Objectives: We have to date discussed effective communication. However, communication is integral to ethical conduct. This section will discuss ethics, and its role in communications in a technical context. By the end of this lesson, you should have a sound understanding of:

- ethical principles;
- ethics as applied to communication; and
- ethics as applied to technology.
What are ethics?

Ethics is an increasingly important area in business, particularly where science and technology are concerned. Ethics are a system of principles, by which human actions and proposals may be judged good or bad or right or wrong.

Many organisations have a formal code of ethics that provide an acceptable framework within which professionals are expected to work. Some examples that are relevant to us are the Australian Computer Society (<http://www.acs.org.au/national/pospaper/acs131.htm>), Software Engineering (<http://www.computer.org/tab/seprof/code.htm>) and Engineering (http://onlineethics.org/codes/NSPEcode.html).

You will notice that in most codes of practice/ethics, emphasis is on the concept of core values - honesty, integrity, trust. How is one honest, or how does one have integrity? How does one promote trust? Fundamental to these is the concept of truth, and with that the importance of communication. Much of your work, and how you are perceived, is the ethical management and communication of truth.

In this section, we will discuss ethical principles as applied to communication, and look at how they may be applied to business and technical practice. At this stage, we will merely cover the concepts of ethics, as you will all cover ethics as relating to your professions in much greater detail later in your programs.

Personal vs professional ethics

Our personal beliefs may be at odds with work we are expected to do, and in fact may be at odds with professional codes of practice or standards. Our personal values are a valuable blend of our family life, culture, society, education, and environment, as well as in religious beliefs. However, when dealing with ethics in the workplace, we need to weigh opinion (personal beliefs/values) with acceptable practice (policy, law, social norms). Getting the balance right is sometimes not easy.

The right versus right dilemma

Rushworth Kidder, in How Good People Make Tough Choices argues that it there is a difference between ethical and moral dilemmas. Consider the following paragraph:

“The world, unfortunately, faces plenty of right-versus-wrong questions. From cheating on taxes to lying under oath, from running red lights to inflating the expense account, from buying under-twelve movie tickets for your fourteen-year-old to overstating the damage done to your car for insurance purposes—the world abounds with instances that, however commonplace, are widely understood to be wrong. But right-versus-wrong choices are very different from right-versus-right ones. The latter reach inward to our most profound and central values, setting one against the other in ways that will never be resolved simply by pretending that one is “wrong”. Right-versus-wrong choices, by contrast, offer no such depth: The closer you get to them, the more they begin to smell. Two shorthand terms capture the
differences: If we can call right-versus-right choices “ethical dilemmas”, we can reserve the phrase “moral temptations” for the right-versus-wrong ones” (1997, p.17).

Kidder goes on to suggest that the really tough choices are those which involve right versus right: “They are genuine dilemmas precisely because each side is firmly rooted in one of our basic, core values. Four such dilemmas are so common to our experience that they stand as models, patterns, or paradigms. They are:

• Truth versus loyalty
• Individual versus community
• Short-term versus long-term
• Justice versus mercy” (1997, p.18).

We often hear ethical dilemmas referred to as choosing between the lesser of two evils. Sometimes, the result of a decision has potentially tragic consequences, regardless of the chosen path.

Can you think of a time when you have been affected by an ethical dilemma? You may like to discuss this with your course buddies - it would be interesting to see what someone else would have done in your situation, wouldn’t it?

**Ethics and communication**

Aristotle, a Greek rhetorician, believed that “communication was most powerful when the speaker’s character, or ethos (ethical appeal) was engaged in presenting the truth” (Seiler and Bell, 2001, p.10).

While ethics are generally linked to truth, they are not just related to speaking. They also are related to action. How, then, are ethics linked to communication?

“The ethical communicator speaks responsibly and gives credit to any sources that contribute to the message being conveyed. An ethical communicator does not plagiarise, and does not equivocate” (Seiler and Bell, 2001, p.10).

Ethical communicators also:

refrain from deliberate undermining or misrepresentation of another’s work in conversation;
• understand the difference between a genuine mistake and malicious intent;
• tell the truth and encourage others to do so;
• provide subjects of interviews or experiments with all relevant information, ensuring that subjects are fully aware and informed of consequences of their actions;
• use language in a simple and accurate way, avoiding sensationalising, misleading, and over-persuasion;
• provide enough detail for the audience to make an accurate, balanced, and informed opinion;
It is not easy to be an ethical communicator in a competitive environment, but you should aim to achieve your goals in an ethical manner at a corporate and individual level. Being an ethical communicator also requires that you have confidence, are assertive without being aggressive, and are not afraid of potential conflict. It takes all of these qualities to stand up for principles, sometimes pitting you against your peers.

**How are ethics relevant to technology development and use?**

Ethical misconduct in a technical environment can be blatant (hacking, intentional poor development in order to ensure continued product and service sales) or subtle (misuse of statistics or manipulating data to pre-empt a decision). Generally, blatant ethical misconduct is also illegal. However, in practice unethical does not automatically equate with illegal. Unethical practice is also not always intentional. For example, you may use percentages rather than figures to promote sales of your product: “75% of our customers rate our product as the best they have ever used” is viewed in a different light when you know that the total number of users is four. Intentional? No. Unethical? Probably. Accepted practice? Yes. Should it be? Not if it misleads the audience.

Allen and Voss (1997) argue that there are 10 ethical qualities that are specific to technical communication. They are: honesty, legality, privacy, quality teamwork, avoiding conflicts of interest, cultural sensitivity, social responsibility, professional growth, and the advancement of the profession.

Technical environments are usually team oriented. Leaders and team members must be ethical for groups to form effectively (Seiler and Bell, 2002, p.10). Seiler and Bell also note four specific ethical concerns to a group in order for it to operate effectively:

1. All group members should have the right to state an opinion or a unique perspective.
2. All group members should conduct themselves with honesty and integrity.
3. Confidential information shared in the group should remain confidential.

Successful teams often establish a set of team guidelines that are set by the group. Ethical issues maybe managed within this context. Alternatively, they should be addressed in the context of the relevant industry code of ethics.

We will address specifics of ethical behaviour in the workplace in the next lesson.


Exercise 11

Write down five points of opinion on one of the following scenarios. These opinions should be supported by, and developed in relation to the relevant society code of ethics, which should be your national body in your country of residence.

1. **Keep it Secret?**: Shelley is a quantity surveyor who is reviewing construction costs for a major building project prior to final invoicing. She becomes aware that the concrete mix used for one section of the building should not have been used as it would not allow for the weight-bearing capacity required. The right thing to do would be to tear the area down and replace with an alternative concrete mix. This, however, would add time and costs to the project, which is almost finished. Shelley was responsible for recommending the concrete mix in the first place. What should she do?

2. **Signing Off?**: Jason is a Development Team Leader on a software implementation project. The project is running behind time, and his supervisor has produced a report that identifies five areas where shortcuts could be made and software features eliminated. Jason knows that if these specific features are removed from the software, the overall functionality will be reduced. He is concerned about the software product’s final quality and does not want to sign off on his supervisor’s report. What should he do?

Your sources must be cited correctly.

Internal students should submit this exercise to their tutor in class. External students should submit this with Assignment 2 in Week 12.

*Note that at this stage, punctuation and grammar is increasingly important, and your submissions will be failed/discounted if they do not meet basic grammatical standards. If you are having problems, you should contact your tutor (internal students) or the Course Coordinator (external students).*

VISIT THE WWW SITE

You should now visit the course website to access web-based links and readings, and to discuss any thoughts you have on this lesson. The website address is in your course profile, or can be accessed via http://e-courses.cqu.edu.au