

Chapter 1

Communication theory and professional practice

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Case studies and comments

Case study 1.1 - Communication ethics in the professions

Below are extracts from a *Sydney Morning Herald* article titled 'Self-interest detracts from lustre of the professions' and written by Simon Longstaff, executive director of the St James Ethics Centre, Sydney.

the professions are consistently understood as being made up of people who act in a spirit of public service. That is, professionals are supposed to put the interests of the community before self-interest or that of their professional colleagues ... society has agreed to enter into a kind of social compact where it allows professionals certain privileges. These include: the right to carry out certain work forbidden to others, the right to engage in self-regulation, and so on. Far too often has society been left with no alternative but to conclude that its trust has been abused ... there are medical practitioners who have failed to respect the autonomy of their patients, lawyers who have failed to distinguish between the client's interests and wants, and accountants who have operated as 'guns for hire' on the basis that if they don't do the job, then somebody else will. Engineers have sanctioned the application of sub-standard specifications, architects have allowed the public spaces to be polluted and journalists have ignored the truth in favour of a 'good story'. It must surely be time for a deeper debate about the purpose of the professions in society; a time to call the professions to account and give them an opportunity to re-commit to the social compact. It is also a time for them to make serious suggestions about ways in which the community's trust can justifiably be restored.

Source: S. Longstaff (1994), 'Self-interest detracts from lustre of the professions', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 April, p. 17

Discussion

Organise a class discussion of the ethical obligations of professional communication. Refer to the points made in the case study as well as the six-point code listed in the 'Communication code of ethics' section of the chapter. Here are a few possible discussion starters:

- What obligations do professionals in your field have to their profession, their employers, their colleagues, their clients and society as a whole?
- Should their primary obligation be to their organisation and its shareholders in the case of a public company?
- What does Simon Longstaff mean when he talks about 'the social compact'?
- Do professionals guard their 'secrets' from the public? If so, why and how?

- What are some of the effects of unclear communication on both the profession itself and the people who are its clients?

Identify, if appropriate, cases of unethical behaviour among professionals that you have experienced or may have read about. After you have discussed this case study, turn to our comments on it.

Comments

Ethical considerations are basic to communication generally and to professional communication at all times. In this case study, we are interested in your experience and insights and perhaps some of the ethical dilemmas you have faced. Many ethicists, like Dr Simon Longstaff, believe that professionals should act not only in the interests of their own organisations and its shareholders, but also in the interests of the greater community, and this is what he means by the 'social compact'. In later chapters of the text, we consider ethics in terms of language, research techniques, letter and report writing, intercultural communication competence and mediated communication. So without laying down strict ethical advice, we might consider ethics to be a subtext of all we say or don't say, be it in negotiations, persuasive speeches such as sales pitches, or written workplace documents, submissions and promotions.

Case study 1.2 - Purposeful communication

A ward supervisor at a hospital wishes to prevent time-wasting at morning tea breaks. She tries out a number of noticeboard messages and asks you to pick the one most likely to produce worker cooperation. The messages are:

1. Nursing staff are asked to respect the morning tea privilege. Ward sisters to note.
2. Morning tea is taking too long. Staff late back to work will lose this privilege.
3. Boys and girls, we know you like to chinwag at morning tea break, but give us a break and cut *yours* down to the allocated 15 minutes provided.
4. A short respite from the morning's nursing duties is provided between 10.30 and 10.45 a.m. Staff are inclined, however, to presume on the hospital's generosity in the granting of this privilege, with the result that many do not resume normal duties for up to half an hour after the commencement of the break. Patients may be inconvenienced as a result. It is desired that staff take cognisance of the need to cooperate in this regard.
5. Staff are asked to limit their morning tea break to the 15 minutes provided between 10.30 and 10.45 a.m.

Discussion

Comment on the 'purposefulness' of each message and pick the best one. Discuss how staff might respond to each of the messages. If you wish, write a better one yourself. After you have discussed this case study, turn to our comments on it.

Comments

If the purpose of the notice is to get support and conformity, then (1) is too impersonal and formal, and lacks specific information; (2) is too threatening and also fails to give exact times for the break; (3) is patronising and cloying; and (4) is longwinded and pompous. We think (5) is preferable; it is easily read and understood and gives exact times. Does the group agree? Is your choice better than any of the others?

Case study 1.3 - Structuring the message

Bill Snedden, the sales manager, tended to 'overcommunicate'. So when Sheila Oates, one of his reps, got the following mobile phone message from Bill, she didn't listen carefully or take notes, thinking it was just general chat and didn't apply to her. Unfortunately, the message was erased before she could ring back. The message said: 'Sheila, I asked Liam and Ali to go on that assignment next Wednesday and to report at 9.30 at the Cole Bay branch of Westpac, 15 Firth Street. Liam and Ali are the two new programmers I appointed last week, by the way. What I wanted to ask you was to go along too and show them the new IT procedures'.

