2.5: Organizational Communication Ethics

Learning Objectives

- Explain Reinsh’s (1990) nine basic ethical findings in organizational communication.
- Differentiate among the components of Redding’s (1996) typology of unethical organizational communication.
- Understand the four phases of the feminist perspective of organizational communication ethics proposed by Mattson and Buzzanell (1999).
- Describe why Montgomery and DeCaro (2001) believe that human performance improvement can help organizations in improving organizational communication ethics.
- Assess the implementation of an organizational communication ethics intervention using a human performance improvement model.

The preponderance of everyday problems that plague all organizations is either problems that are patently ethical or moral in nature, or they are problems in which deeply embedded ethical issues can be identified. And this proposition is ethically significant, of course, when we recall the axiom that communication is a prerequisite for the very existence of any organization. (Redding, 1996, p. 18).

W. Charles Redding published this statement in a book he wrote about organizational communication ethics shortly before his death. While Redding did not believe that organizational communication students and researchers need to become trained ethicists, he did believe that anyone studying organizational communication should have a working knowledge of the differing theoretical perspectives of ethics (as were proposed earlier in this chapter). Redding’s call for increased attention to ethics includes four basic questions:

1. “What messages or other communication events are perceived by which perceivers as unethical?”
2. “Why? That is, what criteria are cited for making specific ethical evaluations?”
3. “In what respects do these criteria appear to be grounded in organizational (or other) cultures?”
4. “What are the consequences of unethical communication? What, in other words, are the relationships between unethical communication and other organizational and societal phenomena?” (Redding, 1996, p. 24).

Redding’s four questions are very similar to the list Johannesen, Valde, and Whedbee (2008) provided for examining human communication as a general construct. Seeger (2001) noted that applying ethics in the organizational communication context, “focuses on norms and guidelines of professional practice, methodologies for promoting ethical decision-making, various codes of conduct and how these function to promote discussion, informal decisions, and resolve practical ethical problems” (18). To help us achieve Seeger’s concept of applied organizational communication ethics, the rest of this section will focus on Reinsh’s (1990) nine basic ethical findings in organizational communication, Redding’s (1996) typology of unethical organizational communication, Mattson and Buzzanell’s (1999) extension of Redding’s Typology, and Montgomery and DeCaro’s (2001) ethical performance improvement perspective.

Reinsh’s Nine Basic Ethical Findings in Organizational Communication

In 1990, Reinsh examined the state of ethics research in business communication by examining the empirical research conducted on this subject. Based on his analysis of 28 different research articles, Reinsh found nine basic areas of agreement:

1. Communication behaviors vary in moral worth, and various groups (e.g., advertising executives, general public) demonstrate a relatively high level of consensus about the moral weight of many specific practices.
2. Blatantly unethical behaviors sometimes occur in business organizations.
3. Unethical business communication can be effective in the short run.
4. A person’s behavior is related to his or her ethical beliefs.
5. The concept of business communication ethics is relevant to many different aspects of business including direct mail marketing, management, and consulting.
6. The concept of business communication ethics is related to other significant concepts such as honesty and trust.
7. Persons differ in ethical values, beliefs and behaviors, and the differences may be associated with variables such as gender, age, perceptions of an employer as typical or “generous,” and the values, beliefs and behaviors of one’s cohorts.
8. Ethical analysis in business communication has sometimes been impressionistic; consistent, careful attention to the work of ethicists in other fields (e.g., philosophy, interpersonal communication) is desirable.
9. Business communication ethics should encompass oral communication as well as written. (p. 265)

In light of the earlier discussions in this chapter, the majority of this list is consistent with other perspectives on ethics. However, there is one major idea in this list that had not been previously discussed in this chapter. Reinsh concluded that sometimes unethical communicative behavior can be effective in the short-run. If unethical behavior was never effective, there would be no reason for anyone to engage in unethical behavior. The simple fact is, quite often unethical behavior can help people get ahead in life and in business. Reinsh noted that individuals interested in organizational communication ethics tend to agree that unethical behavior is effective in the short-run, but there is disagreement about the effectiveness of unethical behavior in the long-run. Basically, the longer someone engages in unethical communicative behavior, the greater the likelihood that others will start to notice, thus establishing clear
diminishing returns to unethical behavior (to use an economics term).

