The Importance of Ethical Language in Business Communication

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Abstract: Language is culturally transmitted. It means that the language people use is the result of influences different factors had upon them: parents, educators, colleagues, and media. When conveying a message, it is important to think not only about the words that help with clarity but, also, it is crucial to consider the meanings of different words. In the business world, for companies operating in foreign countries, the language used plays a central role in how these companies are perceived, thus the language and the culture of that country coexist. In today’s world, effective communication is critical to a company’s success since it strengthens relationships, improves decision-making, and improves problem-solving abilities. Yet, successful business communication means that the communication must include the application of ethical standards during communication. Thus, this paper aims at presenting the relationship between communication and business, with emphasis on ethical language.

1. INTRODUCTION

Culture is defined as “the specific learned norms of a group’s attitudes, values, and beliefs” (Daniels et al, 2011). In contemporary society, apparently marked by democracy, words may become people’s biggest weapons. As we have witnessed many times, words have tremendous power to achieve change through articulate messages meant to influence the masses. Thus, language has become a reflection of culture, contributing to people’s understanding of what is “good” or “bad.” Linguists are increasingly focusing on ethical language, emphasizing the use of disparaging language and its potential to create a hostile environment.

Effective communication is critical for an individual’s success in today’s world since it helps to develop and maintain relationships, as well as improve decision-making and problem-solving abilities. It would be difficult to explain one’s views, beliefs, and ideas to another without efficient communication. When related to business, ethical behavior and corporate social responsibility can bring important benefits to a business. Ethical communication improves credibility, and the decision-making process and also contributes to the creation of a certain level of trust between parties. Thus, ethical communication allows two parties to communicate with a basic understanding of what is expected. How individuals or groups of people transmit information is referred to as an ethical issue in corporate communication. Communicators aim to explain their ideas, intentions, and goals to their receivers as clearly as possible to achieve effective communication. As a result, communication is only successful when both the sender and the recipient have the same understanding of the information.

Effective communication skills are required in today’s corporate environment due to the highly informative and technology age, thus the exchange of information between parties has been made easier. Regardless of the situation, communication is about making choices, reflecting

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ideals, and having consequences. Customers, management, and employees all value honest and ethical behaviors, thus any company trying to be socially and ethically responsible must prioritize ethical communication both inside the firm and in its dealings with the public for successful communication. Hence, ethical communication in business is critical since it promotes the company’s reputation, avoids major financial and legal issues, and benefits everyone involved.

2. ETHICAL COMMUNICATION IN BUSINESS

Ethical communication in the workplace is the exchange of information between a variety of individuals involved in the day-to-day running of the company (management, employees, suppliers, clients, and the community), communication that has to be truthful and accurate.

As we have mentioned earlier, ethical business communication may take different forms. The literature has devoted a wide range of writing regarding the significance of ethics in business communication. Most failures in business happen due to the absence of morals in their business operation, therefore ethics is the basic achievement of authoritative development and progress. It can be said that ethics are a vital segment in achieving business objectives. According to Martin and Chaney (2012) there is a direct correlation between ethical business communication and customer loyalty. Ethical business communication plays a vital role in the development of a loyal customer base because of the ethical way in which the company behaves when it comes to communicating with its customers. Ethical business communication helps to create a positive image of the organization in the workplace, which helps in attracting more customers. Ethics also contributes to employees understanding of corporate standards, particularly in the area of communication. The respect and protection of all human beings’ rights is the foundation of ethics. Hence, together with business communication reduces discrimination and makes people practice honest behavior in a business setting.

According to The National Communication Association (NCA) (https://www.natcom.org/) contexts, cultures, channels, and media, ethical communication is “essential to responsible thinking, decision making, and the formation of relationships and communities.” Obviously, it still takes into account the moral principles that govern a person’s behavior. Moreover, the NCA states that “ethical communication enhances human worth and dignity by fostering truthfulness, fairness, responsibility, personal integrity, and respect for self and others.” Communication ethics value truth, honesty, integrity, respect, fairness, and justice. Ethical communication is about freedom of expression and diversity of perspective. According to this theory, people should do their best to understand others, while promoting access to communication resources and opportunities. Nonetheless, communication ethics is about sharing information, opinions, and feelings, while also respecting privacy and confidentiality. Hence, not considering these principles can threaten the quality of all communication. Therefore, “unethical communication threatens the quality of all communication and consequently the well-being of individuals and the society in which we live.” (National Communication Association, 2017). On the other hand, communication ethics can vary across different communication contexts. While all of these morals should still be kept in place, “communication ethics are expressed in different ways within different contexts”. Within communication, we value respect and listening. Interpersonal and public communication may also value respect and honesty compared to organizational and rhetoric communication. Though all principles are still important, some play a bigger role in certain contexts.
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3. PRINCIPLES OF ETHICAL COMMUNICATION

