

A matter of values

Level: Upper intermediate +

Time: 90 minutes +

Summary: This lesson is about the importance of ethical behaviour. In this lesson, students:

1. study an article in which a communications expert discusses what constitutes unethical behaviour in a business context and what employees can do to behave ethically;
2. complete a summary of the article;
3. discuss the role of ethics in their own working environments.

Materials: One copy of the worksheet per student; one copy of the language reference section per student (optional)

Group size: Any

Note: This lesson plan is for both pre-experience and in-work business students based on an original article first published in *Business Spotlight* issue 5/2016. This is a shortened version.

Warmer

In pairs, students complete the definition, in written or spoken form. After they have done this, get them to read the paragraph entitled 'The meaning of "ethics"' in the article and compare their definition with the author's.

Key words

The students match the key words with the definitions. Then, they scan the article to find the words, check their answers and see how the words are used in context. Note that the definitions for the words are given in the order the words appear in the article.

Key:

- | | |
|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. <i>define</i> | 9. <i>misinterpret</i> |
| 2. <i>fundamental</i> | 10. <i>reformulate</i> |
| 3. <i>prohibited</i> | 11. <i>withhold</i> |
| 4. <i>credit</i> | 12. <i>compromise</i> |
| 5. <i>disturb</i> | 13. <i>circumstances</i> |
| 6. <i>blame</i> | 14. <i>bear</i> |
| 7. <i>present</i> | 15. <i>absenteeism</i> |
| 8. <i>accountable</i> | 16. <i>imperative</i> |

Understanding the article

Students use ten of the key words from task 2 to complete the sentences, changing the form of the words if necessary.

Extend the task by asking them to make further (similar) statements about the article and its content.

Key:

- | | |
|------------------------|--------------------|
| 1. <i>define</i> | 6. <i>present</i> |
| 2. <i>absenteeism</i> | 7. <i>disturbs</i> |
| 3. <i>fundamental</i> | 8. <i>credit</i> |
| 4. <i>misinterpret</i> | 9. <i>withhold</i> |
| 5. <i>reformulate</i> | |

Expressions with role

Students scan the article to find three expressions that contain the word *role*. Then, they talk about what the author means by explaining each point in their own words and possibly rewriting the sentences.

Key:

1. *play a role – influence a situation*
2. *own-role – benefitting yourself and your position*
3. *step into the role of another person – take on another person's responsibilities and do their job*

Extension: Find out if the students know any other phrases that contain the word *role*, for example *be a positive role model* and *have the starring role (in a film)*.

Discussion

Students discuss the questions in groups and then provide feedback to the whole class.

Case study: a problem with sales

Students read the case study, then discuss their answers to the questions in small groups. Get feedback from each group. Discuss their opinions, what advice they might give Petra and whether they have ever encountered a situation like this.

The author of the article, Bob Dignan, offers this feedback:

The following comments are provided as food for thought. Different interpretations are, of course, possible.

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What do you think of Petra's communication with Mike? How far does it live up to the principles discussed in this article? What advice would you give her?

Petra's message is deeply problematic in many ways. She clearly blames Henry and assumes that his motives are selfish and negative – and this affects her ability to do her job. And she has decided on a course of action that will lead to confrontation. Petra fails the test of ethical communication in many ways, which could affect the organization negatively.

What do you think of Mike's response to Petra? Does it live up to the principles discussed in this article? What advice would you give him?

Mike also fails the test of ethical communication. He falls into the role of co-conspirator against Henry. He accepts all of Petra's assumptions, including her story that Henry is to blame and is acting unethically. As a result, he recommends a form of confrontational escalation. Mike fails to challenge Petra and encourage her to see that she and Henry have a joint interest in the client or to encourage her to consider her own potential responsibility. Maybe the reason that Henry doesn't consult Petra – if it is true that he doesn't – is his feeling that Petra has an aggressive attitude towards him. Mike could advise Petra against using a "blame approach" and challenge her to reflect more carefully on what happened and why. He could encourage her to be open and curious about Henry's behaviour and to make positive assumptions about Henry's motivation. And Mike could push Petra towards a constructive conversation with Henry to discuss how sales and IT can work together more effectively for the customer.

