hear, in an effort to get what you want? Would you copy another person's work and pass it off as your own? And finally, how honest are you really being when answering these questions?

All of our communication, in the workplace, at home or down at the pub, has an ethical dimension, although not necessarily in a positive sense. Studies show that lying is so prevalent in society that it can be considered a cultural trait (Patteron & Kim, quoted in Redding, 1996) or part of the 'human skill set' (Middleton, 2002). In a widely reported study of American graduate students, 60% lied at least once during a 10 minute conversation, and on average, participants told two to three lies during one interaction (Knight, 2003).

New Zealanders have recently witnessed several high profile political scandals linked to lying or 'hiding the truth': in late 2002, Act MP Donna Awatere Huata's weight loss was revealed to be the result not simply of calorie counting and exercise – as she implied in various interviews – but stomach stapling surgery; Cabinet Minister Lianne Dalziel was forced to resign in February 2004 after misleading the public about her role in leaking a letter to the media; and an infamous 'lie in unison' memo eventually resulted in the dismissal of Immigration Service communications manager Ian Smith in March 2004.

In *The Dominion Post* newspaper, columnist Joanne Black notes a "fascinating interplay about lying" (2004, p. B4) in the wake of the Immigration Service scandal and considers the implications of these shifting definitions of untruthfulness for her as a parent:

Here, for example, is a fairly typical bedtime conversation in my house between me and my eight-year-old son.

“Have you cleaned your teeth?”

“Yes.”

“No you haven’t. You haven’t been in the bathroom.”

“I cleaned them yesterday.”

Now, taking the Government’s definitions as benchmarks, I think perhaps I owe my son apologies. He hasn’t been lying. He has technically been telling the truth. I did not ask him whether, after dinner on this particular evening, approximately between the hours of 1915 and 2030, and by first putting toothpaste on his toothbrush and then applying both to his teeth, had he cleaned them. No, I’d merely said “Did you clean your teeth?” If the last time he’d done anything like clean his teeth was eating an apple on New Year’s Day, which is possible, then his answer “yes” was technically correct. (Black, 2004, p. B4)

As philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche said, in a comment which neatly encapsulates the repercussions of unethical communication, “What upsets me is not that you lied to me; it is that from now on, I can no longer believe you” (cited in Johnson & Phillips, 2003, p. 22).

What is Ethics?

Our contemporary understanding of ethics is influenced by the philosophy of the ancient Greeks (particularly Socrates, Plato and Aristotle), Christianity, Western values and the notion of choice. While ethical questions have preoccupied humankind for centuries, and although “thinking about ethics is one of the oldest intellectual traditions of humanity” (Sanders, 2003, p. 14), the academic study of communication has been slow to address or fully incorporate this aspect of our interaction with others.

Ethics generally is concerned with questions of right and wrong, in situations where we have a choice about how we act, and lack specific guidance from laws or morals (Hendtlass & Nichols, 2003; Sanders, 2003; Seeger, Sellnow & Ulmer, 2003). There is a difference, though, between morals, laws and ethics.

Ethics is a bigger concept than morals. Morals are usually about fairly clear right-and-wrong choices that people make in their personal lives and relationships. They are learned as part of our culture and upbringing, and may differ between families and between eth-

nic groups . . . Ethics are the personal processes or ideas that we apply when we face an issue not completely covered by our rules and morals. (Hendtlass & Nichols, 2003, pp. 6–7)

In simple terms, ethics is concerned with “serious and difficult questions about how we should live our lives” (Sanders, 2003, p. 14). Communication ethics, then, focuses on “serious and difficult” questions about how we should communicate. The Institute of Communication Ethics’ model identifies five perspectives – political, media, organisation, group and interpersonal – which alert us to the ethical complexities and tensions underlying our interactions (Beckett, 2003). This chapter focuses particularly on organisational and interpersonal perspectives, but also considers mass media ethics, the latter an area which dominates much of the communication writing on ethics (Redding, 1996. For useful contemporary overviews of journalistic ethics, see Hendtlass & Nichols, 2003; Keeble, 2001; Sanders, 2003).

Writers such as Seeger et al. (2003) and DeVito (1995) maintain that the defining feature of ethical communication is the promotion of genuine freedom of choice through access to accurate information for decision making. This is in contrast to unethical communication which tends to put us in a position where we either make choices we would not usually make or decline to make choices we would normally make. To illustrate, we can consider information about the health risks of smoking. It has been established that tobacco companies withheld information about the link between smoking and lung cancer, released information designed to confuse the issue and intentionally disseminated false statements, all of which effectively denied smokers the choice to make informed, health-based decisions about their behaviour (Seeger et al., 2003).