Businesses rely on communication in all of its forms, including face-to-face, print, and digital. At the same time, the business world heavily focuses on revenue, growth, and profit margins. Organizations deal with sensitive information every day, like news about financial crises, or information about upcoming upheavals. Most of the time, managers are told to keep such information private because it can lead to an ethical problem, either within the organization (internally) or for its consumers and investors (externally). Nonetheless, a growing number of voices are asking for workplace honesty, transparency, and respect — not just between the company and its customers, but also within the company itself. As corporate communications are largely deregulated, this leaves room for messaging that is creative, misleading and sometimes incorrect. Thus, the question that arises is: Where do we draw the line? Despite a variety of communication standards that organizations should be aware of, ethical communication is the most crucial. As a result, ethical communication is a form of communication based on particular ethical standards (Mandelbaum, 2020). These are:

**Honesty.** Running a business that is proud of being ethical and socially responsible is a challenge. Honesty is the cornerstone of ethical communication, and all other characteristics flow from it. It is defined as the act of communicating a message straightforwardly and truly.

It is not ethical communication to try to make information more appealing. When a boss asks tough questions, neither is lying because speaking the truth would make an employee appear bad. Thus, if honesty is not a driving concept in how a company conducts every area of its work process, it is nearly impossible for that company to develop trust.

Honesty in business is not only doing things correctly the first time but also articulating the ideals around which a company is founded.

**Transparency.** In business, transparency is the foundation for trust between a company’s customers, partners, and employees. When talking with persons with a vested interest in business matters, being transparent involves being honest and open. It is conceivable to tell the truth but not the whole truth, albeit partial disclosure is rarely ethical.

**Professionalism.** In the workplace, ethical communication is more than just an issue of personal morality; it is also a sign of professionalism. In a job or business situation, professionalism is described as someone’s conduct, behavior, and attitude. It is not necessary to work in a certain profession to display important professional talents and characteristics. Job success, a strong professional reputation, and a high level of work ethic and quality are all linked to professionalism. According to Forbes, thinking long-term is the best method to communicate effectively (Flaxington, 2018).

**Consistency.** So that individuals are not confused by contradicting messages, consistency necessitates that the information supplied to various parties is rational and congruent. An anticipated workflow that is constant throughout the firm is vital in any business process, not simply communication methods. Consistency creates a pattern everyone can come to expect, and they develop a subconscious comfort level when business needs are met. Many organizations admit that consistent communication is the basis of any business’s success and survival. Workplace communications have positive results in increasing productivity, improving efficiency, and raising employee satisfaction and morale.
Responsibility. Whenever speaking or writing in a business environment, individuals have certain responsibilities to their audience, their employer, and their profession. The sender of the message is responsible for the way the message is received. Writing an unclear message to give the sender credible disputability if the receiver misunderstands the message is not ethical communication. The sender must communicate the message in such a way that it surpasses any unexpected hurdles, such as conversing with customers in plain English rather than business jargon. Manipulation, avoidance, and other verbal techniques are forbidden by ethical communicators. They must be as open as possible.

Fairness. Fairness is the notion of communicating without judging or interrupting the other person, and not presuming how they would reply. According to the career and management learning solutions platform Mind Tools (https://www.mindtools.com/CommSkll/ActiveListening.htm), active listening is an essential skill as this talent guarantees that everybody is listening to comments and addressing in-depth questions for clarification.

People who embrace this concept build an environment devoid of discrimination and dishonesty in order to ensure a fair decision-making process. Fairness is related to the process of decision-making rather than the outcome. The goal in a corporate setting is to make smart judgments that benefit the company while not causing harm to customers, employees, shareholders, suppliers or people, in general.

4. THE IMPACT OF UNETHICAL COMMUNICATION ON BUSINESS

The Merriam-Webster dictionary (Merriam-Webster.com dictionary) defines “unethical” as “not conforming to a high moral standard; morally wrong; immoral.” Some schools of thought define unethical communication as anything that encourages ignorance, intolerance, or defamation. According to Redding (1996), coercive, destructive, deceitful, invasive, secretive, and manipulative-exploitive communication are six types of unethical interaction that regularly occur in businesses. Behaviors such as intimidation or threats, in which the speaker abuses his or her status or influence and attempts to limit the hearer’s autonomy, are examples of coercive communication.

Destructive communication, according to Redding, is defined as communicative activities that harm a listener’s self-esteem, image, or feelings by demonstrating disregard or scorn for the listener’s values. It includes “insults, derogatory innuendoes, epithets, jokes (especially those based on gender, race, sex, religion, or ethnicity); put-downs; backstabbing; character assassination and so on”.

Acts intended at deceiving, misleading, or defrauding the listener are considered deceptive communication. According to the same author, subordinates are more inclined to engage in false communication when discussing their activity or observations. However, Redding also points out that businesses employ euphemisms to conceal product flaws, unpleasant details, and unpleasant realities.

The intrusive communication category is concerned with communicative acts that infringe on the listener’s privacy rights. Acts of secretive communication include hoarding or concealing information that would reveal a person’s incompetence. Silence and unresponsiveness are included in this group, according to Redding.
Manipulative-exploitative communication involves exploiting people’s anxieties, prejudices, and ignorance in order to get acquiescence.