How would you advise Petra to communicate in her meeting with Henry? What might she say in the first five minutes?

Petra could apply the five ethical communication principles mentioned in the article:

Joint interest: Petra could begin by stating that the objective of the meeting is to clarify how they can best collaborate and serve the customer.

Sensitivity: Petra could express appreciation for the role of sales and state explicitly that the conversation is not about reducing this role.

Curiosity: Petra could ask questions to clarify what Henry has done and why he has done it.

Openness: Petra could be open with Henry about the effects of his actions on her and her department.

Responsibility: Petra could accept some responsibility for not having discussed this problem sooner, even though she told Mike that it has happened before.

Language reference

Encourage students to read through the example sentences with their partner and clear up any uncertainties over meaning. You could then ask students to role play the conversation between Petra and Henry using some of the language from the language reference section.

Related topics on onestopenglish

The following Business Spotlight lesson also deals with the subject of ethics:

www.onestopenglish.com/business/business-spotlight/money-or-morals/554993.article

This Spotlight lesson is on the related topic of whether it's acceptable to lie in job interviews.

www.onestopenglish.com/business/business-spotlight/is-it-ever-ok-to-lie-in-a-job-interview/

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1 Warmer

a. What does the word *ethics* mean to you? Complete the definition.

- Ethics are ...

b. Now read the paragraph entitled 'The meaning of "ethics"':

2 Key words

Match the key words to the definitions below. Then, find them in the article to read them in context.

absenteeism	accountable	bear	blame
circumstances	compromise	credit	define
disturb	fundamental	imperative	misinterpret
present	prohibited	reformulate	withhold

- describe clearly and exactly what something is _____
- relating to the basic nature or character of something _____
- not allowed _____
- praise for something you have done or achieved _____
- upset and worry someone a lot _____
- say or think that someone or something is responsible for a bad situation _____
- at an event or in a place _____
- in a position where people have the right to criticize you or ask you why something happened _____
- understand or explain something wrongly _____
- express something in a different way or using different words _____
- deliberately not give something to someone _____
- risk harming or losing something important _____
- facts or conditions that affect a situation _____
- carry; have _____
- the habit of not being at work when you should be, usually without a good reason _____
- something that is very important and urgent _____

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Bob Dignen

Excellent communication is essential for the success of a company and the happiness of its employees. Bob Dignen explains the principles behind it and the effect it has.



When we talk about good and bad business communication, we normally think in terms of effectiveness. Was the speaker clear? Was the presentation well structured? Was the right decision reached at the end of the meeting? But we can also look at communication from an ethical perspective and at the benefits this can bring.

THE MEANING OF “ETHICS”

Ethics is a complex term. It is about what is right and wrong from a moral perspective and also about rules that define how human beings should interact. And many of these fundamental rules are similar across cultures. They deal with the need to act beyond self-interest, to act with consideration and respect for others' feelings and rights, and to avoid forms of behaviour that are socially disapproved of or legally prohibited.

UNETHICAL BEHAVIOUR

There are many forms of behaviour that we may regard as unethical. Look at the following categories of behaviour.

1. Acting selfishly, not doing as much work as others or choosing simple tasks rather than difficult ones. Doing more work than others so you can get more credit. Prioritizing your own targets over those of others. Reading non-urgent emails on your mobile phone rather than talking to people when in social situations. Insisting on your own way of doing things rather than doing things the way others prefer – for example, when to start a meeting or which restaurant to go to.
2. Causing distress or harm to others. Putting unreasonable pressure on others. Communicating in a way that disturbs others (for example, by being impolite, disrespectful or authoritarian). Making others feel worthless by not listening or by interrupting or contradicting. Being excessively critical or blaming others. Showing emotions such as impatience, irritation or anger towards other people. Causing others to feel impatience, irritation, anger, anxiety or fear.
3. Using socially “outlawed” behaviour, gossiping negatively or spreading rumours about colleagues or business partners who are not present. Complaining about others who are not present to defend themselves. Lying or claiming

someone else's ideas as your own. Cheating or bribing. Manipulating others for your own interests. Bullying, intimidating or threatening others. Letting someone fail when you could have helped. Injuring someone physically or psychologically.