Ethical Frameworks

To fully understand how we make ethical choices, we need to have some understanding of the philosophical frameworks that inform our responses. What makes the area so fascinating is the different values used to explain, interpret and justify behaviour, and the shades of grey that quickly emerge in contemporary discussions of ethics. According to Sanders (2003), “reflecting the fragmentation of our postmodern times, it is no longer possible to point to an overarching, dominant framework for ethical reflection” (p. 14).

Western theorists have identified influential schools of thought, simply described as deontological ethics (duty ethics), consequentialist ethics (utilitarianism), and virtue ethics (humanist ethics).

- *Deontological ethics* is the most 'cut and dried' approach, expressing a commitment to fundamental principles (such as honesty) regarded as universal, and therefore, always applicable whatever the circumstances. An example is the Ten Commandments of the Judeo-Christian tradition.
- *Consequentialist ethics* or *utilitarianism* is more pragmatic, focusing on consequences or what action will be best for the most people. "The right way to behave in a given situation is to choose the alternative most likely to produce the greatest overall good" (Halbert & Ingulli, 2002, p. 24). John Stuart Mill's work on freedom of speech, which he argued needs to be balanced against consideration of harm, is an example.
- *Virtue ethics* is concerned with moral character and "place[s] moral weight on the dignity of the individual, and humanity's obligation to care for one another" (Hendtlass & Nichols, 2003, p. 6). A virtue ethics approach emphasises character rather than rules and duties (as in deontological ethics) or consequences (utilitarianism).

Mazur (1993) clarifies how a communication activity, such as lying, is interpreted under these three broad frameworks. Under a duty-based, deontological approach, he says that lying is morally wrong because it harms the dignity and autonomy of both the person telling the lie, and the person who is told the lie. The importance of people being able to make free, rational choices underlies deontological ethics; yet, "Each lie I tell contradicts the part of me that gives me moral worth. Second, my lies rob others of their freedom to choose rationally" (Mazur, 1993, para. 4). Virtue ethics also sees lying as wrong because it is inconsistent with the development of virtuous qualities (in this case, honesty).

However, the virtue approach is not so rigorously opposed to lying, because of other virtues which may motivate the telling of a lie (such as compassion). "In essence, virtue ethics finds lying immoral when it is a step away, not toward, the process of becoming the best persons we can be" (Mazur, 1993, para. 6).

Utilitarian ethics shifts the focus to the consequences, maintaining that in some contexts it might be more ethical to tell a lie, rather than the truth, if "the resulting consequences maximize benefit or minimize harm" (Mazur, 1993, para. 7). Such an approach does, however, require a person to correctly anticipate the consequences of the lie before telling it. Further, Mazur notes that "suggesting that people may lie in pursuit of the greater good can lead to a 'slippery slope', where the line between cleverly calculated moral justifications and empty excuses for selfish behaviour is exceedingly thin" (Mazur, 1993, para. 10).

These three broad frameworks are the outcome of a Western tradition of ethical thought, but Cheney, Christensen, Zorn and Ganesh (2004)

observe these are increasingly being supplemented by an “ethics of compassion”, which has its roots in Buddhism and other Eastern belief systems. They argue that those who advocate such an approach do so “not only to counter the overwhelmingly cognitive nature of the Western traditions of ethics but also to highlight how gut feelings can often lead us to do the right thing” (p. 425). Similarly, McGregor (1997) offers an abbreviated test for what she calls intuitive morality: “if the moral choice you are about to make smells bad, then trust your nose. It probably is” (p. 137).

The varying demands of the workplace point to the practical appeal of what is known as “situational” or “contextual” ethics, an approach based on the idea that “there are no absolute principles . . . that apply universally, without qualification. Every dilemma must be evaluated in its particular context or situation” (Pettit, Vaught & Pulley, 1990, p. 235). This does not mean that every response is equally valid but acknowledges that we can draw on different approaches, depending on context.

A postmodern sensibility implies that we are hesitant to accept any one ethical system as being applicable to everyone and for all time – that there’s a healthy scepticism toward overarching views. This perspective, attuned to the reality of multiple belief systems, is not the same as relativism, where all frameworks or positions are treated as being just as good as one another. (Cheney et al., 2004, p. 431)

Relativism, according to Sanders (2003), ultimately undermines ethics by allowing it to be whatever an individual decides: “It is subjective, personal and unable to furnish absolute and universal norms” (p. 22). It should not be confused with what Cheney et al. (2004) mean by a post-modern approach to ethics, in which “our ethical practice becomes an ongoing reflection about our values, ends, and means rather than an automatic application of a general framework” (p. 432).