Redding’s Typology of Unethical Organizational Communication

As part of Redding’s (1996) call for the field of organizational communication to “wake up” and start studying ethics, he created a basic typology of unethical organizational communication. The resulting typology consisted of six general categories: coercive, destructive, deceptive, intrusive, secretive, and manipulative-exploitative.

Coercive

The first category of unethical organizational communication discussed by Redding (1996) is coercive acts. He defined coercive acts as:

…communication events or behavior reflecting abuses of power or authority resulting in the diminishing of another person’s autonomy. This includes: intolerance of dissent, restrictions of freedom of speech; refusal to listen; resorting to formal rules and regulations to stifle discussion or to squash complaints, and so on. (pp. 27–28)

When one looks at this list of unethical communicative behaviors, the clear pattern of supervisor abuse of power is evident. In essence, the supervisor is either preventing messages from being sent by her or his subordinates or is refusing to attend to messages that her or his subordinates are sending. Notice that this process is being done mindfully on the part of the supervisor, which goes back to the intent issue raised by Andersen (2001) and McCroskey (2006).

Destructive

The second category of unethical organizational communication discussed by Redding (1996) is destructive acts. He defined destructive acts as:

Communication events or behavior attack receivers’ self-esteem, reputation, or deeply held feelings; reflecting indifference toward, or content for, basic values of others. This includes: insults, derogatory innuendoes, epithets, jokes (especially those based on gender, race, sex, religion, or ethnicity); put-downs; back-stabbing; character-assassination; and so on. It also includes the use of “truth” as a weapon (as in revealing confidential information to unauthorized persons, or in using alleged “openness” as a façade to conceal the launching of personal attacks. It also can include silence: failure to provide expected feedback (especially recognition of good work), so that message senders (e.g. managers) are perceived as being cold, impersonal, unfeeling, self-centered, and so on. (pp. 28–29)

When looking at Redding’s explanation of destructive communicative acts, there are clearly two parts: aggressive communication and use of information. The first part of his definition focuses on how individuals can use aggressive forms of communication in an attempt to make others feel inferior. These types of communicative acts are commonly
referred to as verbally aggressive acts and we will explore them in more detail in Chapter 15. The second aspect of destructive communication is about how people use information within an organization. Information is commonly seen as a commodity in many organizations, so the hoarding of information as well as using information in manipulative manners is quite common. This category is similar to the fifth typology of business ethics created by J.O. Cherrington and D. J. Cherrington (1992). Issues related to destructive uses of information will be explored in more detail in Chapter 5.

Deceptive

The third category of unethical organizational communication discussed by Redding (1996) is deceptiveCategory of unethical acts desribed by W. Charles Redding (1996) that describes communication events or behavior reflecting a willful perversion of the truth in order to deceive, cheat, or defraud. acts. He defined deceptive acts as:

…communication events or behavior reflecting a “willful perversion of the truth in order to deceive, cheat, or defraud” (Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, 1998, s.v. “dishonesty”). This includes: evasive or deliberately misleading messages, which in turn includes equivocation (i.e., the deliberate use of ambiguity) …; also bureaucratic-style euphemisms designed to cover up defects, to conceal embarrassing deeds, or to “prettify” unpleasant facts. (p. 30).

In this category of unethical behavior, we have non-truthful and misleading messages. The first part of this definition examines how some individuals lie in order to get what they want at work. The second part of the definition examines how some individuals within organizations use messages in order to alter a receiver’s perception of reality. The messages, in this case, are not explicitly not-true, but are manipulated in a fashion to alter how receivers interpret those messages. This category encompasses the second and third categories of J.O. Cherrington and D. J. Cherrington's (1992) typology of business ethics.