American comedian, Fred Allen famously said, “An advertising agency is 85 percent confusion and 15 percent commission” (https://www.forbes.com/quotes/3131/). Just like in life, business communication is about more than just getting a word over; it’s also about gaining feedback, which is heavily influenced by how the message was received. This means that communicators must take into account any language limitations that the audience may encounter and strive for representation in their word choices. In professional interaction, communicators should make certain that they do not present anything that may be construed as demeaning, intolerant, or even hateful. The following are instances when corporate communications become overcomplicated, instances ignoring that communication is always two-way.

4.1. Starbucks: The Importance of the Company’s Main Values to Each Employee

Two men went to a Philadelphia Starbucks to meet up with friends in April 2018. They asked to use the restroom as they sat at a table waiting to be served. Nonetheless, the on-duty manager phoned the cops, and the two black males were unfairly detained for trespassing. The video of the arrest went viral, and #boycottStarbucks was trending on social media the next day. What began as a store manager trying to follow company policy devolved into a racially charged interaction that even Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz labeled “reprehensible.” Kevin Johnson, the company’s CEO, issued an immediate statement that included a formal apology to the two men. To employees and customers, he said, “You can and should expect more from us. We will learn from this and be better.” (https://stories.starbucks.com/press/2018/starbucks-ceo-reprehensible-outcome-in-philadelphia-incident/). Schultz also discussed a list of internal actions the company would take (realigning the entire organization to the company’s key values and mission; encouraging bottom-up feedback from partners on how the company was doing from their standpoint; adopting best practices and reviewing policies that support an inclusive and equal culture). Starbucks shuttered 8,000 outlets a month later to train 175,000 employees on discriminatory practices and how to make every client feel welcome. Starbucks conducted an internal inquiry into its rules after recognizing a major breakdown in its organizational communication protocols and how its “practices and training contributed to a disastrous outcome.” It was regarded as a genuine and transparent response.

4.2. Yahoo’s Failure: Not Communicating

Yahoo executives admitted in September 2016 that a data breach in 2014 had revealed the accounts of 500 million users to hackers. Three months later, in December, the corporation revealed that another hack had occurred in 2013, this time affecting one billion accounts. Yahoo acknowledged nearly one year later, in October 2017, that the data hack had touched all 3 billion of its subscribers (Larson, 2017). In this case, ironically, Yahoo’s business communication failure was not communicating, an example of deceptive, intrusive and secretive unethical communication. It appears that firm insiders were aware of the incident when it occurred years ago but kept it hidden. An internal investigation found that “failures in communication, management, inquiry, and internal reporting contributed to the lack of proper comprehension and handling of the 2014 Security Incident (McAndrew, 2018).”

Yahoo is an example of a company that, by not addressing a crisis with internal stakeholders and customers, faced a decrease in valuation (Yahoo was in the process of selling a part of its
corporation to Verizon, who slashed the asking price by $350 million as a result of the error); damaged brand reputation (people will not trust a company that not only mismanages their personal information, but also fails to notify them that their names, phone numbers, and passwords have been stolen, thus Yahoo’s failure to communicate most likely resulted in a loss of users); loss of employee trust (trust is an extremely important aspect highly affecting high employee confidence and engagement).

4.3. Nike: Top Management Business Communication Failure

Nike has been one of the most well-known names in the world of sneaker gear since 1971, when the Swoosh emblem was first introduced. Nike has consolidated its position as the leader in the footwear market, with an annual profit of $36 billion, thanks to endorsement deals with some of the most well-known personalities in sports. Notwithstanding being one of the most profitable garment corporations in the world, Nike has suffered a few public relations disasters that required extensive mending. Female employees spoke up in 2018 about the male-dominated workplace atmosphere that encouraged harassment and discrimination. It began with an anonymous poll on their experiences conducted by a group of women at the company’s Beaverton, Oregon headquarters. CEO Mark Parker was informed of the alarming findings (Creswell et al. 2018).

What went wrong with Nike are just some examples of internal communication problems. Yet, the more significant problems were that it took a survey by a group of employees to reveal this toxic culture, that a leader said he was unaware of the problems, and, conclusively, the lack of efficient methods of bottom-up communication.

5. CONCLUSION

Ethical communication refers to communicating in a manner that is clear, concise, truthful and responsible. Therefore, we believe that unethical communication is a threat to the quality of all communication and consequently the welfare of individuals and the society in which we live. Being ethical implies acting in accordance with moral principles or following good moral standards in all situations, not only when talking. It is critical to communicate ethically because there are too many people forgetting about what is right and what hurts other people. Also, ethical communication is about giving respect and being a respectable human being. Both individuals and organizations suffer major consequences when they engage in unethical behavior. They could lose their job and reputation, companies’ credibility could be harmed, general morale and productivity could suffer, or the behavior could result in considerable financial loss.

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