The drawback of this flexible, interpretative shift is that in the absence of specific guidance, the onus is put on individuals to think carefully about the ethical dimensions of the situation. Yet, in increasingly time-poor working environments, ethical reflection may simply be put in the ‘too hard’ basket. Consequently, ethical standards will fall and it becomes hardly surprising that, as Jaksa and Pritchard (1996) note, “news about ethics is usually bad” (p. 1).

Types of Unethical Communication

So far, we have used lying as an example of a communication act with an obvious ethical dimension. Lying clearly contravenes at least one of Mohan, McGregor, Saunders and Archee’s (1997) requirements that

'good' communication be clear, honest, democratic, sincere, logical and respectful of its audience. But what other types of disreputable communication exist in workplace settings? Redding (1996) offers a typology of unethical communication activities which he argues are common in organisational settings:

- *Coercive* acts are abuses of power or authority (for example by intimidating or threatening others) in an unjustifiable attempt to influence behaviours
- *Destructive* communication behaviours use aggression to target self esteem, reputation or feelings and often take the form of insults, backstabbing and inappropriate jokes
- *Deceptive* communication refers to lying and cheating, as well as the use of euphemistic language to hide meaning or information, or to put a misleadingly positive 'spin' on something
- *Intrusive* communication invades privacy, particularly through surveillance, and includes acts such as eavesdropping, tapping telephones or monitoring Internet use
- *Secretive* communication is usually nonverbal and covers silence, unresponsiveness, hoarding information and cover-ups
- *Manipulative-exploitative* refers to communication acts which attempt to gain compliance or control through exploitation of fears, prejudices or ignorance, as well as behaviours that patronise or condescend.

These may be familiar to us from our personal lives as well as the workplace. Yet, of special concern to business communicators is the evidence suggesting workplaces may actually encourage unethical behaviour. This is because all organisations possess some form of authority hierarchy, task specialisation, structural complexity and role indoctrination which do not compel us to behave badly, but may make it easy to do so.

At points in your working life you may, for example, be: put in situations where you are not allowed to contribute to decision-making; instructed to act in a certain way by a manager, despite your personal misgivings; put under pressure to perform with little consideration of consequences; required to work in a system where there is little support; and be required to communicate using euphemistic language or jargon that covers up or distorts the truth.

Even the traditional job interview has been criticised for its unethical basis, particularly because of the power imbalance between interviewer and interviewee. However, while interviewers set the agenda and may use 'cat and mouse' style tactics to 'test' applicants, interviewees also employ impression management techniques to make a positive impression.

The Advantages of Ethical Communication in the Workplace

Commenting on the results of a United States study into lying, in which between 56% and 86% of adults said they had told serious lies to those close to them, Redding (1996) notes that for 17% of participants, the only reason they attempted not to lie was they were worried about being caught! Particularly 'bad' lies were judged to be those that hurt others, violated a trust, involved crime or were completely self serving. Clearly, many of us believe that telling a lie is not such a bad thing, particularly if we can get away with it, and that it can be justified in certain circumstances. Yet, as philosopher Sissela Bok points out, the negative consequences of lying include: "risks to the liar himself [sic] of personal discomfort and loss of integrity, of a greater likelihood, however slight, of having to lie again to shore up the first lie; and of a somewhat diminished resistance to lying for causes he may wish to further in the future" (quoted in Bugeja, 1996, p. 109).

There appear to be two main reasons we will lie if we can get away with it: first, it is consistent with social expectation and seems more acceptable or kinder to do so; and second, it makes us look better. Interestingly, research has identified gender differences in lying, with women tending to lie to make someone else feel good and men telling untruths to make themselves look better (Knight, 2003).

So what are the advantages of being more ethical? It may simply feel better to act in accordance with our own beliefs about right and wrong. Even if we do not subscribe to a particular ethical framework, we may still adopt a blended approach influenced by personal values and our knowledge of the practical advantages of ethical behaviour for relationship building and professional advancement.