THE PROBLEM WITH ETHICS

Listing unethical behaviours is relatively easy. But committing to act ethically at work is more difficult. The pressure to be successful and profitable is often so great that people's ability and willingness to communicate sensitively and fairly is reduced. A number of other factors also play a role here: people often separate their “private self” from their “work self”. The large size of many organizations makes it easier for individuals to become less accountable for their actions. The leadership culture of many large organizations does not encourage open and ethical communication and behaviour. People working internationally may also misinterpret the behaviour of others as negative and unethical, even when these people believed they were acting ethically.

FIVE PRINCIPLES OF ETHICAL COMMUNICATION

Ethical behaviour comes from having clear values and principles. These inform the choices we make: whether or not we communicate in specific situations, what we say and how we say it. Here are five principles that could help you to communicate more ethically at work.

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A matter of values (continued)

1. Acting with joint interest

Giving up “own-role” orientated behaviour is a key component of ethically based communication in organizations. For example, rather than simply focusing on your own objectives during presentations and discussions, show your willingness to explore joint interests and their benefits for others. In this process, it is important to give others the time to express their interests and to feel confident that they are being taken seriously. This can be explicitly connected to shared values and principles for joint decision-making.

2. Acting with sensitivity

Sensitive communication focuses on managing the emotions of others and practising carefully controlled non-violent communication that does not create negative emotional states, such as anger or fear. This also means being aware of your own emotional state so that you don't transfer your own negativity to others. It is also important to think about people's four core emotional needs:

- a sense of commonality – Use inclusive terms such as the pronoun “we” and talk about things that you have in common and that you share.
- a sense of respect – Communicate your awareness of people's experience and expertise.
- a sense of autonomy – Make sure you don't step into the role of the other person.

- a sense of appreciation – Show this explicitly and thank people for their work and help. Check regularly how others are feeling about your behaviour and apologize immediately if you cause offence unintentionally.

3. Acting with curiosity

It is important to recognize that your views are not the only truth and that other people's ideas deserve your respect and curiosity. Being curious means being truly open. Curiosity is expressed by remaining silent, allowing others to speak, asking questions and encouraging others to say more. Practise asking questions to clarify what others mean. Reformulate their comments to check that you have understood correctly. And ask questions to get people to give you more details about what they are saying. Finally, don't forget to show your appreciation of the points of view that others share.

4. Acting with openness

People often withhold information that others have a right to know or they keep quiet about things for their own advantage. After all, knowledge is power. But ethical communicators make a commitment to share information as much as is possible. Of course, management responsibility or a conflict of loyalties may compromise our ability to share information. But we can still be open about reasons for not doing so – for example, because someone has explicitly asked us not to share information. We

also need to remember that our words and ideas are often simply opinions from our own perspective rather than facts. Being open about this helps us to be inclusive, collaborative and respectful.

5. Acting with responsibility

Responsibility is central to ethical behaviour. The moment we begin to blame others or circumstances unfairly, we are ignoring our responsibility. Instead, explore and express ways of bearing some responsibility for what happens. This also allows others to take responsibility and to think about their future actions. When problems do arise, we may need to escalate them to someone higher in the organization.

AN IMPERATIVE, NOT A CHOICE

Both organizations and individuals suffer when communication is unethical. Collaboration, motivation and happiness are all affected. Stress, absenteeism and employee turnover increase, causing further costs and reducing effectiveness and efficiency. When we think about it like that, we realize that ethical communication is not an option – it's an imperative.

BOB DIGNEN is a director of York Associates and the author of many books.

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3 Understanding the article

Use the key words from task 2 to complete the summary of the article. Change the form of the words if necessary.

