# Differences in Communication Culture

## Chapter Learning Objectives

- Recognize the ***diversity of business communication*** as an element of diverse organizational structures.
- Understand the ***conflict and misunderstanding*** as a consequence of communication across organizational boundaries.
- Understand ***ethical communication*** as a function of communication culture.

### *Communication Diversity in Organizations*

Once we understand that organizational structures are related to communication patterns, it is easier to see that different communication norms could arise in various parts of an organization. Differences in their "normal" communication might even define the various units of a large corporation. Very formal, authoritarian boss-subordinate relationships might be the norm in one sales region of a company, while a more relaxed, "open-door" policy encourages distributed decision-making in another region. In fact, a salesperson who transfers from one region to the other might experience considerable difficulty until he or she grows accustomed to the new environment. Employees of the two regions might even find each other "hard to work with" because they don't realize they are making different assumptions about how communication ought to be done.

Learning *about* organizational communication is only the first step in effective communication *within* an organization. A person must also learn to recognize variations in communication that can occur, interpret communication differences in productive ways, and make effective choices about how to communicate "across" the many organizational boundaries that exist within a business community.

### *Variations in Organizational Style*

Communication in virtually any business will exhibit the common norms of the business culture, but every organization is also unique in some respects. The new graduate must learn the general rules of business in order to communicate effectively as a part of the business community, but it is equally important to learn what is considered appropriate within his or her own company. No one business organization's culture is any "better" than another, although some business authors have argued that the most successful companies seem to exhibit "strong" cultures in which everyone agrees on a single, clear way to get things done (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Peters & Waterman, 1982). Generally, decisions can be made more easily and action taken more quickly when most of the organization's citizens "know the rules," even though it doesn't seem to matter as much what those rules are.

It is impossible to say exactly what the communication rules of a particular company will be before spending quite a bit of time getting acquainted. The major differences among business organizations follow cultural patterns that are found among all discourse communities, however, and some principles of "cross-cultural" communication can help an outsider to predict an organization's expectations.

## Relationship Rules across Cultures

The fundamental norms of Western rhetoric place a high value on the linguistic manipulation of symbols between self-aware, autonomous individuals, to share meaning through the creation of linear, analytical reasoning chains. Group decisions that are made according to this general method are considered "better" than decisions made by people who are not self-aware, for instance, or based on such non-linguistic methods as a ritual dance or prayer.

Within the past century, attention to other cultures and communities in Africa and Asia, and to subcultures and co-cultures of women, ethnic minorities and economic classes within the Euro-American West, have led to a realization that rhetorical rules can vary widely. The explicit symbol manipulation of talk, for instance, is less important in Asian cultures than ineffable modes of meaning (Liu, 1988). Many African philosophies value paradox and analogy over the linear logic (Eze, 1993). Collectivist values of distributed decision-making outweigh individual decisions in many of the West's subordinated communities (Gaetz, 1995; Gilligan, 1982; Gowen, 1992; Weinstein-Shr, 1993).

A great deal of cross-cultural misunderstanding can be traced to a failure to understand each others' basic assumptions about how decisions ought to be made (Brislin, 1993; Hofstede, 1991; Triandis, 1994). Presumably then, understanding the motives and behaviors of a discourse community begins with a recognition that its members are functioning according to rhetorical rules that make sense from within their own community (Condit, 1993).

Although the underlying reasons are not entirely clear , cultures around the world seem to vary their relationship rules along two key dimensions, striking a balance between individual identity and power and social allegiance and control.

### Individualism versus Collectivism

Every member of a community has both an *individual identity* and a *collective identity* as a member of the group. An important step in human personality development is creating a balance between the conflicting senses of a "private" self and a "social" self. At the same time, the community achieves stability by socializing its members into a conventional, "healthy" balance between individual autonomy and social obligation. The definition of a "healthy" balance varies from culture to culture, however, and the variation is described in terms of a community's typical pattern of *individualism* versus *collectivism* (Brislin, 1993; Hofstede, 1991; Triandis, 1994).

An individualistic culture is one that encourages a high degree of individual, highly differentiated identity and considers it normal for people to act in ways that will benefit themselves. A collectivist culture, on the other hand, places more value in a highly developed social identity and expects its members to act in ways that benefit the whole group. Obviously, people in either kind of community are always making choices, and there can be wide variations among individuals within either community. Thus, it is possible to talk about a person having or not having a highly differentiated personality as well as describe a whole community as having individualist or collectivist values.

Traditionally agricultural cultures tend toward collectivism while industrialization and urbanization correlate with more individualistic values (Berry, 1976), but every community finds a way to accommodate both individual autonomy and social cohesiveness. Collectivist cultures will typically expect an individual to meet strict obligations to family or the state and abide by limitations on movement, education or occupation, but create elaborate protections of an individual's autonomy in the realm of private thoughts, social respect, or personal "face" (Christian & Christian, 1966; Garcia, 1996; E. C. Stewart, 1985). Conversely, highly individualistic Americans demand the freedom to live, work and associate as they wish, but tolerate a high degree of social pressure with respect to moral, psychological and fashion conformity (Hofstede, 1991; E. C. Stewart, 1985).

Power Distance

A similar balance must be achieved between individual autonomy and group solidarity. Stable decision-making groups will necessarily create some system that is considered an appropriate way for the group to control the behavior of individual members. These variations from group to group are typically described in terms of the degree of *power distance* that is considered normal (Brislin, 1993; Hofstede, 1991; Triandis, 1994).

A community with a high power distance is one in which there is a high degree of deferential respect between those who are told what to do and those who tell them. Typically these highly differentiated relationships are maintained with a clearly hierarchical social system that makes it easy for anyone to know in a give situation whether she is the teller or the one who can be told what to do. Because the rules are clear, it can be said that one person holds power over the other. A community with low power distance, on the other hand, encourages widely dispersed and even overlapping methods for the group to tell individuals what to do. Many people share the power, and roles can shift quickly with the circumstances.

Perhaps because the climate is harsh and people have to cooperate to survive, countries in the Northern latitudes tend to have looser rules about who is in charge of making decisions. Meanwhile, communities in more tropical environments, traditionally facing more challenges from human than environmental sources, have created larger and more carefully organized cultures that rely heavily on strict adherence to a chain of command (Hofstede, 1991 45). Nevertheless, both kinds of cultures are trying to achieve the same purpose: social relationships that guarantee the most effective and efficient decisions in the typical situations they encounter.