There are, in addition, financial pay-offs to behaving ethically. It makes good business sense, because unethical behaviour tends to have a high financial cost (Hollwitz & Pawlowski, 1997, quoted in McGregor, 1997). Business texts, such as *Absolute Honesty*, claim that there are quantifiable benefits for companies built on honesty and accountability. Following several high-profile ethical failures in American business, including the Enron collapse, Johnson and Phillips (2003) identify payoffs for honesty: "you create trust . . . you do the right thing . . . you discover it's rarely as painful as you think . . . you pay a higher price for lying . . . you keep things simple" (pp. iii–iv). An organisation will work hard to build a positive reputation and often puts considerable resources into branding, yet this will mean nothing if the public perceive that the 'foundations' are dubious (McGregor, 1997).

The Inland Revenue Department's (IRD) public image took a hit in 2003 when some employees improperly accessed the tax files of well known New Zealanders. In March 2004, it was reported that 59 staff

members had been investigated for 'celebrity surfing', resulting in 23 dismissals (Bell, 2004). While this amounts to a small percentage of the IRD workforce, these revelations undermine the organisation's efforts to reassure the public about protection of privacy. Perceived ethics do influence credibility, persuasive ability and integrity of the message (Sligo, Fountaine, O'Neill & Sayers, 2000).

Pettit, Vaught and Pulley (1990) examined whether there is a tension between morality, ethics and organisational power, asking if managers listen to their conscience when making decisions, and if people compromise their own ethics when asked to do so by someone in a position of authority. They found that when managers were acting ethically they attributed it to their personal values, but they blamed supervisors for their unethical actions. One of the biggest news stories of 2004, the abuse of Iraqi prisoners by American soldiers revealed in numerous disturbing photographs, resulted in a 'blame game' between individual soldiers, who said they were merely following orders, and military leaders.

In the workplace, personal ethics are a key determinant of our behaviour, although organisational culture also influences our actions. It is intuitively reasonable that the stronger our personal convictions, the lesser the organisation's (potentially negative) effect on our behaviour. Clearly, the employment relationship sets up certain expectations and will impact, at least to some extent, on our ethical behaviour.

Freedom of Expression and Ethics

The right to free expression "constitutes one of the essential foundations of a democratic society as well as one of the basic conditions for individual self-fulfilment" (Kruger, 1993, p. 746). Internationally, freedom of expression is protected under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights. In New Zealand, Section 14 of the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act states that, "Everyone has the right to freedom of expression, including the freedom to seek, receive, and impart information and opinions of any kind in any form."

There is, however, tension between the right to free expression and ethical responsibility. In 2003, this tension came into sharp focus after radio breakfast host Paul Holmes called United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan a "cheeky darkie" and said the world would not be told what to do by someone from Ghana. Some defended Holmes' right to say what he wanted, referring to the sanctity of free expression, while others suggested his comments were merely tongue in cheek. Detractors denied it was a light-hearted comment and argued it reflected unacceptable behaviour by a high profile public figure.

One of the key issues is whether guarantees of free expression apply when harm may occur. As Zingo (1998) points out, while freedom of speech is fundamental, it is not an absolute right. Instead, free expression must be balanced against society's need to maintain order, protect general welfare and public morality (Piazza & Melville, 1991). As noted earlier, John Stuart Mill famously argued that there should be limits to free expression, but only when it involves harm to others (Hargreaves, 2002).

Most nations have regulated extreme forms of communication such as violence and pornography, and have passed laws on issues such as defamation and libel. Yet, fewer nations have thus far elected to pass legislation against hate speech, generally, the public use of derogatory and offensive language denigrating others, particularly on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender and/or sexual orientation. There is on-going debate as to whether nations should extend restrictions on free expression to cover situations where the human rights of minority groups are infringed. The response of some nations signals an important turning point in the way such harm is approached:

The recognition by the Canadian Supreme Court that the social harm of discrimination can outweigh the free speech interest, marks a major new development in freedom of expression jurisprudence . . . It is an approach that re-distributes speech rights between unequal groups. (Mahoney, 1993, p. 774)

Underlying much of this debate is concern about power and inequality, often linked to the potential of mass communication, particularly the media and increasingly the Internet, to influence ideas. As Storck argues, in a world of totally free expression, the rich and privileged tend to thrive:

Like unfettered capitalism, complete freedom of expression is simply a means by which those with money and influence remake society at the expense of those without these things. (1997, p. 24)

While acknowledging issues of power and the need to monitor how freedom of expression is exercised, most accept the democratic importance of this right. It does have important implications for communication professionals in business contexts and throws up interesting questions which test our ethical frameworks and responses. For example, Cheney et al. ask:

Does Nike Corporation have the right to refute charges of abusive child labor practices in Indonesia by arguing that the people there

are “better off” with Nike employment than without it? . . . Do corporations like Exxon/Mobil have rights to free speech – in issuing any sorts of “advertorials” on political and social questions? (2004, p. 408)

Mass Communication Ethics

In New Zealand, the growth of media management, public relations or ‘spin doctoring’, coinciding with cuts in newsroom resourcing, has raised concerns about an imbalance between paid advocacy and journalism. Both public relations and journalism encounter cynicism about their ethics, reflecting a public perception that both professions lack integrity.

