

Ethics

Lesson 4 Notes

Why Discuss Ethics?

Discussing ethics is important because we make many decisions, big and small, in the workplace daily. Ethics are rarely clear-cut, and decisions are not always simple. Explaining our reasoning and decisions is important. If we clearly understand our actions, we can clearly communicate our motives to others. If we don't clearly understand our actions, we may not be able to clearly communicate to others or persuade them to support our decisions or consider our reasoning (Dombrowski).

Understanding ethics helps us to justify our reasoning, consider right action, consider implications, consider different options, and to demonstrate awareness of real-world constraints.

What Should I Consider?

When you make a decision, you should consider your professional code of ethics, your company code of ethics, and your personal ethics (Anderson).

Professional codes of ethics can be found on the website of professional organizations like the National Nurse's Association, the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing, and the National Society of Professional Engineers. Each of these codes offers guidelines for practice in a professional field.

Company codes of ethics can sometimes be found on the company's website. Other times, these codes are within company intranets or are provided via print or electronic document. These codes offer guidelines for practice within the organization.

Your personal ethics also factor in. Each individual comes to a company or a field with their own ethical code. Being able to articulate what it is can help you determine if your ethics are in alignment with that of a profession or an organization.

In addition to these codes, you should consider all stakeholders who are directly and indirectly impacted by your actions.

How Can I Ensure I'm Ethical in My Communications?

As you craft communications, make sure that you include only accurate, credible, and complete information. In addition, do not claim ownership of someone else's work. It is also important to recognize your own (conscious and subconscious) perspectives as well as those of others, to consider how those perspectives are informed, and to refrain from stereotyping. Ensure accessibility, and always remember the human.

Ensure Integrity

To ensure integrity, you should first make sure that all information you include is true and complete. Also make sure you claim ownership only for what is yours, remaining aware of:

- Patents - Items whose credit for creation is protected
- Trademarks -Company names (WalMart), logos (the Target bulls-eye), or slogans (I'm lovin' it)
- Copyright law -Items whose distribution is protected by law (books, movies, or software) (Anderson)

Ensure Accessibility

Build accessibility into everything you create. Use elements that assist all audiences in accessing, finding, and using information like visual and typographic cues and including alt-text, captions, and preset Styles.

In addition to ensuring accessible design, use accessible language. Use words with only one meaning; for example, although “awesome” generally has a positive connotation, “amazing” may have a positive or negative connotation. Use standard nomenclature, or naming; for example, using “essay” in some areas of a lesson and “paper” in others may confuse a student who is unsure the words refer to the same document. Another important language consideration is to use metaphors. People relate new ideas to things that they already know. The use of idioms should be minimized unless all potential users understand the idioms. For example, if we use the American idiom, “It was raining cats and dogs,” we need to be sure that all potential users understand that idiom means that it was raining heavily.

Ensure Cultural Competence

Creating ethical communications in ethical ways requires you to **first be aware of your own** perspective, what informs it, and how that impacts how you interact with others. Understanding Gert Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions can help you to understand both your own perspective as well as what your audiences may think, feel, and believe. Those dimensions are:

- Power Distance (how power is shared/relationships between individuals in a power structure)
- Individualism (whether focus is on the individual or the collective/community)
- Masculinity (what values are considered masculine or feminine and how much either matters)
- Uncertainty Avoidance (comfort level with ambiguity)
- Long-term Orientation (balance of traditions and progress) Indulgence (what delay in reward may be acceptable/comfortable)

While these dimensions can be helpful, it is always of paramount importance **to refrain from stereotyping**.

Remember the Human

Your audience are humans who think, feel, and believe. All of your writing and design impacts other humans and should be HUMANIZED.

Visuals

Visual displays can be humanized by using pictographs or by using photographs or drawings of humans in conjunction with bar or line graphs (Dragga and Voss).

For example, Figure 1 below humanizes the healthcare worker by representing the largest portion of the pie chart as a photo of a healthcare worker in a healthcare setting. This helps to ensure the focus is on the people rather than the data alone.

Exposure settings for health care personnel with COVID-19

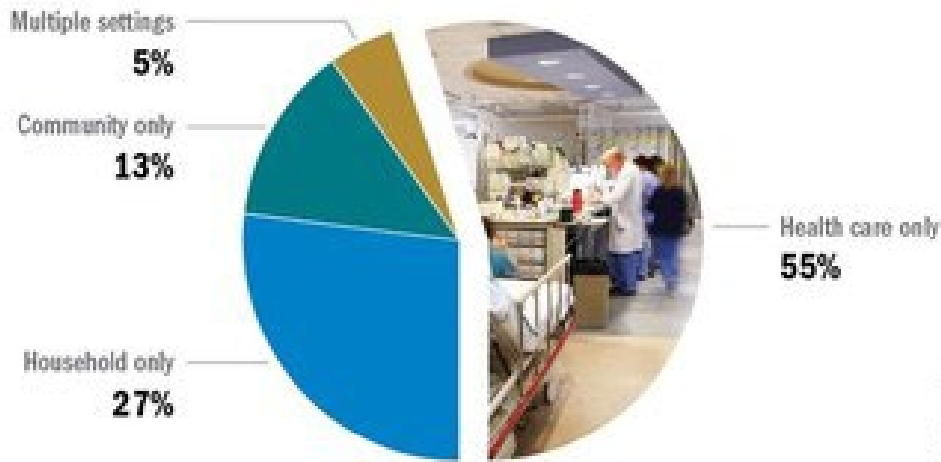


Figure 1: Exposure settings for health care personnel with COVID-19; MWMR, 2020 April 14;69(early release): 1-5

It is also important to place warnings appropriately. Review Figure 2 below.