Organizational Differences

Differences in individualism and collectivism can be found in business organizations, although the terms used to describe organizational cultures are different. Some companies are encourage "cut-throat" behavior as people compete against each other to climb "over each other" on their way to the top. Other companies are described as having a "family attitude" such that everyone worries more about the organization's success than about their own individual career success. Similarly, companies range in power distance from the very hierarchical "command and control" structure to the flat "learning organizations" where decision-making power is widely distributed.

The classical management model was formulated within the highly individualistic, high power distance culture of the Prussian army, and theorists have only recently begun to see the more collectivist, low power distance communities as a viable management alternative. As a result, the contemporary trend appears to be a shift from highly stratified organizations with many layers of management and strict lines of communication toward lean, flat organizational structures that boast of open, fluid communication networks (Daft & Marcic, 2004).

In reality, organizations vary, just as national cultures do, as a result of environmental factors that reward different ways of maintaining the individual/social balance intrinsic to every human being. The relationship rules in a stratified organization will explicitly support and maintain the status of those at the top of the organization, but so will the less obvious but equally strong rules that characterize a flat organization (Barker, 1993; Tompkins & Cheney, 1985). In fact, many people find the subtle and sometimes ambiguous rules of a very flat organization to be more difficult to learn and use than the clear rules of a hierarchical one.

Regardless of the exact nature of the organization, its rhetorical nature dictates that its discourse norms will reinforce the power of those who have it, require that individuals indicate respect for those who outrank others in the social system, and provide ways to smooth over the small conflicts that might get in the way of good social relationships. The tricky thing is that the symbols and signals change from one group to the next. Simple things like meeting attendance or the order of names on a routing slip can mean very little in one organization, but a great deal in another.

> One manager was amazed to learn that several of her employees considered showing up for meetings "a sign of respect." She had considered meeting attendance to be "minimal" behavior for anyone with membership in the group. In fact, she was greatly insulted when her staff would merely "show up" without having done any preparation for making a contribution to the agenda. Only when the situation blew up into a major confrontation did anyone realize they were working with some very different assumptions about what constituted a "sign" of respect.

**Knowledge Rules across Cultures**

Differences in the way people define rational or sane thinking are generally described in terms of cultural differences in problem-solving methods (Cole & Scribner, 1974), meaning structures(Kaplan, 1976), or epistemology (Whitson & Poulakos, 1993). Normal human functioning involves both *global* perceptual processes that apprehend overall patterns and *analytical* processes that focus attention on specific details for further examination (Donald, 1991; Edelman, 1992). An individual learns which sensory details deserve focus as part of his or her cultural upbringing, and the value a rhetorical community places on various kinds of information reflects its collective preference for global or analytical thinking for collective decision making.

Analysis versus Pattern Recognition

In the case of knowledge rules, the most relevant issues are generally described in terms of the differences between Western rationalism and the more holistic thinking of Eastern philosophies. Human cognition actually involves the continuous balancing of global, implicit cognitive processes (sometimes called "right brain" or "gestalt" awareness) and conscious, analytical attention to selected elements of the environment (the "left brain" or "focused" processes) (Crick, 1994; Donald, 1991). All humans are engaged in a constant process of making implicit sense of the "big picture" while picking out small fragments of the environment to resolve inconsistencies or problems as they arise. In order to share perception, two human beings need to be paying attention to the *same* small fragments, patterns that over time create a cultural epistemology or cognition.

Western culture, in general, and the educated, academic, technological West in particular, has selected categorical boundaries, sensory stimuli, and visual data as most important for problem solving, while Eastern and African cultures are more likely to solve problems with a wider range of fragments, selecting analogical features, emotional stimuli and aural data as equally, if not more important to problem solving (Berry, 1991; Goody, 1977; E. C. Stewart, 1985; Triandis, 1994). It can be disconcerting to engage in a common task with someone who habitually selects different types of information as important.

> The American engineer might begin to carefully sort data into a spreadsheet, assuming data will "fall out" into meaningful categories if the sorting is done carefully enough. His Nigerian counterpart shakes his head in amazement, wondering how the data can even be understood without attention to where it was gathered and the relationships among those sources.

High Context versus Low Context

Global versus abstract functioning is sometimes described in terms of field dependence or independence (Witkin & Goodenough, 1981), with some groups learning to look at data separately from its surrounding context while others value data as an integrated part of the whole. People in more individualistic communities also tend to be "low context" as well, paying less attention to context, emotional or relationship cues, and the "unstated" meanings of a situation. Attention to the subtleties of the unspoken and implicit elements of situational context is more characteristic of collectivist cultures where holistic pattern match is a valued way of problem solving (Triandis, 1994).

Time Perspectives

Closely related issues involve the cognitive use of time and the willingness to spend mental resources on eliminating uncertainty before taking action. North Americans tend to organize their work lives around time, prioritizing their problem-solving choices on the basis of tangible, concrete time-keeping devices like calendars, watches and project software (Hall, 1959).

Other communities are more likely to view timeliness as only one of several problem parameters to consider, and perhaps less important than emotional harmony, aesthetic design or social utility.

> The American engineer is probably willing to jump into the data-sorting task because "time is money" and "decisions can't wait." Both the American and Nigerian team members will be more willing to begin work without full information or a clear plan, however, than their Belgian colleague, whose national culture derives from a tightly controlled Roman empire that valued careful planning and predictable outcomes over flexible accommodation (Hofstede, 1991 135).

Organizational Differences

Just as individual thought processes must carefully balance the various needs for holistic understanding, careful attention, timely decisions, and predictability, an organization can only survive if its decision-making processes effectively balance those same elements. An important purpose of organizing is to take advantage of strengths different individuals or businesses might have in one area over another. In any collaborative work situation, individuals can expect to find themselves negotiating these priorities as they decide among themselves which information to use, how quickly to make the decisions, and whether complete information is needed to do so.

When individuals approach communication from high or low context perspectives, the event is sure to involve misunderstandings. While one participant is trying hard to ignore all the extraneous cues in the room set up, physical behavior, politeness cues, humor, or silent moments, and pay attention to the words, the other is ignoring the words to pay close attention to the room set up, physical behavior and so on. The two people might leave the same meeting, one thinking very little communication has occurred while the other is overwhelmed with the meaning in the contextual cues. Often, there will be mixed or contradictory information in the linguistic and physical cues, and one person "listens" to the words and the other to the context.

Decision-making styles are a typical way to describe cognitive and epistemological differences. Some organizations engage in detailed analysis of statistical information in a step-by-step examination of data across long periods of time. Other businesses favor the use of strategic teams to discuss big picture values and set basic goals before anyone gets lost in the details. Some companies like to collect survey data from large numbers of customers to spot trends before buyers even realize their own preferences. Others like to schedule in-depth interviews and focus groups to find out why customers have made their decisions. Sometimes knowledge rules are interrelated with relationship rules: information obtained by upper management is preferred to that supplied by the marketing reps, or recent MBA's are asked for their opinions while the accounting staff is expected to supply "unbiased" data.