Discussion

Examine the six aspects of purposefulness listed in the 'Purpose in communicating' section and explain why Sheila had to telephone her boss that evening. After you have discussed this case study, turn to our comments on it.

Comments

Bill Snedden's phone message is poorly constructed. Sheila hears no relevance to herself until the end, by which time she has forgotten the instructions and has accidentally deleted the message. Bill should probably have begun with a request to her to go with the new staff. If Bill had initially focused on what he wanted Sheila to do, she would have listened more carefully to the detail.

Case study 1.4 - Identifying 'noise' in written communication

Here are some passages of text that we have extracted from recent publications. Each one has an example of a form of 'noise' that we have described. Read them through and classify each as mechanical, semantic or psychological. Make sure you can explain your choice. After you have discussed this case study, turn to our comments on it.

1. You will hear from us as soon as we have investigated your claims.
2. The estate will be divided equally between his brother and his wife's three sisters.
3. We trust that in future you will not fall behind in your instalments.
4. Peter did not trust the surgeon after he broke both his hands.

5. Ku-Ring-Gai council has broken new ground by organising a symposium on urban bushland management for Saturday evening (11 October). It is the first time a council has arranged a symposium to discuss thoroughly its bushland reserves.
6. We need to achieve conceptual communication criteria with a view to bringing about a dynamic parameters analysis. Overall capabilities implementation is compatible with the modular facilities interface.

Comments

We would classify the sentences as follows:

1. Psychological noise: The tone could be regarded as blunt and offensive. Use of the word 'investigated' creates an overtone of distrust.
2. Semantic noise: This sentence is ambiguous. Does his brother receive 50 per cent or 25 per cent of the estate?
3. Psychological noise: Again, the tone is threatening and accusing. The use of the phrase 'We trust that in future ...' is patronising.
4. Semantic noise: Again, this sentence is ambiguous. Whose hands were broken - the surgeon's or Peter's? Or did the surgeon break both of Peter's hands?
5. Mechanical and psychological noise: Poorly and inconsistently spelt documents may convey a lack of expertise or a lack of care or professionalism. If someone cannot spell, do they really know the subject? Media releases like these are the public face of an organisation. Poor attention to technical detail not only makes the text harder to understand but also may adversely impact on the perception readers have of the organisation.
6. Semantic noise: This kind of jargon often appears in business and policy writing, often because the writer wants to impress the reader with their expertise or their status. The message usually turns out to be meaningless or an inflated version of what the writer is communicating.

Case study 1.5 - Supermarket sales tactics cleverly use the way our brains perceive and process sensory information

Ever wonder why you always seem to spend more than you intend when you do the weekly food shopping? Consumer research shows how supermarkets cleverly use their knowledge of psychology and the way our brains deal with a mass of sensory information to influence our spending habits.

The points below have been adapted from a guide published by the Australian Consumers Association publication *Choice*:

- Sensory delights: It's very common for a supermarket to locate the attractive fresh produce or the bakery at its entry. Does the deli section

with its medley of colours and tasty offerings then follow? The sights and smells create a market-type atmosphere that aims to put you in the mood as you're led through the labyrinth to the less interesting packaged dry goods and strategically placed impulse-buy items. Smell is a powerful sense, with links to memory, and freshly baked goods and fresh produce conjure positive associations. Fresh food also looks best in natural light, hence the positioning near the front entrance.

- In your face: More-expensive items with higher profit margins tend to be right in the line of sight of the target customer, as shoppers are considered 'lazy' and will see those first. Cheaper or supermarket brands tend to be located on the higher or lower shelves. Manufacturers pay more for the eye-level space on the shelves.
- Where are the eggs? Probably nowhere near the milk or bread. Separation of popular staples is a common element of supermarket design. Why? So you'll spend more time in-store negotiating your way past all those flashy and tempting impulse-buy items.
- This goes with that: Positioning natural combinations like chips with dips or biscuits near coffee or tea may be logical, but is it any wonder that it increases the sales of both? Items that are positioned in close proximity are perceived as being related.
- Research shows that grocery shoppers are heavily influenced by in-store displays, particularly those at the end of aisles in the 'bargain bin'. Are they really discounted?
- Colours invoke our emotions and can encourage us to spend more money. Red is used because it stands out above all other colours. It also causes our adrenaline to start and makes the heart beat faster. Blue is used as a trust symbol and green invokes freshness.
- Size and shape do matter. If a manufacturer wants its brand to stand out from its competitors' brands, it will use either larger packaging or a different-shaped bottle to catch the shopper's attention among the mass of colours and shapes on the shelves. Generic or supermarket brands are often similar in appearance, size, shape and package design to the leading brands, to make it harder for shoppers to distinguish them.
- A study published by the American Psychological Association showed that even the choice of in-store music influenced shoppers' wine selection. Over a two-week period in an English supermarket, either French or German music was played at a display of wines from these countries. When the music was French, sales of French wine increased; when it was German, sales of German wine increased. When questioned, shoppers seemed unaware of the effect the music had on their wine purchasing. Source: Choice (2009), 'Supermarket sales tactics', 5 January, <http://www.choice.com.au/reviews-and-tests/food-and-health/food-and-drink/supermarkets/supermarket-sales-tactics.aspx>

