



## The Importance of Addressing Issues of Applied Ethics for Communication Scholars and Consultants

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The four articles in this special section on applied ethics remind us once again of the need for more intensive work by communication scholars on the crucial issue of ethics in organizational contexts. All of the authors address this need and suggest various solutions to the problem of foregrounding communication ethics in today's complex organizational environment.

Matthew Seeger does a commendable job synthesizing the work done to date on organizational communication ethics and providing a general overview of the field. Clearly, a comprehensive overview is beyond the scope of this space (and one which should be written for inclusion in *Communication Yearbook*), but Seeger does do an excellent job of reminding us that W. Charles Redding's conclusion that scholars have substantially ignored issues of ethics in organizations is still valid today. Although some progress has been made and is detailed by Seeger, much remains to be done. Seeger is correct in pointing out that the growing attention to cultural and interpretative approaches to the study of organizational communication has included a renewed interest in ethical issues. