

1.4.1: Guidelines for Ethical Communication

Learning Objectives

- Identify key guidelines for ethical business communication

It's not enough for a communicator to craft a message that's clearly understood by his audience, leveraging the seven principles of business communication:

- Clear
- Concise
- Objective
- Consistent
- Complete
- Relevant
- Understanding of Audience Knowledge



Figure 1. How might ethics affect the decisions you make as an employee?

In reality, if you adhere to the seven principles, you will communicate ethically. For instance, if you craft a message that is not clear and concise, and you use tricky language that manipulates your consideration for your audience's knowledge, then you are not being ethical. If you're not being objective, and you are trying to communicate your opinion (or the opinion of others) as fact, then you are not being ethical. If you purposely do not disclose complete information, then you are not being ethical.

You don't have to look too far today to see examples of unethical communication; they're all over the media. "Fake news" media sites abound, even though social media outlets like Facebook and Twitter are making efforts to prevent them from being posted and shared. Is fake news ethical?

Daily World Update

Daily World Update is a fake news site that recently posted an article called "Black Woman Who Won Georgia Primary Arrested for Election Fraud." The story talks about Michelle Agabobo Willford, running for governor of Georgia, who paid for "tens of thousands of votes" by promising free welfare. This story runs parallel to a real-life story of Stacy Abrahms. Abrahms recently won a primary elections as a candidate for Georgia governor (without paying for votes). Her success made news, because, if she wins, she will be the nation's first black female governor.

Now, the *Daily World Update* claims to be a satirical site, and this article about Michelle Agabobo Willford fake, but if this news story is shared on social media, people just see the headline and jump to their own conclusions about what happened in Georgia. Is this ethical communication? Does it meet those seven business communication objectives above?

General Motors

General Motors now admits that over 100 people died because of faulty ignition switches that were not recalled. In an article in *Forbes* magazine, reporter Carmine Gallo claimed that "[Two Misleading Words Triggered GM's Catastrophic Communication Breakdown](#)." The article discusses that the ignition issue was mis-labeled as a "customer convenience" issue and therefore didn't get the attention it needed. Data about the issue was buried in the back of a 72-page PowerPoint deck. These were communication choices made by human beings. Was it a mistake, or was it unethical?

The seven principles of business communication should be enough to keep your messages ethical. But if you want further guidance as to what is and is not ethical in business communication, the International Association of Business Communicators outlines a code of ethics for all its members:^[1]

- I am honest—my actions bring respect for and trust in the communication profession.
- I communicate accurate information and promptly correct any errors.
- I obey laws and public policies; if I violate any law or public policy, I act promptly to correct the situation.
- I protect confidential information while acting within the law.
- I support the ideals of free speech, freedom of assembly, and access to an open marketplace of ideas.
- I am sensitive to others' cultural values and beliefs.
- I give credit to others for their work and cite my sources.
- I do not use confidential information for personal benefit.
- I do not represent conflicting or competing interests without full disclosure and the written consent of those involved.
- I do not accept undisclosed gifts or payments for professional services from anyone other than a client or employer.
- I do not guarantee results that are beyond my power to deliver.

If you have any question regarding the ethics of a particular message, these guidelines should serve you well. Betraying the trust of your audience is lethal to effective communication.

Principles of Ethical Decision Making

After ethical intensity, a thoughtful manager will consider the principles that might apply to an issue. There is no one set of principles to check off, but the seven listed here are common to most people.

- **Legal and regulatory requirements** set the minimum standard for behavior. Any company or individual can disagree with the law, but given the consequences, such disagreement must be done carefully. The Hobby Lobby stores refused, on religious grounds, to follow the Affordable Care Act requirements for certain health benefits. The US Supreme Court found in their favor in 2014.
- **Long-term self-interest** means the pursuit of outcomes that will benefit the self in the long run. For example, a company must make choices to ensure its continued existence. The costs and harm from failure are substantial.
- **Personal virtue** refers to conformity to a standard of righteousness. You should make choices that are honest and truthful individually. The good of the company does not justify lying.
- **Utilitarianism** seeks the greatest benefit for the maximum number of people. This is often difficult to judge over large groups of people.
- **Individual rights** are related to the freedom to act and think without punishment through regulatory, legal, or societal means. For example, we make individual health decisions to smoke or drink beverages loaded with sugar even though the health costs are borne by many through private and government insurance programs.
- **Distributive justice** is the fairness of the outcomes. That is, how are the benefits shared or distributed among the individuals in a group? The US market system can have winner-take-all outcomes. Our welfare system redistributes a little to the losers in the market game who are also part of our society.
- **Religious injunction** is the main moral and ethical guide for many people.

Watch the following video for an overview of the ethical decision making process:



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1. International Association of Business Communicators, "[IABC Code of Ethics for Professional Communicators](#)."

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