Discussion

What characteristics of the way that we perceive information from the environment are these display tactics exploiting? Can you think of other clever ploys that shops use to appeal to your senses and get you in the mood for shopping? After you have discussed this case study, turn to our comments on it.

Comments

The human brain experiences the outside world via the five senses, and filters and organises the stimuli until it has meaning. In order to deal with the mass of stimuli from the outside world, such as the multitude of colours, smells, sounds, shapes and so on in a supermarket, the brain uses organisational patterns or schema to shape interpretation.

Marketers have long studied the psychology of human behaviour to distinguish their products from the many others in a supermarket, and our list includes only some of the strategies they use. This illustrates how reality is constructed by the way our brains process sights, sounds, smells and so on, and by how we have learned to interpret these meanings.

Discussion questions and solutions

Defining communication

1. Which of the four definitions of communication given in the 'Defining communication' section seems to be the most useful and appropriate in your work as a student?
All these definitions are useful depending upon the circumstances. No single definition encompasses all the situations where communication is involved. Students should be encouraged to examine each of the definitions proposed and maybe in groups discuss how each may or may not apply to their particular experiences or professions. The tutor could then lead a discussion of the differences and contexts.
2. Which forms of communication are most important in your profession?
Give some examples and describe situations in which communication competence is important for you as a professional.
Answers will vary greatly here. Students should be encouraged to discuss this topic with reference to their own professional experience.
3. Discuss a recent case involving professional life in which poor communication has had serious results.
Probably the most serious case was the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl in April 1986. One of the reasons why this nuclear reactor could not be turned off was poor technical communication in the instruction manuals.
4. What do you understand by the term 'whistleblowing'? You may need to do some research on this one.

A whistleblower is someone who informs the public about dishonest, unethical or criminal activities of government departments, public/private companies, or institutions. The most famous whistleblower of recent times is Julian Assange and the WikiLeaks website (<http://www.wikileaks.org>).

5. Examine and discuss the ethics involved in a recent case of whistleblowing in your profession.

Answers will vary here. In academia, in 1996 physics professor Alan Sokal submitted a hoax article to *Social Text*, a respected scholarly journal of postmodern cultural studies. The purpose of this was to test the journal's intellectual rigor and to discover whether a humanities journal would publish nonsense if it sounded good enough and contained impressive ideological concepts. The article, called 'Transgressing the boundaries: towards a transformative hermeneutics of quantum gravity', ludicrously proposed that quantum gravity was a social and linguistic construct. The journal did not peer-review the submission, thus the article was not checked by an expert physicist. Upon the article's publication in May 1996, Sokal revealed that it was a hoax, 'a pastiche of Left-wing cant, fawning references, grandiose quotations, and outright nonsense ... structured around the most ridiculous quotations he could find about mathematics and physics'.

The scandal that ensued centred on the fact that the article was published by a well-respected humanities journal, not only making a mockery of the humanities but also academic research publications in general.

The transmission model of communication

6. In his 1967 book *Understanding Media*, communication theorist Marshall McLuhan said, 'The medium is the message' (p. 15). He meant that the choice of medium can transform a message and its meaning. Discuss this idea.

Student answers may vary as this is discussed. The focus should be on the transmission model of communication. Students could review this question after reading the introduction to the 'What is mediated communication?' section for additional interpretations of McLuhan's work.

7. We claim in the 'Purpose in communicating' section that the choice of media is as important as the message itself. If you were asked to give advice to the 500 students in Stage 1 of your course on plagiarism and how to avoid it, how would you communicate your message?

One possible response is to provide a lecture on copyright and plagiarism, with Web-based examples and written materials as handouts. A copyright expert could be asked to address the lecture, and the software program Turnitin, which checks its own databases and the Internet for instances of student plagiarism, could be used as an example.

Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each of these forms of media in communicating this message to this particular audience:

a. word-of-mouth communication in small-group briefing sessions

Useful for the ability to answer specific questions and give specific answers to address group concerns. If students could bring examples of possible violations, then even better.

b. email announcements to all students

Only useful as a reminder, since not all emails are read or received in time.

c. an article in the weekly student newspaper

Might be useful, but would need to be general. May not be effective as few students read such publications

d. a speech to the whole group in a large lecture hall with an accompanying PowerPoint slideshow

An advantage of this is that it allows communication of the issue to a large number of students simultaneously. Also, slides can be produced for future reference. A limitation is that a lecture does not usually allow questions to be answered and students can easily tune out or be distracted by things such as mobile phones. Attendance at lectures is also unpopular unless there is a quiz or exam linked to the information. Unless a roll is marked, we find that students stop attending lectures as the term progresses.

e. a continuous video, set up in the student cafeteria

Totally useless, since student cafés are places where students relax and socialise. The information effect would be minimal.

f. an interactive, self-paced tutorial on the faculty's website.

Possibly useful, but the value of self-paced tutorials is debatable. Again, there is no provision for answering questions. The tutorial would need to be carefully written, and the results of online quizzes taken with a grain of salt. This may be useful as a resource or point of reference for particular questions, or for early career instructors to learn the material.

Feedback

8. We define feedback as the response to a message. Without it, we cannot be sure we have communicated effectively. But how do we get feedback? Form groups of four or five and discuss specific methods of seeking feedback in the two situations described below. Compile the list on a whiteboard, overhead transparency or butcher's paper and compare your list with those of other groups.

a. Your lecturer keeps giving you poor marks for written assignments but few comments. You would like to improve your assessments.

Answers will vary but could include checking the assignment guidelines to make sure you followed the instructions, making an appointment to discuss your marks, emailing the lecturer for more feedback, asking other tutors for assistance, asking the Learning Centre for advice, and checking friends'

assignments for their comments. There are also a few (US) websites that supposedly coach you (for a fee) in writing your assignments. We have not checked the quality of any of these sites, so it is a case of buyer beware.

- b. Promotion is coming slowly to you in your firm. Despite having finished a higher-education degree and having won two company awards for creative design, you have remained in the same position for three years while watching contemporaries surge ahead of you.*

Options include talking to your immediate superior for advice, obtaining feedback from trusted colleagues, and perhaps visiting HR for feedback and advice on performance reviews and how to improve your status within the company. Employing a career coach is also a popular way of improving one's career prospects.

The transaction model of communication

- 9. Test the claim that 'meanings are in people, not in words'. Ask members of your group to write down and then compare notes on brief definitions of the following:*
 - a. company loyalty*
 - b. the climate crisis*
 - c. sustainable development*
 - d. globalisation*
 - e. border protection*
 - f. professional integrity*
 - g. crisis management*
 - h. spin doctoring.*

Answers will vary considerably here. The aim is to demonstrate how class members believe in certain ideas according to their respective cultures, education, interests and political perspectives. In our experience, for example, some students may perceive 'border protection' as a real crisis where the government needs to stop asylum seekers from entering the country in an 'illegal manner'. This is just media hype, however, since there is no such thing as a legal asylum seeker. Others may ask, 'What are we protecting our borders from?' or 'Is the term merely a form of xenophobia [fear of others] dressed up euphemistically?'.

As a back-up, instructors can prepare alternative meanings for the terms; for example, climate change (climate scepticism), border protection (violations of UN agreements), company loyalty (scapegoating), professional integrity (examples of fraud and illegal professional activity) and crisis management (lying, misinformation and deception).

- 10. On separate sheets of paper, write one-sentence definitions of professionalism, loyalty, quality, productivity and transparency. Then, in small groups, exchange your definitions and discuss the varieties of meaning. Note the differences of perspective and emphasis.*

The activities in 9 and 10 usually produce many different definitions and examples from students. As with question 9, instructors could prepare in advance alternate meanings for 'professionalism', 'loyalty', 'quality', 'productivity' and 'transparency'.

11. Write a sentence containing a statement of fact, as you see it - a truism; for example, 'Redheads are bad tempered'. Exchange your statement for a partner's sentence and see if you can agree on their meanings.

There are many such truisms which may be discussed. Examples include: 'Blondes have more fun', 'Fat people are jolly people', 'Asian people are inscrutable', and 'Russians are very careful with money'. It would be useful to extend this discussion to explore why and how these kinds of statements become 'truisms' and their impact on broader perceptions.

Websites

- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communication_theory (Wikipedia)
- <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/%28ISSN%291468-2958> (Human Communication Research)
- <http://www.hcrc.ed.ac.uk/> (Human Communication Research Centre)
- <http://www.oxfordjournals.org/help/moved/> (Oxford journals)
- <http://www.wiley.com/bw/journal.asp?ref=1050-3293> (Wiley journal Communication Theory)
- http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikimedia/en-labs/5/51/Communication_Theory.pdf (Communication Theory)

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Key terms

- transmission theories of communication
- Shannon and Weaver's model of communication
- Berlo's model of communication
- transaction model of communication
- communication and perception
- communication and culture
- communication and gender

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Australian and American spellings in your searches; for example, 'globalisation' and 'globalization'; 'organisation' and 'organization'.

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