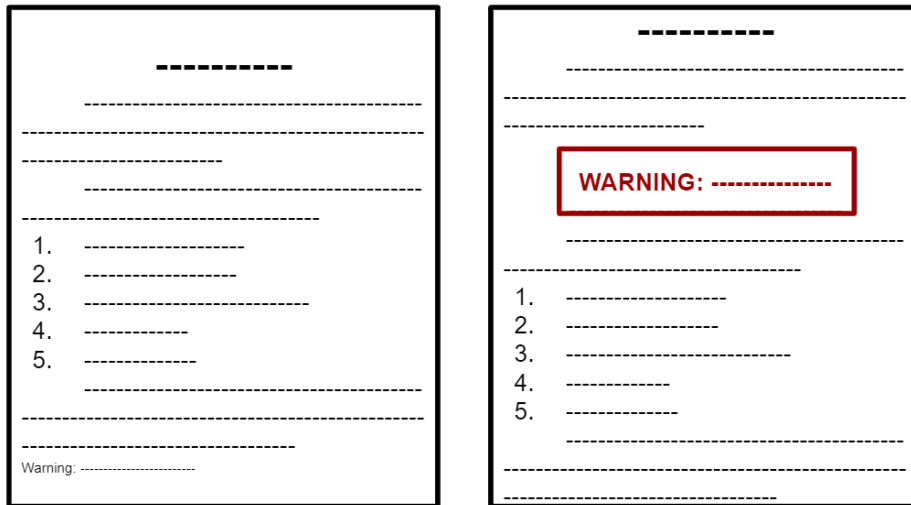


Figure 2: Warning Statement Placement

The document shown on the left includes a warning statement in small print at the bottom of the document. The document on the right, however, includes its warning statement in large red print surrounded by a red box and placed prominently in the document. Because warning statements let users know something will happen if certain actions are or are not taken, users’ awareness of these statements is important. Emphasizing them on a document helps draw the users’ attention to them.

Writing

DEHUMANIZING language or language that FACILITATES DEHUMANIZATION should not be used. This excerpt from a Geheime Reichssache (Secret Reich Business) memo written by a Nazi beauracrat for his boss describes lighting recommendations for vehicles used to transport people to concentration camps like Auschwitz:

“The lighting must be better protected than now. The lamps must be enclosed in a steel grid to prevent their being damaged. Lights could be eliminated, since they apparently are never used. However, it has been observed that when the doors are shut, the **load** always presses hard against them as soon as darkness sets in.”

The “load” referred to is the humans who were being transported to the concentration camps. The memo uses objective language that makes dehumanizing decisions possible (Katz).

What Do I Do if I Think Something May Be Unethical?

If you think something might be unethical, ask questions that help to reveal unethical practices. Gather facts and rationale, and remain open to others’ ideas. Let’s review a couple of examples.

Case Example 1: Computer Crush

A programmer is asked to write a program that will raise and lower a large X-ray device. He writes and tests his program. It successfully and accurately moves the device from the top of the support pole to the top of the table. The program is installed. Later, an X-ray technician tells a patient to get off the table after an X-ray is taken. The technician then sets the height of the device to “table-top height.” The patient, however, does not hear the technician and is crushed under the weight of the machine (Harris, Pritchard, and Rabins).

Your specific perspective on the case may inform your decision. Think about what you would do if you were the patient’s loved one, the technician, the technician’s employer, the programmer, and the person who designed the documentation. If you were the programmer or the person designing the documentation, what might you do to ensure all stakeholders are considered (and considered as humans)?

Case Example 2: World Health Organization Graphic

You are in charge of posting the graphic from the World Health Organization (Figure 3) to its Twitter.

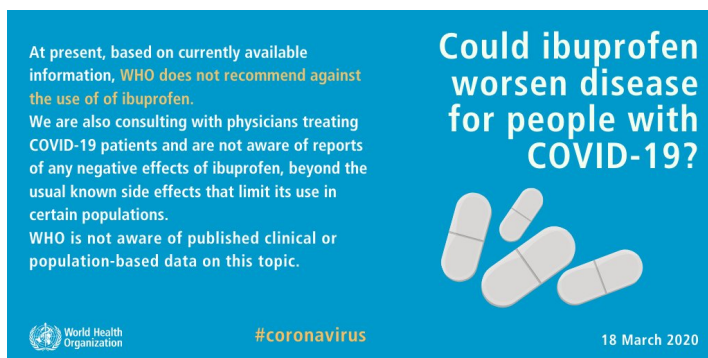


Figure 3: WHO Graphic; WHO. (2020, March 18). [Tweet]. Retrieved from [This Twitter feed](#)

You know that the information is important to share quickly, but you are not sure that the graphic will reach its target audience because of the language level used. How do you work within these real-world constraints?

Ethics Decision Checklist

When you are faced with ethical dilemmas like these, consider the following:

- **What is the ethical dilemma?**
- **What specifically is making you uncomfortable?**
- **What are your competing obligations in this dilemma?**
- **What advice does a trusted supervisor or mentor offer?**
- **Does your company's code of conduct address this issue?**
- **Does your professional association's code of conduct address this issue?**
- **What are you unwilling to do? What are you willing to do?**
- **How will you explain or justify your decision?**

What is Most Important to Remember?

The biggest takeaways are to:

- Rely on ethical guidelines from your profession and organization as well as your own ethics
- Consider all stakeholders
- Ensure integrity, accessibility, and cultural competence
- Consider your own and other's perspectives and biases
- Use resources thoughtfully
- Design intentionally
- HUMANIZE
- Use the ethics decision checklist
- Ask questions, use facts/reason, and remain open

References

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Ethics and Technical Communication From WikiBooks. Located at:

http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Professional_and_Technical_Writing/Ethics#Legal_Issues_and_Communication. License: CC BY-SA: Attribution-ShareAlike

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