**Interaction Rules across Cultures**

Although most U.S. businesses function within a democratic culture that values face-to-face conversation as an "ideal" form of communication (Schudson, 1997), the presumption is not universal across all rhetorical communities. Differences exist because of assumptions about the nature of language itself and about the role of other forms of communicative behavior.

Representation versus Reference

Language is an important human capability, but it is not a necessary element of most of what makes us human: consciousness, self-recognition, coherence, intentionality, aesthetics, morality, pedagogy, personality or social behavior (Damasio, 1994; Donald, 1991). Most of Western philosophy is built, however, on a view of language that considers it to be the *best* form of communication, allowing the most accurate transfer of meaning from one human mind to another (Branham, 1980; Liu, 1988; J. Stewart, 1995). Much of Asian and African philosophy, on the other hand, holds language to be the *least* trustworthy means of communication, and that truth revealed without words is "more" truthful (Fernandez, 1980; Hofstadter, 1979; Liu, 1988 8).

Organizational Differences

Business language is, in general, more direct, more formal and more conservative than the language you will use in social situations or hear on television. In virtually no business situation are cursing or explicit references to sex acceptable. In most businesses, written forms of communication are considered more "businesslike" than oral or electronic means and the explicit verbal message is contractually binding. In many situations, non-verbal gestures, pictures, and facial expressions are excluded so as to avoid "emotional" aspects of the situation and stick to the "important" business issues. Even though non-verbal communication carries more meaning about people's relationships and what they are "really" communicating, business contracts are based on just what the language says.

Within this fairly narrow range of appropriate communication, however, there will nevertheless be some variations. Many organizations expect letters to be formally worded, using phrases and words that have been chosen by the legal and financial department so as to avoid any contractual or promotional misunderstanding. In other companies it is the custom to email chatty, humorous responses to customers and vendors, referring correspondents to the company website for "the fine print." Context and relationship will generally be closely interrelated with communication choices, and in most companies the communication channels and language used for customers, vendors, colleagues, bosses and regulatory agencies will be quite different.

Of course, changes also occur within any organization as individuals join or leave the company over the years. Each individual has a unique personality and communication style, as well as simultaneous membership in the cultures of his or her own neighborhood, town, church or profession. The people who work for a company never become totally homogeneous or totally consistent, any more than every single citizen in a town communicates in exactly the same way (Louis, 1985). Organizational cultures are not static sets of rules, but a living, breathing composite of all the ways in which individual members communicate, perform their expected roles, and try unexpected things in the face of new developments (Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1983; Putnam, 1983).

Although misunderstandings can often be prevented by simply asking about an organization's values and expectations, full information is not always available. Making a guess about the probable expectations of an organization might not yield the perfect answer, but some organizational characteristics are common.

- Differences between companies are very often the result of different ***management philosophies*** at the very top levels. Because business organizations are typically hierarchically organized, the ways in which the top level communicates will sooner or later become the way everyone communicates (Morley & Shockley-Zalabak, 1991; Edgar H. Schein, 1991; Shockley-Zalabak & Morley, 1989).
- ***Size*** is another factor in organizational climate. Very large companies, or companies whose operations are spread out over a large geographical area must often create careful procedures and insist that everyone act consistently in order to keep the complex operation running smoothly. Employees come to value carefully controlled and consistent communication. On the other hand, a small company with just a few employees might come to value flexibility and open communication patterns so that just a few people can handle a large number of diverse tasks.
- The ***age of the organization*** also influences the degree to which values are internalized as normal behavior, or understood as the commonly held vision—perhaps of the future, or of a charismatic leader (E. H. Schein, 1985). At its "midlife" an organization spawns subcultures, while organizational maturity brings cultural constraint on innovation with an emphasis on preservation of the past.
- There are also some consistent patterns of corporate behavior across ***industries*** or ***geographical area***. Manufacturing, technology and communications companies tend to have more relaxed dress codes than

financial and insurance firms (Knight Ridder Newspapers, 1999). A few Southern California businesses really do shut down when the surf is up, but in Manhattan a serious business stays open regardless of something so inconsequential as weather. Internet based “e-companies” exhibit faster decision-making processes and more tolerance for incomplete information than traditional businesses (Neuhauser, Bender, & Stromberg, 2000).

### *Communication across Boundaries*

Even within a single organizational culture, communication is not a simple task, but most employees also engage in transactions that cross organizational boundaries and even national and cultural borders. Good business communication is always sensitive to the cultural differences across organizational, social, or national boundaries. Individuals from one business culture must be able to interact comfortably with a wide range of customers, business associates and community leaders from other business organizations, as well as with co-workers, managers and subordinates from different departments and functions within their own company.

> George Muller, and insurance claims adjuster, comments on the complexity of dealing with various regulatory agencies; “Even though insurance procedures might be governed by a single federal law, the companies are operating in different states with different administrative rules. Even the local applications can differ from office to office. To appeal a particular decision, we can choose to go to either local or regional levels within the HMO organization, or directly to Medicare. In fact, in the middle of a case, Congress has even changed the laws, as it did with prescription coverage in 2005. A letter of appeal might include different information, different evidence and a completely different tone, depending on where it goes.”

Those who change jobs quickly realize that organizational assumptions are different from each other, but there are also issues that arise when communication occurs between different departments or units. Even when the communication rules for group members are quite similar, communication with non-members usually requires some special care.

### Across Status Lines

Even within a single organization, communication expectations will usually vary across different levels of the organization. Instructional communication or a request for information from one organizational level to another will include presumptions about the value of information, or on the utility of forms of communication, which might not be shared among all participants.

**Production workers** have no supervisory responsibilities and at this level communication will vary considerably depending on the industry or department function. A clerical or “white collar” worker might be expected to do a great deal of written or mathematical work, while a “blue collar” worker might be responsible for more physical or technical tasks. Hierarchical social relationships are generally comfortable for most workers at this level of an organization, and there is a general preference for concrete, sensory sources of information. At this level in most
In general, production workers are expected to have basic communication skills (spelling, grammar, English pronunciation), but actual usage can accommodate relatively low skills . Listening, speaking and interpersonal are usually more important than writing or presentation

skills , and the audience for ones message is generally a co-worker or immediate supervisor within the same organizational unit.