Intrusive

The fourth category of unethical organizational communication discussed by Redding (1996) is intrusiveCategory of unethical acts desribed by W. Charles Redding (1996) that describes communication events or behavior that are used by someone in attempt to monitor another person. acts. He defined intrusive acts as:

…communication behavior that is characteristically initiated by message receivers. For example,…the use of hidden cameras, the tapping of telephones, and the application of computer technologies to the monitoring of employee behavior; in other words, surveillance. The fundamental issue, of course, revolves around the meaning and legitimacy of “privacy rights.” (p. 31)

The issue of intrusion has become important in the 21st Century because modern technology has made intrusion into individuals’ private lives very easy. Whether potential employers are looking at your private Facebook information prior to interviewing you or employers install software on your computer that monitors every key stroke you make, corporate “big-brother” is definitely watching you. According to a 2005 survey conducted by the American Management AssociationAMA E-Policy Institute. (2005). 2005 electronic monitoring and surveillance survey. American Management Association. Retrieved from: http://www.amanet.org, 36% of respondents had some amount of monitoring of their computer key-strokes by their organizations and 50% of respondents had some or all of their computer files monitored by their organizations. 76% of respondents noted that their workplace monitored their internet activity. In fact, 26% of the
respondents indicated that their organizations had fired workers for misusing the internet and another 25% had terminated employees for e-mail misuse. Corporate intrusion does not stop with computer activity. 3% of the respondents said that all of the employees in their organization have their telephone calls recorded while 19% said that only selected job categories had their telephone calls recorded. Some companies go so far as to track their employee’s physical whereabouts via global positioning systems and satellite technology in company vehicles (8%), company cell phones (5%), and employee identification cards (8%). We should mention that there are court cases within the United States that have legalized all of these processes without requiring a forewarning to employees. In the European Union, however, employees must be notified prior to monitoring, but organizations can still legally monitor their employees.

**Secreteive**

The fifth category of unethical organizational communication discussed by Redding (1996) is secretive that describes communication events or behavior that is undisclosed even when disclosing the information could be in an organization’s best interest. He defined secretive acts as:

…various forms of nonverbal communication, especially (of course) silence and including unresponsiveness. It includes such behaviors as hoarding information (I call this “culpable silence when someone purposefully prevents information from being given to receivers who need the information.”) and sweeping under the rug information that, if revealed, would expose wrongdoing or ineptness on the part of individuals in positions of power. (p. 32)

In essence, this category is a further break down of J.O. Cherrington and D. J. Cherrington’s (1992) fifth category of business ethics. However, Redding goes further than J.O. Cherrington and D. J. Cherrington by noting that even nonverbal unresponsiveness can be a form of unethical communication. For example, if the sender of the message purposefully manipulates her or his nonverbal behavior in an attempt to skew how a receiver interprets a message, then the sender of the message is preventing the receiver from completely and accurately interpreting the message. Furthermore, Redding believes that many employees engage in culpable silence, which occurs when someone purposefully prevents information from being given to receivers who need the information. While culpable silence is not lying in the strictest of senses, culpable silence is clearly a version of deception.

**Manipulative-Exploitative**

The final category of unethical organizational communication discussed by Redding (1996) is manipulative-exploitative that describes communication events or behavior that takes place when the source purposefully prevents the receiver from knowing the source’s actual intentions behind a communicative message. He defined manipulative-exploitative acts as those where the source purposefully prevents the receiver from knowing the source’s actual intentions behind a communicative message. A term that Redding finds closely related to these unethical acts is demagoguery:

Of central importance is the notion that a demagogue is one who, without concern for the best interests of the audience, seeks to gain compliance by exploiting people’s fears, prejudices, or areas of ignorance.
variant of, demagoguery is the utterance of messages that reflect a patronizing or condescending attitude toward the audience—an unstated assumption that audience members are dull-witted, or immature, or both. (pp. 33–34)

As you will learn in Chapter 3, much of the early writing on how managers should interact with their employees centered on the clearly manipulate-exploitative organization.