Yet unlike violence and pornography, the news media have a strong case for protection from regulation because of their vital contribution to democratic discourse. There is also a long established democratic principle that the news be independent from the state. The media jealously guard this independence and fight governments’ tendency to manage messages or impinge on the free flow of information by making rules that impact on news making.

However, the ethical transgressions of media and public relations practitioners are often high profile and controversial. The natural tensions between journalism and public relations, or the “unholy alliance” as Comrie (2002, p. 158) calls it, means both are quick to criticise the other’s mistakes. Nevertheless, professional organisations of public relations practitioners and journalists do subscribe to ethical codes. The public’s perception that ethics is not considered by professional communicators is often unfair, although clearly there are instances of lapses in judgment and on-going issues of integrity for both professions (McGregor & Comrie, 2002; Walle, 2003). However, commentators agree that communication professionals could do more to engage with public reservations about ethics, leading us to examine the issue of ethical codes.

Ethical Codes

Research is mixed on the effectiveness of codes governing ethical aspects of communication such as fair and honest dealings, privacy, e-mail content and Internet use. Cheney et al. (2004) argue that ethical codes “unite a community of professionals . . . they offer a basis of making important distinctions . . . they are used to sanction violators . . . they offer standards for ethical excellence” (p. 432). According to Johannesen (1997), “Codes also provide one way of debating and clarifying *institutional re-*

sponsibilities and policies for communication ethics; individual decisions on communication ethics are not enough" (p. 178, italics in the original).

However, ethical codes may serve only as superficial documents that organisations publish, but never actively refer to, or that they see as irrelevant and impractical. For example, Walle (2003) notes that the ethical codes of public relations societies in America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa all fail to address regular moral reflection, which she regards as vital if the industry is to improve its poor reputation. Another criticism of codes generally centres on the risk that they can shift the focus onto individuals' actions and release organisations from their responsibilities.

Ideally, ethical codes will not exist in a vacuum of debate about the ethical challenges faced by an organisation. Habitual consideration of ethics can usefully help an organisation prepare for a crisis when there is not time to fully consider the ethical aspects of the challenge at hand. According to Johannesen (1997), the success or failure of ethical codes depends on wording, mechanisms for enforcement, and who participates in writing them. Criticisms of particular codes tend to reflect failures in these areas. For example, the New Zealand Press Council's long-awaited statement of principles is variously described as inadequate, superficial and ambiguous in the way it deals with reporting children and diversity (Tully & Elsaka, 2002). Kramer and Kramarae (1997), in a chapter on gendered communication ethics, observe that many of the codes and policies related to the Internet deal more with commercial and legal values than with the communication issues raised by new technology. Walle (2003) notes that the ethical codes of public relations organisations in various countries, including New Zealand, fail to deal with practitioners' obligations to society.

Conclusion

"Organizational life is saturated with ethical (or moral) problems" (Redding, 1996, p. 18), but the ethical dimension of workplace interactions has not been widely considered. High profile ethical failures and studies showing the prevalence of dishonesty in our society attract plenty of media attention and mean that "in some parts of the world, ethical communication by organisations is regarded as an almost oxymoronic statement" (Gregory, 2003, p. 6). Few communication practitioners are deliberately unethical but are, as Gregory goes on to observe, "faced with difficult situations where priorities and loyalties are not always obvious and where the very meanings of truth and rightness are not universally agreed" (pp. 6–7). Effective communication nurtures ethical behaviour by means of listening, constructive confrontation and problem solving. Strong interpersonal communication skills will not stop ethical problems

from arising, but “managers would have at their disposal the communication ability to handle them” (Pettit et al., 1990, p. 245). In summary then:

Communication ethics in an age of diversity requires the will and ability to listen carefully, to pursue and practice mutual respect, invite reciprocity and inclusiveness, and to live openly and responsibly with the dialectical tensions inherent in commonality and difference. (Makau & Arnett, 1997, p. x)

By talking about ethics and discussing competing principles and rationales, we have the opportunity to grow and change. Communication clearly has an important contribution to make to the development of the genuinely ethical workplace.

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