**First line supervisors** must be able to provide instructions and directions, often in written form. Many individuals at this level of an organization feel themselves to be members of multiple communities, and sometimes find there various audiences are making different assumptions about proper social relationships or knowledge sources. The ability to create coherent memos, letters and emails becomes crucial, and required interpersonal skills include an ability to handle difficult employees, situations, and to motivate and monitor a diverse group of people. Communication is with direct reports, peers in the organization, and probably middle management in several departments outside ones own.

**Middle management** must be fluent in typical communication forms, and be able to correct, edit, and supervise the communication of others. Most members of management will have had some academic background, learning to value the democratic social relationships and analytical decision making styles of Western elites. Team skills, negotiation and office politics become crucial for success as the manager is heavily involved in communication among many different departments and levels of a large corporation, often playing the role of tomato. Social skills take on additional importance as interactions are not always within the workday and workplace.

**Upper management** takes on 'ceremonial' and boundary crossing functions (Mintzberg, 1975), and the ability to make presentations to internal (other departments, labor representatives, formal publications like newsletters) and external (service clubs, the press, financial statements). Someone at the highest level might actually have less direct written communication responsibilities, but is ultimately responsible for important legal, financial and public documents. Top management must often play the role of corporate ambassador, not merely skilled but eloquent with large groups, the media, a compelling writer and/or speaker, engaging in negotiations with other corporate entities, financial markets, banking and government representatives.

> The classic misunderstanding across these various levels is that the amount of detailed, concrete information to be communicated *decreases* as communicators move up the organizational hierarchy, while the focus on the more abstract topics involved in planning and strategic decision-making *increases*.

**Partnering Across Boundaries**

Business is becoming a truly global enterprise and the traditional notion of a trading territory between communities is no longer sufficient. As people in different countries go beyond buying and selling from each other and begin to create business partnerships, they cannot merely abide by the communication norms of the general business environment. The communication cultures of two different countries must be combined somehow, to create a new organization that has a unique culture of its own. In spite of international differences, "business values can, on occasion, override cultural norms and expectations" [Bargiela 1999 26].

Large differences exist in the way companies work cross-culturally. Sometimes a parent company from one country creates or purchases as subsidiary in another. While the parent will often have a strong corporate culture that negates some of the traditional cultural characteristics of a subsidiary country (Varner, 2000 46), most will find themselves adjusting their own values, beliefs and procedures to accommodate the facts of doing business in another country. In other situations a partnership of equals is formed, and the resulting organization must create a new set of rhetorical rules to govern its relationships, information use and discourse. As with organizations in general, there is no one set of rules that is any better than another, but the most significant influence on managerial style in multinational business settings is the nationality of the manager (Laurent, 1986), and there are some points at which political and social history have made cross-cultural differences particularly obvious.

Key features of business, such as hiring practices, promotion policies, decision making, financial regulations, business law and governmental regulations, vary widely from country to country, reflecting the historical, social and political roots of business in each community. Not only must an international business communicator understand the principles of cross-cultural communication, he or she must also understand the different ways in which business is done across cultures. "The channels, levels of formality, use of technology, content and style of delivery are influenced by culture and business considerations….A communication strategy that does not take the specific business context into consideration will not be effective" (Varner, 2000 49).

Business as Trans-Cultural Communication

In a very real sense, business is the most fundamental type of cross-cultural communication. Ever since the grain growing villages began trading with the potters' village for jugs in which to market the beer they brewed, business has required communication between different communities. When isolated communities begin to trade with one another, they must somehow set aside their own values, assumptions and communication habits and create a common set of communication norms. They can agree to disagree on many things, but a successful business relationship requires that the trading partners have a common rhetoric to clarify relationships (*who* can make the trade?), knowledge (how will we *value* the traded goods?), and language (*how* will the trade be negotiated?). A history of international business practices can be framed in terms of the evolving structures of rules that governed how people ought to communicate to make decisions, trades and partnerships [Preston, 1992 #4300].

For those who come together from several different countries to do business, a shared professional culture prevents the disintegration of a group that might not share any other assumptions, values or characteristics (Chevrier, 1999). In fact, in some international settings, individuals find that their adaptation to the new work culture is easier than adjusting to the changes required in personal and family settings (Alkhazraji, W. L. Gardner III, Martin, & Paolillo, 1997). Whatever nationalities are involved, good cross-cultural communication involves being willing to talk about the circumstances of a given situation rather than justify a home culture's traditional assumptions about who should make decisions. Relative positions within the business organizations might have a far stronger effect than either person's cultural background (Varner, 2000 48). It is thus useful to think of creating a "transcultural" space of business communication, rather than trying to resolve the differences inherent in "cross" cultural communication.

***A focus on individuals*** Successful multi-cultural groups tend to look at their communication differences in terms of specific traits and preferences of individuals, rather than broadly generalized categories of how people from the original cultures or organizations act. Some differences can be predicted from the national, ethnic or industry cultures of those with whom you are working. It is said, for instance, that British businesspeople tend to be more straight-laced than U.S, workers, or that workers in the entertainment industry have more relaxed standards about lifestyle choices. These broad categorizations can help businesspeople to anticipate and avoid a social faux pas in a new country, but they are less useful in day-to-day communication.

***Presume competence and positive intent*** Whether the situation involves the international department of a global business or a Chamber of Commerce team that includes representatives from several different industries, successful communication across organizations depends on a willingness to set aside differences and focus on the task at hand. Cultural differences are less likely to become barriers when people expect to work together successfully. By focusing on those things that you have in common—the task, shared economic goals, a business orientation—you can reframe your differences as solvable complexities.

***Appreciate differences*** The sharing of a professional culture does not mean that individual or business differences are ignored or submerged (Laurent, 1986) but that participants "have many interests and reference points in common, and thus they converse easily among themselves" . Successful groups minimize their cultural differences by focusing on their work, but at the same time they recognize that cultural differences play a significant role in their interpersonal dynamics (Chevrier, 1999).

Language differences

English is often considered the international business language, although its use is not universal. In fact, the exclusive use of English creates communication difficulties with clients and customers, difficult relationships with foreign business partners, and significant operational difficulties in translation and use of business documents (Breda & Haaris, 1999). Citizens of other nations are often insulted by an assumption that English will be used rather than their own languages, or that American usage is presumed when doing business in Britain, India or Singapore. Obviously, the jargon and slang of one nation will not translate easily to another community, but even ostensibly culture free ideas like mathematics or computer science are expressed differently. Furthermore, whenever the business partners do not speak a common language, the entire intercultural business communication approach can be influenced by the dynamics of the interpreters (Varner, 2000 48).

Language itself might seem to be the most obvious obstacle to communication between people from different countries, although the translation from one language to another is a relatively minor problem, compared to the large differences between the uses of language to communicate as compared with low or high reliance on the context of the situation to create meaning. As problematic as language choice, translation and verbal misunderstanding can be, more difficulty arises in the realm of physical and visual communication.