Mattson and Buzzanell’s Feminist Organizational Communication Ethic

In 1999, Mattson and Buzzanell used Redding’s (1996) Mattson, M., & Buzzanell, P. M. (1999). Traditional and feminist organizational communication ethical analyses of messages and issues surrounding an actual job loss case. Journal of Applied Communication Research, 27, 49–72. organizational communication ethic typology to analyze a specific case study. Through using the specific case, Mattson and Buzzanell came to believe that Redding’s “system is linked to managerialist outcomes of individual and organizational effectiveness (i.e., to communicate unethically would create situations in which managers do not receive crucial information and would leave the firm vulnerable to productivity problems, strikes, and litigation)” (p. 62). Mattson and Buzzanell believe that some individuals would focus primarily on Redding’s categories and not see the possible positive outcomes of some of the unethical communicative behavior. In essence, is there ever a time when deception is ethical and profitable? For this reason, Mattson and Buzzanell followed Steiner’s (1997)Steiner, L. (1997). A feminist schema for analysis of ethical dilemmas. In F. L. Casmir (Ed.), Ethics in intercultural and international communication (pp. 59–88). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. approach to understanding feminist ethical dilemmas. Mattson and Buzzanell opted for the feminist ethical approach because feminist ethics “differ from other ethical approaches in their vigilance toward a vision of value transformation (equitable power sharing and decision making) and instance on present community (meaning that “doing” ethics involves being a part of the envisioning and struggling)” (p. 62). We should note that the Mattson and Buzzanell perspective clearly falls in line with the critical perspective of organizational communication research discussed in Chapter 1. Ultimately, Mattson and Buzzanell created a four phase framework for ethical analysis.

Definition of the Situation

The first phase of Mattson and Buzzanell’s (1999) framework for ethical analysis is the definition of the situation. Mattson and Buzzanell explain what occurs in this phase when they write “identification of problematic ethical issues in context; description of power struggles, particularly those cause by gender imbalances; attempts to silence and marginalize vulnerable individuals and groups” (p. 63). The first phase of this framework focusses specifically on ethical dilemmas and then examines how some people within the dilemma are being subjugated by those with power. One of the fundamental issues in critical theory is the innate existence of power imbalances within organizations. Therefore, finding where these imbalances exist is important for determining ethical behavior.

Values and Ideals

The second phase of Mattson and Buzzanell’s (1999) framework for ethical analysis is examining values and ideals. Mattson and Buzzanell explain what occurs in this phase when they write “identification of feminist values and ideals relevant to a particular case: voice, community, and fairness” (p. 63). Voice is “the ability both to construct and articulate knowledge and to make choices and act in situations” (Mattson & Buzzanell, 1999, p. 64). In essence, this perspective
believes that any time an individual is forced to withhold her or his opinion, knowledge, and perspectives, her or his voice is being muted by those individuals with power, and thus creates an unethical situation.

The second value discussed by Mattson and Buzzanell is community, which recognizes that “there are diverse standpoints but common issues—commitment to multiple stakeholders, caring behaviors, and community-maintaining strategies.” These commitments to others, self, values, and to the organization “challenge members to engage in authentic dialogue” (p. 65). Unethical communicative behaviors that would violate the standard of community standards include messages that “maintain boundaries, trivialize or diminish others contributions (e.g., humor, put-downs, terms of address), patronize individuals, and exclude members from participating in discussions about organizational concerns” (p. 65).

The final feminist value is that of fairness, or how the decision making process influences all stakeholders involved. According to Mattson and Buzzanell, “Decision making that does not contribute to the empowerment of marginalized persons and to the visibility of power imbalances is unethical” (p. 66).

**Ethical Principle**

The third phase of Mattson and Buzzanell’s (1999) framework for ethical analysis is applying the ethical principle. Mattson and Buzzanell explain what occurs in this phase when they write “inclusion of emotion in ethical considerations; refusal to develop or use single rules for identifying and resolving ethical dilemmas; utilization of values and ideas that empower, give voice, and emancipate people” (p. 63). According to Steiner (1997), “feminist inquiry is generally unsympathetic to rule-based ethical theories or theories that—as they usually do—exclude consideration of emotion” (p. 74). Mattson and Buzzanell argue that it is important to include individual’s emotional responses when thinking about ethical dilemmas because “these responses indicate what people care about and might be willing to change” (p. 66). In the end, many aspects of organizational life are accompanied with complex emotions, which should be considered when examining the ethical nature of organizational communication.

