Objectives: In the previous chapter, we discussed the overall principles and definitions of ethics as applied to communication and technology. To complete our course in professional and technical communication, we will now look at the principles of applied ethics. By the end of this lesson, you should have a sound understanding of:

- ethical considerations in a working environment
- techniques to enhance ethical practice.
Ethics in the workplace

Your own personal views may sometimes be at odds with that which appears accepted within a workplace environment. For example, you may believe that it is wrong to destroy natural environments, but you may be working for a company that is planning on doing exactly that. Ideally, you will work for a company that states its position very clearly and this position is one with which you agree. Should you apply for a position with a mining company if you are violently opposed to the mining profession? Do you think you can change the world from the inside, or are you going to cause yourself immense frustration? Indeed, Alfred Marcus, in *Business and Society: Strategy, Ethics, and the Global Community*, suggests that ethical behaviour often requires self-sacrifice (1996, p.155).

Marcus suggests that there are seven ways to enhance ethical behaviour in the workplace:

1. Know and use ethical principles
2. Act in a way that prevents harm to people and companies
3. Act in a way that keeps you from going to jail (ie. don’t do anything you know to be illegal)
4. Act in a way that avoids public humiliation (ie. don’t do anything you wouldn’t want to see on the front page of a newspaper)
5. Act in a way that preserves your job (ie. be aware of, and act on corporate policies)
6. Set realistic goals for subordinates, so they won’t cheat (ie. reward ethical and honest behaviour, and don’t set goals so high that it is impossible to achieve them without cheating)
7. Act in a way that promotes peace of mind (ie. you don’t need the stress of living with actions you know to be wrong) (1996, p.122).

It is relevant here to discuss the importance of being assertive, and its link to ethical behaviour. Assertion is defined as “standing up for personal rights and expressing thoughts, feelings and beliefs in direct, honest and appropriate ways which respect the rights of other people” (Hargie et al in Hartley, 1999, p.195). Hartley suggests that some of the features of assertion are:

- “recognising that you have basic human rights which should be respected by others;
- recognising that these rights include being able to express your feelings and needs;
- communication which is direct, honest and open;
- expressing mutual respect for other people and their rights” (1999, p.195).

The inference here is that assertion will enable you to speak up when you encounter unethical practice.

Techniques for ethical technical communication

- Choose words that are not subjective (loaded) and may unintentionally sway your audience - eg. Johanna *said* that she was responsible, as opposed to Johanna *admitted* that she was responsible, which implies guilt.
• Use statistics responsibly and accurately. Misuse of statistics can include manipulation of figures, using median when you mean mode, or leaving out figures which don’t suit your purpose.

• Ensure that your subjects are fully aware of what you are doing, why you are doing it, and how the information is going to be used when conducting research using human subjects (interviews, surveys).

• Represent figures accurately when using graphics, which can be easily distorted to misrepresent information, or alter the audience perception.

• Leave photographs, even digital, in their original state. Do not, for example, remove toxic rubbish from the background of a photograph of a new property development. While tempting, and easily done, this is a blatant misuse of technology.

• Be honest about your achievements. Acknowledge those who have helped you, or sources of information. Don’t take the glory for someone else’s work.

• Be proactive about admitting mistakes. It is far easier and more responsible to tell your superiors about something that has gone wrong than having it ‘discovered’. Imagine knowing about a toxic spill, and trying to cover it up with one or two other colleagues, to wake up one morning to see the issue splashed all over the papers. By informing superiors, action can be taken immediately.

• Information in your hands that is confidential should remain that way. For example, a subordinate who discusses personal matters with you to explain a recent downturn in their productivity should be confident that this will not become ‘office gossip’.

• Your unique skill should be used in an ethical manner. For example, just because you know how to hack code or create bionic rats does not mean that you should.

• Always consider the worst case scenario.

• Treat others as you would wish to be treated. If you are the sort of person who doesn’t care how you are treated (interestingly enough a common defence!), consider how people should be treated.

You should now do the required exercise to complete this lesson. That concludes our course - we hope you have enjoyed it and learned a lot. Good luck in your future studies.

REFERENCES


There are no readings from your text this week.

Internal students will prepare for a short ethical debate within their workshops. External students will contribute to the course discussion list.

You are to:

• post an opinion on the following topic to the course discussion list.
• your posting must be completed by 5pm, Friday, Week 12.

**Topic: In the work environment, personal beliefs or opinions are more important than professional ethics.**

You may choose to agree or disagree with this statement. You can either post a set response to the question, or engage in discussion by responding to a post by a fellow student. Your response should be written formally, and will be examined for written expression.

**Posting Checklist:**

1. Ensure that your name and section (eg. Introduction) are in the subject line.
2. Do not post any attachments - your statements should be in the body of your post.

Contact the Course Coordinator if you are have any problems completing this exercise.

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