> A 2001 Gallup poll demonstrates that more Americans are growing increasingly bilingual and "foreign-language proficiency is increasingly a money-making attribute at work" (Johnson, 2005)

***Ethical Workplace Communication***

For the young person deciding on a business career, a commitment to a large organization is rather a move to a new country. New organizational members are expected to do new things they wouldn't have done if they hadn't traveled, and some of the new activities are likely to be uncomfortable and even distasteful. On the other hand, traveling to a new country does not mean a person gives up all sense of moral behavior. Success within a decision-making community depends on abiding by its communication rules, but ethical action sometimes requires balancing the contradictory rules of two different cultures.

Individuals hold personal values, beliefs and assumptions about ideal organizational life that are continually contrasted with their perceptions of organizational reality. The goals of the business might be at odds with an employee's own church teachings or the goals of the neighborhood in which he lives. These differences can lead to situations in which the "ethical" communication choice might not seem obvious or easy. The closer the fit between a person's previous values and the organization's culture, the more satisfied the person (Shockley-Zalabak & Morley, 1994 341), although no one can expect to find any organization that consists of people who completely and consistently agree on everything.

## An Ethical Approach to Rhetorical Relationships

Because there is so much cultural diversity, ethical communication in the business world cannot be defined solely in terms of just one community's understanding of moral, sane and decent communication. Instead, ethical communication involves an ongoing effort to understand and accommodate the various ways in which people can create a rhetorical community of decision makers.

### The Social-Work Contradiction

A particular kind of communication conflict arises in business organizations because their members are simultaneously members of both a social culture of family, town and church community and the business culture of their work organization. Much of the discomfort with "businesslike" communication involves the very different ways that decision-making is typically done in different spheres of community life. Churches make decisions in one way, groups of family and friends do things quite differently, and business uses still another way of going about the process.

Some management theorists have begun to wonder whether many problems of business ethics can be traced to the way our culture divides up political, business and social ways of doing things [Freeman, 1992 #3315][Saiia, 2003 #3326]. Certainly definitions of ethical communication are based on how a group understands the purpose of communication within moral social relationships.

| | **Social relationships of the U.S. middle class** | **Work relationships in the typical U.S. corporate organization** |
|---|---|---|
| **Organizational Purpose** | The fundamental purpose of communication is to create and sustain relationships, and communication practices must further healthy interpersonal relationships. | Business organizations are purposeful, and they have developed norms of communication practice that have been proven to make task performance more productive. |
| **Communication Goals** | **People communicate in order to form and maintain** | **People communicate in order to make a decision, perform a task** |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | **relationships**. If you think about *why* you communicate with your friends and acquaintances at school or at church, you'll probably answer with something along the lines of, "so, we can get better acquainted." In fact, you probably would decide whether someone is a potential friend on the basis of whether you are "able to communicate well." From a purely social perspective, you communicate in order to have a relationship, if you don't communicate easily, you assume that a good relationship is unlikely, and finally, if you don't communicate with one another fairly often, any relationship you might have had is likely to fall apart. | **or solve a problem.** Communication that is not relevant to some sort of task is assumed to be taking up time that could be spent on "real" work. Business conversations are expected to stay "on task" and focus on the expected outcome. The subject matter should be limited to the "facts and figures" that are needed to get the job done. |
| **Assumptions of Good Communication** | **People who communicate more and more intimately have a "better" relationship.** As an important corollary, we also judge the relationships we have on the basis of the communication that occurs within them. The best friend is the one with whom we talk about the most topics at the most intimate levels; the topic and "purposefulness" of communication are secondary. In fact, if two people's communication was always about the task at hand, they would probably consider themselves to be "just acquaintances" because real friends would talk to each other whether or not they had anything to talk "about." | **The best communication is the quickest and shortest needed to get the job done.** The corollary to a task oriented purpose of communication is that the best communication is the most efficient. The person who can send the required information in one email instead of three is a better communicator. |

Not only are social and business "rules" of good conversation different, they are diametrically opposed. The characteristics of communication that make a business conversation efficient, productive and appropriate would be taken as signals of dislike, distrust or dysfunction in a social conversation. A fundamental problem with defining "good" communication in a business environment is that the ethics of building social relationships and the ethics of doing tasks in the most efficient way create two different definitions of "ethical" communication.

Ethical communication in a business context requires the application of business norms while simultaneously negotiating social relationships and achieving a dynamic balance between the two. In a large organization where people spend a great deal of time together, their "social" assumptions will govern some of their communication, while the "business rules" govern other conversations.

- Business relationships are both social and administrative. The primary purpose of interpersonal communication in the workplace is both to build relationships and accomplish a task. Tom Peters once noted that great businesses exhibit "simultaneous loose-tight properties" [, 1982 #1994] In effect, people treat each other as both close friends AND as task partners.
- People are kind to each other as they would be to friends, accepting each other's faults and idiosyncrasies without complaint—but at the same time they expect each other to carry out their jobs without fail.
- People go along with each other's desires and preferences—but at the same time they give each other criticism when something is not going well with their tasks.
- People are tolerant, forgiving and loving with each other—but at the same time they keep a close eye on each other.

The constant balance between social and business relationships is not simple, but neither is it impossible. A healthy family does it every day. Imagine a large farming family somewhere in the Midwest. The family members engage in social communication: the purpose of the communication is simply to share being family. Family members show each other unconditional love, going along with each other's desires and accommodating each others differences, using talk just to make each other feel comfortable. But when the crops are ready to come in, the family finds itself engaged in administrative communication too, passing information and making decisions to do a task. The family members depend on each other to do all the necessary jobs well and on time, to speak up if a problem is found, and to use communication to get the job done.

Of course, if a business is just one big happy family, loving each other and getting a job done at the same time, the organization must be managed like a healthy family, not a dysfunctional one. You might find yourself working for a company that has no "authority figure" to provide a clear mission, define each person's responsibilities and administer discipline fairly. Or, there might be no "nurturing figure" to soothe fears, provide comfort, and figure out ways to get around the rules when special situations arise. In such a case, the demands on every individual are greater and balancing the ethical behavior is more difficult.

The Objectivity-Connection Contradiction

Many statements about ethical workplace communication applaud "open" and "honest" communication and condemn practices that breed mistrust or deceit. The conflicts become apparent when workers charge that their bosses withhold information, or when co-workers complain that others ignore or disparage their feelings or perceptions. The underlying disagreement is often over what kinds of information ought to be included in the communication, with violations framed as unkind communication, at the very least, and potentially unethical when bad decisions result from using incomplete or inappropriate information.