**Development of a Solution**

The final phase of Mattson and Buzzanell’s (1999) framework for ethical analysis is developing a solution. Mattson and Buzzanell explain what occurs in this phase when they write “reanalysis of options so that those most vulnerable entail the least harm; exclusion of alternatives based on ethical principles and probable harm to major stakeholders” (p. 63). The first part of this phase is the generation of possible solutions. At this point, all solutions are taken seriously. However, once the different solutions have been proposed, the next step is to eliminate any solutions that either violate ethical principles or could cause harm to vulnerable stakeholders. The differing solutions should then be analyzed in terms of both stakeholder needs and corporate success.

While the Mattson and Buzzanell (1999) four phase framework for organizational communication ethical analysis is theoretically intriguing, we are still left with ambiguity about the difference between ethical vs. unethical behavior. On the other hand, if Redding’s (1996) typology of unethical organizational communication behavior is concrete, we are still left with an absolutist perspective on ethics that may not always match the intent of the source. Unfortunately, this is the nature of ethics; there will always be ambiguity when examining and understanding ethics. The final section of this chapter proposes a brief process that can be implemented when attempting to increase ethical communication within an
Montgomery and DeCaro’s (2001) Ethical Performance Improvement Perspective

While the previous section introduced you to both concrete and abstract views of determining the ethicality of organizational communication, this section will examine a perspective on increasing ethical organizational communication as proposed by Montgomery and DeCaro (2001). Montgomery and DeCaro proposed that one of the best ways increasing organizational communication ethics is to use a human performance improvement approach. “Ethical problems or dilemmas have behavioral consequences. Analysis can measure and monitor the behaviors leading to the unethical act, or the act, itself. By analyzing the antecedents and consequences, they can then design an intervention to correct the behavior” (32). Often, human performance interventions related to ethics happen in hindsight: an ethical violation occurs first and then the human performance improvement experts backtrack to determine how and why the ethical violation occurred. At other times, human performance interventions related to ethics start with a code of ethics (e.g., National Communication Association’s Ethical Credo in Note 2.22 "National Communication Association Credo for Ethical Communication" or the International Association of Business Communicators Code of Ethics in Note 2.35 "International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) Code of Ethics") and then follow with suggestions for action in order to ensure that the ethical codes are followed.

International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) Code of Ethics

Preface

Because hundreds of thousands of business communicators worldwide engage in activities that affect the lives of millions of people, and because this power carries with it significant social responsibilities, the International Association of Business Communicators developed the Code of Ethics for Professional Communicators.

The Code is based on three different yet interrelated principles of professional communication that apply throughout the world.

These principles assume that just societies are governed by a profound respect for human rights and the rule of law; that ethics, the criteria for determining what is right and wrong, can be agreed upon by members of an organization; and, that understanding matters of taste requires sensitivity to cultural norms.

These principles are essential:

- Professional communication is legal.
- Professional communication is ethical.
- Professional communication is in good taste.

Recognizing these principles, members of IABC will:

- Engage in communication that is not only legal but also ethical and sensitive to cultural values and beliefs;
- Engage in truthful, accurate and fair communication that facilitates respect and mutual understanding;
• Adhere to the following articles of the IABC Code of Ethics for Professional Communicators.

Because conditions in the world are constantly changing, members of IABC will work to improve their individual competence and to increase the body of knowledge in the field with research and education.

Articles

1. Professional communicators uphold the credibility and dignity of their profession by practicing honest, candid and timely communication and by fostering the free flow of essential information in accord with the public interest.
2. Professional communicators disseminate accurate information and promptly correct any erroneous communication for which they may be responsible.
3. Professional communicators understand and support the principles of free speech, freedom of assembly, and access to an open marketplace of ideas and act accordingly.
4. Professional communicators are sensitive to cultural values and beliefs and engage in fair and balanced communication activities that foster and encourage mutual understanding.
5. Professional communicators refrain from taking part in any undertaking which the communicator considers to be unethical.
6. Professional communicators obey laws and public policies governing their professional activities and are sensitive to the spirit of all laws and regulations and, should any law or public policy be violated, for whatever reason, act promptly to correct the situation.
7. Professional communicators give credit for unique expressions borrowed from others and identify the sources and purposes of all information disseminated to the public.
8. Professional communicators protect confidential information and, at the same time, comply with all legal requirements for the disclosure of information affecting the welfare of others.
9. Professional communicators do not use confidential information gained as a result of professional activities for personal benefit and do not represent conflicting or competing interests without written consent of those involved.
10. Professional communicators do not accept undisclosed gifts or payments for professional services from anyone other than a client or employer.
11. Professional communicators do not guarantee results that are beyond the power of the practitioner to deliver.
12. Professional communicators are honest not only with others but also, and most importantly, with themselves as individuals; for a professional communicator seeks the truth and speaks that truth first to the self.

