

Members Quarterly

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Feature

Facing Increasing Ethical Challenges

Time to check your Ethical Code of Conduct



Judy Suke

Ethics author, Mary E. Guy, defines ethics as, “that behaviour which is the right thing to do given the circumstances.” As managers, it is our responsibility to train our employees to understand the increasing ethical challenges that have resulted from globalization, intercultural relationships and an intergenerational workforce. The following information will help you to create an Ethical Code of Conduct – a written document that will outline the organization’s values, responsibilities and ethical obligations.

According to “Business Communication Process and Product 6th Canadian Edition”, there are six goals of ethical business communicators: abiding by the law, telling the truth, labeling opinions, being objective, communicating clearly and giving credit. These basics are easily understood and can be clearly explained in your code of ethics. But what happens in the gray areas when you do business around the world? Whose values, culture and laws do you follow?

An article in the New York Times, “*Shaking Hands, Greasing Palms*”, stated that...

“Some observers claim that when North American businesspeople venture abroad, they are wandering into an ethical no-man’s-land, a murky world of payola where transactions often demand a gratuity to oil the wheels of business.”

Suggestions to help your employees include:

Broaden your view

Look at what others countries consider moral, traditional, practical and effective, then document your organization’s responses.

Avoid reflex judgments

Don’t automatically judge business customs of others as immoral, corrupt or unworkable. Where possible, find alternatives. Instead of caving into government payoffs, offer non-monetary public service benefits, technical expertise or additional customer service.

Refuse business if options violate your basic values

If an action seriously breaches your own code of ethics or that of your organization, give up the transaction.

Work in the fresh air

Conduct all relations and negotiations as openly as possible.

In addition to the six basic goals in ethics, you may want to cover these items in your code of ethics: the appropriate amount of money to be spent on business gifts, legitimacy of payments to agents and distributors to expedite business, environment mistreatment, receiving gifts from suppliers and communicating clearly.

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Communication is a key factor in intercultural dealings. As professionals, we have an obligation to write clearly so that receivers understand easily and quickly. Some organizations have passed Plain English policies that require policies, warranties and contracts to be written in language comprehensive to average readers. This involves using short sentences, simple words and graphic highlighting.

Do not use expressions that discriminate against individuals or groups on the basis of sex, ethnicity, disability or age. Language is discriminatory when it stereotypes, insults or excludes people. Using mental categories, representations and generalizations to describe the group can be very helpful when we want to understand their practices. However, we need to be careful.

Intercultural authors Verner and Beamer distinguish between stereotype and prototype: "A *stereotype* is an oversimplified behavioural pattern applied uncritically to groups. Stereotypes are fixed and rigid. Although they may be exaggerated and over generalized beliefs, stereotypes are not always entirely false. They often contain a grain of truth. However, when a stereotype is based on erroneous beliefs or preconceptions, then it becomes a prejudice. The term *prototype* describes mental representations based on general characteristics that are not fixed and rigid but rather are open to definitions. Prototypes are dynamic and change with fresh experience. Based on objective observations they usually have a considerable amount of truth in them."

It is our responsibility to provide our employees with honest, helpful guidelines for dealing with various cultures. Often these guidelines can be sourced from our more experienced executives.

I believe that we should even go a step further and include business etiquette, providing rules for professional behaviour both externally and internally actions that will raise the professionalism and reputation of our organization. Etiquette is more about attitude than about formal rules. That attitude conveys a desire to show others consideration and respect, to make others feel comfortable and care more about their happiness than your own.

Here are a few simple pointers to keep in mind:

Use polite words

Be generous with words and phrases such as *please, thank you and you're welcome.*

Express sincere appreciation and praise

Tell coworkers how much you appreciate their efforts.

Be selective in sharing personal information

Avoid talking about health concerns, personal relationships or finances at the office.

Don't put people down

If you have a reputation for criticizing people, your coworkers will begin to wonder what you are saying behind their back.

Rise above other's rudeness

Don't use profanity or participate in questionable joke telling.

Be considerate when sharing space and equipment

Clean up after yourself.

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Choose the high road in conflict

Avoid letting discussions degenerate into shouting matches.

Disagree agreeably

You may not agree with everyone, but you should respect their opinions.

Without a solid set of rules to follow, determining the right thing to do is not always easy. Establishing an organizational code of ethics is not only important, but essential to your success.

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