Some have argued that business' attention to the "bottom line" reflects an over-reliance on objective, numerical data at the expense of other information—emotional reactions, environmental relationships, aesthetic values—that would lead to better decision-making (Freeman & Liedtka, 1991; Mumby & Putnam, 1992). The ethical issues stem from an underlying set of assumptions about the relative value of various kinds of information.

| | **Values implied by aesthetic and emotional information sources** | **Values implied in objective, rationalistic information sources** |
|---|---|---|
| **Organizational Purpose** | **Information is maximized, although data might be contradictory, ambiguous or useless.** The aim is to develop a widely shared understanding of each others' perceptions with the aim of maximizing the amount and diversity of information that can be used for problem solving on an on-going basis. | **Collective action is enhanced by seeking the highest quality information on which to base decisions.** The aim is to make a decision that can guide collective action with a minimum of misunderstanding, conflict, or change. Any decision must be implemented in a timely manner and with an efficient allocation of resources. |
| **Communication Goals** | **Information is shared in order to compare and validate personal perceptions against those of others.** Exchange seeks to explore, validate and disseminate information from as many sources as possible, insuring that all participants have access to information even when they are personally unable to perceive or understand. | **Perceptions are shared in order to discover which data is used identically by all participants.** Exchange aims to winnow out information that cannot be perceived or replicated by all participants, especially that from sources that might be considered subjective, transitory, or ambiguous. |
| **Assumptions of Good Communication** | **Communication should be diverse and open ended**. Redundant and continuous methods of interaction will insure that all sources of information are included. No source of information can be assumed to be better than any other. Inconsistency and contradiction in perceptions are expected. | **Communication includes only information that all parties can perceive as identical.** The best communication sets aside all sources of information that cannot be accessed by all participants and translates all data into forms that can be replicated in the future. Inconsistency and contradiction are evidence that information is unacceptable for use. |

The efficient use of communication to achieve a goal is an accepted value in most business organizations, but that position rests on underlying assumptions about efficiently limiting information that are sometimes in conflict with equally important assumptions about the intrinsic value of all information.

Once common conflict arises when some people feel they should selectively "use" information to make a point or gain consensus about a course of action, while others feel abused by the implication that the speaker's information is somehow "better" than their own. The goal driven use of information can be thought of as *persuasion*, while simply sharing information with others can be framed as an *invitation* to consider it. Even persuaders who want to maintain ethical practices are sometimes perceived as unethical by those who find their selective use of information has crossed the line. The communicators who finds his or her goal to be completely ethical might find it hard to see any problem with carefully selecting information to make the supporting argument, but “we may do an enthusiastic sales pitch and promise things our company isn’t quite ready to deliver, or we might highlight the positive aspects of our products and downplay the negative ones. We might formulate financial projections to favor the outcome we advocate. We might overstep the boundaries when advertising to children or go overboard when we use personal data to target customers” (Woo, 2003 24).

Similarly, the value of freely shared information frequently collides with a concern that information sources not be made available to those outside an organizational boundary. Democracy is a fundamental value in Western political systems, and equality is highly valued in Western social relationships. It is not surprising then, that U.S. employees report themselves more satisfied when they are allowed to participate in the decision-making and management activities of the company (Seeger, 1997 81). Management philosophers champion the democratization of corporate life, and nearly any communication expert will advocate open, honest and compassionate communication as not only the most effective model for organizational practices.

On the other hand, some business information is sensitive or confidential, some decisions must be made quickly or confidentially, and some employees are unable or unwilling to expend effort in managerial processes. Businesses typically place more limits on who participates in the decision making process then does the U.S. political process, and an individual is not granted full information or access to the decision-making process until he or she has demonstrated both competence and loyalty to the organizational community.

The Productivity-Privacy Contradiction

Every rhetorical community must balance the needs and desires of individuals against the good of the group. The rules of large corporate bureaucracies make it possible for people to “bracket” their personal ethics and set them aside while they are at work, allowing themselves to follow the prevailing morality of the group, whether or not they privately agree with the behavior (Jackall, 1988). Whether or not this is a good thing depends on an ethical assessment of how the group or the individual would act otherwise. There are many cases where the good of the corporations has been at odds with the good of society or the environment, and we wish the individuals have been able to assert their own values. Other times, a corporation requires an employee to act responsibly, even though he or she would prefer to cut corners or lie to a customer in order to make a little extra commission or avoid doing some extra work.

Many theorists have argued that ethical issues arise because individuals within an organization can’t see how their decisions effect others, so they stop trying to do the right thing (Conrad & Poole, 1998 413; Seeger, 1997 39). Even if they and the corporation both have the same ethical goal, the task specialization and complexity of an organization make it difficult to know what the outcome of a specific small action might be (Redding, 1996 27). Keeping corporate and personal goals coordinated and making sure that the day-to-day practices of the organization are not causing harm by accident require a special communication effort. It is not enough to do what you think is the right thing; it’s also important to talk to your co-workers and supervisors and customers and family to make sure that you haven’t miscalculated an effect or forgotten to consider an outcome.

For many employees, the most disturbing aspect of corporate communication is that it ignores many face-saving, privacy protecting rituals that are typically used to smooth personal relationships. Workplace communication tends to be brutally direct and comprehensive and there is no legal "right to privacy" within the normal course of business. Business organizations collect information about their employees in ways that violate some basic tenets of proper social communication and employee privacy has thus become one of the most divisive issues of workplace ethics (Seeger, 1997 65).

***Health and lifestyle information*** In a social organization, even an intimate one like a family, each member is allowed to decide how much information to reveal to others; in a business organization, the presumption is the opposite. Information that is needed for the organization to guarantee safe working conditions, appropriate work assignments, or reasonable health care costs is simply collected from everyone. Many businesses regularly require drug and alcohol testing of employees. Some conduct psychological profiling and others monitor health-related activities such as smoking and exercise habits. Typically, such information is well beyond the limits of what one would share in polite social conversation, and because they don't "know" the employer very well, many employees feel that their privacy has been violated.

> Businesses are subject to various rules regarding the use of health information they collect. The Americans with Disabilities Act requires most companies to accommodate a disabled employee, and the Family & Medical Leave Act requires an employer to hold an equivalent job for someone requiring time off due to illness. On the other hand, the federal Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) prohibits employers from releasing any health information about a person without his or her explicit permission. Employees must thus decide how much information to communicate to the employer, and when to do so. Employers and co-workers are prevented from discriminating against someone on the basis of health issues, but at the same time an employer isn't obligated to accommodate a problem he or she doesn't know about. Nor can colleagues offer support if they don't know about a co-worker's medical condition (Cropper, 2005).