Source: www.iabc.com/about/code.htm

According to Beich, Holloway, and McGraw (2006), human performance improvement results-based, systematic process used to identify performance problems, analyze root causes, select and design actions, manage workplace solutions, measure results, and continually improve performance within an organization’s code of ethics applies to them? Do they know what to do if they become aware of a violation of the code...
of ethics? Does the organization’s code of ethics meet accepted standards? Does a code of ethics even exist?"

According to Willmore (2004) Willmore, J. (2004). *Performance basics*. Alexandria, VA: American Society for Training and Development. HPI professionals commonly take on four basic roles: analyst, intervention specialist, change manager, and evaluator. The first role an HPI professional takes on is that of analystRole taken on by a human performance improvement specialist when he or she helps determine relevant gaps that exist in individuals’ behavior, knowledge, and/or attitudes, which helps determine relevant gaps that exist in individuals’ behavior, knowledge, and/or attitudes. When determining relevant gaps in behavior, knowledge, and/or attitudes, an HPI professional must first make sure that the analyzed gaps adhere to the organization’s larger goals and values. If the identified gaps do not coincide with the organization’s goals and values, the HPI professional will have a much harder time attempting to achieve buy-in later on in the improvement process. For example, if an HPI professional is working to improve organizational communication ethics, the individual would start by analyzing any ethical lapses in organizational communication and where the organization should be in terms of ethical communication. In addition to determining what the knowledge and behavioral gaps are, the HPI professional needs to determine what the causes of the gaps are. For example, people in the organization communicating may be engaging in an unethical manner because they are unfamiliar with the organization’s code of conduct. Another possibility is that people may be communicating unethically because the organization rewards them for success and not ethics. A last possibility is that people may communicate unethically because they do not have a predisposition towards ethical communication. Depending on which root-cause an HPI practitioner finds, the resulting intervention strategy will differ.

Once an analysis has been completed, the HPI professional slips into the second role or the intervention specialistRole taken on by a human performance improvement specialist when he or she determines what would be the most appropriate method for getting the organization to its goal or decreasing the performance gap.. In the intervention specialist role, the HPI professional determines what would be the most appropriate method for getting the organization to either reach its goal or to at least decrease a performance gap. Generally, it is important for the HPI professional to have expertise in the area of interest or to consult with subject matter experts. For example, if you are a student of organizational communication, you would be ideally situated to help an organization think through its intervention if the topic related to organizational communication. Some common types of interventions include training, the creation of employee policies and procedures, process mapping, etc. For the purpose of organizational communication ethics, the intervention may come via training in organizational communication ethics or developing an organization-wide code of organizational communication ethics.

The third role an HPI professional takes on is that of change manager. A change managerRole taken on by a human performance improvement specialist when he or she coordinates implementation and execution of solutions while building buy-in and support from all levels of an organization’s hierarchy. “coordinates implementation and roll out of solutions, especially complex or big efforts that may involve multiple initiatives. A change manager also works to build buy-in and support” (Willmore, 2004, p. 20). In the interventionist role, the HPI professional determines what should be done, in the change manager role the HPI professional actually implements the intervention. One of the most important aspects of this phase is getting buy-in from the people who matter within the organization. If an HPI professional
attempts to roll-out a new code of organizational communication ethics while top management does not support the new
code, the intervention will never take hold and will eventually fail. For this reason, it is very important for HPI
professionals to first ascertain which stakeholders must support the intervention and then get that support prior to rolling-
out an intervention.