Ethics are the rules that _____ (1) how we communicate and interact. Unethical communication can lead to stress, _____ (2) and an increase in employee turnover.

Many of the _____ (3) rules of ethical communication are similar across cultures. However, it is still easy to _____ (4) the behaviour of people from other countries and cultures. _____ (5) other people's comments to check that you have understood them correctly.

Avoid gossiping or spreading rumours about colleagues who are not _____ (6). Communicating in a way that _____ (7) and distresses others is considered unethical. Trying to get _____ (8) for doing more work than other people is also unethical. Be open and do not _____ (9) information that others have the right to know. Act responsibly and do not blame other people or _____ (10).

4 Phrases with the word *role*

Find three phrases in the article that contain the word *role*. Discuss the meaning of each phrase.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

5 Discussion

- Read the 'unethical behaviour' section again.

Which of the behaviours do you consider unethical? Which do you see in your organization? In which of these ways do you behave yourself? What other unethical behaviours do you see in your organization or in yourself?

- Read the five principles of ethical communication again.

Which principles might you find helpful for your particular personality and situation?

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6 Case study: a problem with sales

Read the case study. Then, discuss your answers to the questions.

What do you think of Petra's communication with Mike? How far does it live up to the principles discussed in this article? What advice would you give her?

What do you think of Mike's response to Petra? How far does it live up to the principles discussed in this article? What advice would you give him?

How would you advise Petra to communicate in her meeting with Henry? What might she say in the first five minutes?

Mike Hurst works as a programmer. His colleague Petra West, with whom he has worked for many years and who has the same job, joins him for lunch but seems unhappy. When Mike asks what the problem is, Petra tells him about a problem with a colleague in sales (Henry Roberts). Henry keeps promising Petra's client more functions and shorter delivery times. And Petra has to deliver at no extra cost. Read part of the dialogue from their lunch conversation and then answer the questions below.

PETRA: You won't believe it. Henry had a meeting with our client yesterday and agreed to cut the implementation time by ten days. I mean, ten days! It's ridiculous. We don't have the resources to do this so it's going to mean working 60-hour weeks for the next month.

MIKE: Typical.

PETRA: You know, he's always doing this – going behind my back, trying to make me look like an idiot. I need to talk about this, finally. He just wants sales to look good. Doesn't he trust me? Why doesn't he just ask me? If he acts like this, how can I do my job? I have a meeting with him this afternoon. I know exactly what I'm going to say to him and it's not going to be pretty.

MIKE: I had the same problem last month with Henry. I think you need to take this upstairs – to both bosses. It's not fair that he's causing so many problems for everyone without considering the impact he's having.

PETRA: You know what? I feel better already. I'll do that. Thanks for listening, Mike.

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Language reference: A matter of values

ACTING WITH JOINT INTEREST

What I want to do today is to look at how this can be good for both of us.
So before I start, I would like to take a few minutes to hear how you see things and what you need. In the spirit of collaboration, it's important to me that you feel happy about ...
I suggest that any decision has to be agreed by both parties and ...

ACTING WITH SENSITIVITY

I think we both want to ...
I understand you've been in this role for more than ten years.
Given your expertise, what is your recommendation?
So who do you think should handle this?
You're responsible for this area so do you think it makes sense that ...?
Great job. Thank you!

ACTING WITH CURIOSITY

What do you mean when you say ...?
Why do you say ...?
So you're saying that ...
OK, so from your perspective, it's important to ...
Can you tell me a little more about ...?
So what is your opinion about ... ?
Thanks for sharing that with me. That's an interesting perspective.

ACTING WITH OPENNESS

As far as I know, ...
The information I have is that ...
I'm afraid I can't share that information with you at the moment for legal reasons.
Sorry, Jo asked me not to talk about the project at the moment.
This is just a personal opinion.
My perspective is that ... but I may be wrong.

ACTING WITH RESPONSIBILITY

Perhaps I could have ...
Next time, I'll ...
No, this was my fault. I should have ...
I think I need to escalate this to Sandra to get a decision.
I think we should escalate this together to our managers because ...