***Work performance*** Most businesses collect information about how well or how quickly various tasks are performed, including the time a worker spends communicating with others during the course of the workday. Computer monitoring of breaks, minutes between tasks, daily work goals, and service behaviors is increasingly common (Gilchrist & Gilchrist, 1996), and many workers find the possibility of constant observation upsetting and stressful. The most recent issue for office workers is the monitoring of computer usage. Based in part on a recent productivity survey, WebSense, one of the bigger makers of the software, estimated the total annual cost of employees goofing around online at $138 billion for some 53 million employees (Sandberg, 2005) As a result, most employers now monitor the Internet use and many consider misuse a reason to dismiss an employee ("Workers Face Sack over E-mail and Internet Misuse," 2002).

Generally, the courts have held that an employer owns the equipment, pays people to do specific things with it, and has the legal right to see that the work is done as specified. The law does prohibit employers from "egregious surveillance schemes" but are generally allowed to keep tabs on everything that is going on within the workplace and need not notify their employees of any monitoring that will take place (Cohen, 2001). According to one survey, 63% of companies monitor employees' on-line activity, and 15% use hidden cameras to watch workers .

***Rule compliance*** Companies spend a substantial amount of time and effort to see that employees comply with the various financial, legal and safety rules that govern their behavior within the workplace. Adult autonomy in Western society includes the right to make decisions without being told what to do—to be able to act independently, free from the surveillance and controls that we put on children, criminals and the mentally incompetent. Many people find it offensive to have their personal belongings examined at the door, their expenditures reviewed, or their emails monitored because it signifies both a lack of trust and a lack of respect. Nevertheless, business organizations feel they must take steps to protect themselves, their customers and the general public by insuring that controls are in place to insure legal behavior at all times.

***Communication*** Perhaps most alarming for many people is the monitoring of communication (Cohen, 2001; Piller, 1993), which nearly 80% of major U.S. companies now do (Koretz, 2001). Further, virtually any large company has some kind of electronic communication policy (Conlin, 2002), Freedom of expression is a fundamental value in Western society, but the business presumption is that employees who are hired to communicate in a particular way can expect to be held accountable for doing so in the timeframe and manner set by the company.

> Abuse of telephone privileges has long been a problem in the U.S. workplace, where agreement on the appropriate amount of time spent on personal calls or long distance calls seems to elude everyone. One survey found 6% of employers had terminated employees for misusing office phones (Sandberg, 2005), but if worker complaints are any indication, there are many more organizations where the subject is a source of conflict.

The privacy of electronic communication, in particular, remains a challenge for many businesses. Breach of contract, trade secret and defamation lawsuits and the dangers of creating a hostile work environment get most of the attention (Armstrong, 2000) To comply with financial disclosure laws passed in the Sarbanes-Oxley Act, companies must store email, instant messages, and blog postings. Companies use filtering mechanisms to prevent some problem emails, such as pornography or pirated music files, from ever entering the company’s system (Palmer, 2000), but employees need to be careful, both to protect their own privacy and the reputation of their companies. Emails are legally considered company documents, required to be stored on backup tapes for years and subject to subpoena (Seglin, 2001).

> In the past few years, incriminating emails led to the prosecution of banker Frank Quattrone at Credit Suisse First Boston, Merrill Lunch analyst Henry M. Blodgett, and senior executives from Enron Corp. One employment discrimination lawyer estimates that 70% of the evidence in a case is in the form of electronic communications that have been saved (Baker & Grow, 2005). The best advice for many workers is “If you wouldn’t want to post it on your office door, you shouldn’t put it in an email” (Armstrong, 2000).

Although the courts have held that employers have the right to place rules on the use of the computers they own, some employees have sought (and found) relief under rules of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), which “protects the rights of employees to communicate freely with one another about work terms and conditions” as a part of their right to organize themselves (McCarthy, 2000). The right to freedom of communication remains a social and cultural value of great importance, but the NLRB has held that an employee does not have the right to disrupt a company’s computer system in order to communicate, Two thirds of companies in one survey have disciplined their workers for some kind of improper internet use (Conlin, 2000), and a 2005 survey found that over a quarter of organizations had had to fire employees for email abuse (Sandberg, 2005)

**Recognizing and Responding to Ethical Dilemmas**

Learning the communication rules of a business organization can be difficult and is sure to take some time. Even knowing and following the rules will not guarantee completely ethical behavior. The unfortunate reality is that not everyone within an organization will behave in a fully ethical way. Sometimes people will violate the organization's rules, as when a supervisor engages in sexual harassment or condones racist comments in his crew. In other instances, people take advantage of the rules, interpreting or manipulating them to gain advantage. A purchasing agent, for example, might "innocently" tell a vendor that she really likes basketball, knowing that the vendor has season tickets available for "friends." There is a rule against taking bribes, of course, but that word never came out of the purchasing agent's mouth.

Most business people will be asked, at some time, to act in a way that is not acceptable to their "personal" code of ethics (Conrad & Poole, 1998 406), and the general public assumes that business people are routinely expected to compromise their personal standards against lying, cheating or polluting the environment in order to maximize corporate profit or personal gain (Golan, Powers, & Titkemeyer, 1985) The key question is how to communicate an objection to behavior that others seem to think is acceptable.

Learn the rules and expectations.

Ethical challenges are most stressful when they are wrapped in uncertainty. A vague sense of unease can't be addressed easily, but knowing a behavior is clearly against the rules puts the organizational resources on the side of changing that behavior. Many companies have a formal code of ethical conduct, which typically focuses on those behaviors that victimize the company in some way (Conrad & Poole, 1998 407), as well as rules against illegal communication behaviors such as sexual harassment, racist language or inappropriate financial disclosure.

Communicate about goals and values.

The person who is worried about a particular situation should begin by asking others to help sort through the best way to handle it. Everyone is shy about bringing up ethical issues. People worry that criticizing others' behavior will make them seem weak or narrow-minded. The also worry that they'll look like a crook if they voice support for something others might think is wrong. The result can be a lack of any communication at all and a lost opportunity for the group to clarify its own ethical standards. One way to break the silence is to simply ask about the company's goals or the expected outcomes. A salesperson who isn't sure whether she should disclose potential liability issues in a new product might simply ask a co-worker or supervisor whether there is a way to make sure that the customer is making an informed decision. Once the topic is out in the open, the work group is usually able to make a much better ethical choice than an individual can do alone.