The last role an HPI professional inhabits is that of evaluatorRole taken on by a human performance improvement
specialist when he or she: (1) examines if intervention is actually improving performance, and (2) demonstrates the
effectiveness of the intervention to the organization.. Interventions can be very useful, but the success of the intervention
must also be determined. HPI professionals must evaluate the intervention for two reasons: to improve the intervention
and to determine organizational value. The first reason HPI professionals must evaluate an intervention is to determine
whether or not the intervention is actually improving performance. For example, if you measure an organizational
communication ethics intervention and find that people are just as unethical in their communication as they were before
the intervention, the intervention has not worked and must be reevaluated. In this case, the data that you gather about
the intervention can help the HPI professional make changes to improve the next the intervention. Often interventions
are organic and change periodically in order to keep us with changing human performance. This can only be determined
by evaluating interventions. The second reason HPI professionals should evaluate an intervention is to demonstrate the
effectiveness of the intervention to the organization. In world that is marked by discussions of “the bottom-line,” most
aspects of the modern organization need to clearly demonstrate a return on investment, including how the time and
money spent on an intervention actually helped the organization.

Now that the basics of Human Performance Improvement have been discussed, we can articulate a basic model for
improving organizational communication ethics within an organization (Figure 2.2). The following model is based on both
the American Society for Training and Development’s (ASTD) HPI Model and the International Society for Performance
Improvement’s (ISPI) Human Performance Technology Model (for a description of both models, see Rothwell,
(2nd ed.). Alexandria, VA: ASTD Press..

Figure 2.2 Human Performance Improvement Model

Key Takeaways

- Reinsh’s (1990) developed nine basic ethical findings in organizational communication: (1) communication
  behaviors vary in moral worth, (2) unethical behaviors sometimes occur in organizations, (3) unethical
  communication can be effective in the short run, (4) a person’s behavior is related to her or his ethical beliefs, (5)
  communication ethics is relevant to a wide range of business activities, (6) there are many closely related concepts
  to ethics (e.g., honesty, trust, etc.), (7) persons differ in ethical values, beliefs and behaviors and these differences
  can be culturally based, (8) studying communication ethics must involving looking at how other fields discuss ethics,
  and (9) communication ethics is concerned with both oral and written communication.

- Redding’s (1996) typology of unethical organizational communication consists of six distinct types of communicative
  acts: (1) coercive, abuse of power or authority; (2) destructive, behavior that attacks a receiver; (3) deceptive,
  behavior that is intentionally false; (4) intrusive, monitoring behavior; (5) secretive, purposefully not disclosing
  information; and (6) manipulative-exploitative, .

- Mattson and Buzzanell (1999) proposed that organizational communication should be examined through four basic
  phases. First, you should define the situation by identifying ethical issues in context. Second, examine values
  (voice, community, & fairness) and ideals. Third, apply the ethical principle while paying attention to a person’s
  emotional reaction. Last, develop a solution paying special attention that vulnerable people are least effected.

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Montgomery and DeCaro’s (2001) argue that human performance improvement can help organizations with improving organizational communication ethics because this perspective is designed to help organizations systemically think through change.

The Human Performance Improvement (HPI) Model provides organizations with a specific and systematic tool for determining the effectiveness of organizational change. When applied to changing an organization’s approach to ethical communication, the model can help ensure that the project is analyzed, articulated, and evaluated to ensure the best results possible for an organization.

Exercises

1. In today’s world of social media and technological advances in human communication, are Reinsh’s (1990) nine basic ethical findings in organizational communication still applicable? Why or why not?

2. Thinking about your own organization, which of Redding’s (1996) typology of unethical organizational communication do you think is the most common? If you were the top leader in your organization, how would you go about stopping this specific lapse in ethical communication?

3. Look at a recent copy of Business Week, The Wall Street Journal, Fast Company, Forbes Magazine, or another business-oriented publication. Look for a discussion of an issue that has ethical overtones and then walk through Mattson and Buzzanell’s (1999) four phases of feminist thinking when determining a specific solution. How do you think Mattson and Buzzanell’s (1999) four phases would lead you to different decisions than if you took a more traditional stance on decision making?

4. Using an organization that you belong to, think about a specific business or communication ethical dilemma your organization is facing. Walk through the Human Performance Improvement Model and think about how you could implement a change in your organization’s thinking about ethics.