Find a safe person to talk to

Generally, any ethical questions should be taken first to one's supervisor or team members. When individuals feel they can't discuss an issue comfortably within their own workgroups, the next step is to find someone else to confide in. A long term employee in another department is often a good mentor for many problems that come up. The human resources department should be able to set up a confidential meeting with a discrimination or benefits counselor. Even if the problem doesn't have anything to do with discrimination or benefits, these are the people who are trained to deal with sensitive issues and they often act as a company's first line of defense against unethical behavior of all kinds.

Responding to the misconduct of others

After the rules are clarified and the ethical choice is clear, individuals will still chose to act in unethical ways. Perhaps the most difficult aspect of ethical communication is stopping someone else's misconduct. We face strong social pressures against making an ethics complaint. Children are taught not to be tattle tales. Friendships are based on keeping each others' secrets. Democratic citizenship requires that we tolerate the behavior of others even when we disagree with their views or values. In the face of these lessons, accusing a co-worker of wrongdoing can take an act of great courage.

Such communication will never be easy, but following a step by step process designed to reduce conflict can make it most productive:

***1. Express concern one on one***. Ideally, the first communication should be directly with the co-worker involved in the unethical behavior. Without blaming or judging, first clarify with the other person that a rule has been violated or that an ethical choice is involved. Sometimes errors are made or situations are misunderstood. The first step should also be to insure that a simple error or misunderstanding does not lead to unwarranted consequences. There are situations in which any illegal or dangerous behavior must be reported in mandatory ways. Health care workers, for instance, are obligated to report patent abuse and many companies issue a mandatory drug use reporting policy.

***2. Report misbehavior***. If the first communication does not stop a person's misbehavior, the next step is to report the incident to ones *own* supervisor. Going "over another person's head" to his or her supervisor breaks organizational lines of authority and is perceived as "tattling" on another. Disciplinary communication should follow formal lines of accountability, and any reporting of misbehavior outside that chain of command should be handled discretely.

> Francis and Sarah frequently work the back-to-back shifts at a customer service desk. Francis had protested when Sarah put a clearance item behind the counter to purchase later, and Sarah admitted that she knew it violated store policy. Francis has since come into work several times to find merchandise tucked into the service desk. Francis realizes that she can't simply "tattle" on Sarah and expect JoAnn, their supervisor, to take action. Instead, she simply tells JoAnn that Sarah continues to stash merchandise, even though she realizes it is against store policy. JoAnn will now be responsible for doing her own investigation, and might even chose not to take any disciplinary action. Francis, in the meantime, has communicated ethically without taking on any inappropriate responsibility for stopping Sarah's actions.

When reporting misbehavior, be sure to communicate the facts of the situation, without judgment or any attempt to gain status from the effort. Supervisors are wary of such behavior, seeing it as a sign of poor team skills rather than of managerial talent, and needless to say, fellow workers carefully avoid those who cannot be trusted with their confidences (Waddell, 1997).

***3. Create a safety net.*** Understandably, most employees are less likely to report misbehavior if they are new to the company or if they fear some retaliation from co-workers or supervisors (King & Hermodson, 2000). Further, not every supervisor has the interpersonal skills [Pettit, 1990 #2535] or organizational status needed to deal with a violation. The person who finds a supervisor unwilling or unable to handle a situation should begin to document the problem, anticipating that a problem that is not being dealt with is probably going to result in a more serious condition later. At that time, communication is held to higher standards of disciplinary documentation or even legal evidence.

> A week or two after reporting the situation to JoAnn, Francis realizes that Sarah continues to stash merchandise. She continues to clean out the service desk carefully each time she comes to work, but now she begins to enter a description of the merchandise she finds in her PDA.

***4. Blow the whistle.*** Certainly the most distressing situation is to discover that a supervisor condones or even participates in the unethical behavior. "Whistle blowing" is the communication of information about illegal or illegitimate business practices to someone who can act to stop the behavior [Barnett 1992]. Such communication circumvents the chain of command and channels information directly to someone higher in the organization, or especially to legal, regulatory or media agencies outside the organization.

For the communicator, "whistle blowing" is virtually guaranteed to have negative consequences (Seeger, 1997). The individual is, in effect, removing him or herself as a player on the team and taking on the outsider role of referee—the one who "blows the whistle" (Jensen, 1987). Whistle blowing usually violates important ethical values of loyalty to the organization. The obligation to hold company information confidential is not merely reasonable in the business context, but might be crucial for the continued livelihood of organizational colleagues, the economic health of the whole community, or to provide necessary service to customers (Jensen, 1987). Once an outsider, the individual will probably never be allowed to reenter the game, so this is a sensitive type of communication that must be handled carefully.

> As one of the more senior customer service reps, Francis usually works shifts alone, but one Saturday JoAnn fills an emergency absence. Francis is amazed when JoAnn warns her that the hot toy robot is on sale, but the store has received only three of them—as she places the three boxes under her sweater in the service desk. Francis is relieved when JoAnn takes the toys to another cashier to make the purchase, but she realizes now why Sarah has been getting away with stashing items all this time. She is also relieved that her company's ethics committee has a "hot line" that allows anonymous reports.

Challenging the System

Perhaps there is no one in the organization who considers an activity unethical. The issues of gender discrimination and environmental responsibility remind activities considered "business as usual" just twenty or thirty years ago are now deemed unethical and even illegal.  These changes have come about because individuals took a leadership role in changing the ethical rules of their organizations.

The first stage of change communication involves "going through channels" to file a grievance or challenge a decision.  Most companies will have some formal system for requesting changes in its own processes.  This might be a suggestion box, a union challenge, a grievance procedure, or a request to have an issue included on the agenda for the weekly staff meeting.  In many companies the appropriate person to communicate with works in the Human Resources department.

Whatever the formal procedure, it is important that you follow it first, before undertaking any other informal kind of action.  Informal complaining and whining is generally ineffective anyway, and is guaranteed to mark you as someone who is "not a team player" even if everyone agrees that the team's rules need to be revised.   Instead, learn and follow the formal communication channels until you receive

- A clear explanation for the current procedures—You need to understand the company's position before you can make an honest appraisal of its ethical validity.  If the rule is arbitrary or outdated and the company cannot provide a good reason for it, you have established a basis from which to ask that it be changed. OR
- A legitimate decision against your position—As long as the issue is being bumped up the chain of command, you haven't exhausted your formal channels of communication.  Until someone is willing to take responsibility for the rule and its enforcement, you have a basis for questioning its existence.

Only when the formal channels of communication are exhausted is it appropriate to begin to advocate change outside those channels.  Before taking on that challenge, many people at least consider whether they wish to continue as a part of the community and live according to its ethical rules.   Deciding "no" does not imply that a person must quit the company, but often change will require that he or she achieve a position with sufficient power to change the rules.

### *Chapter Notes*


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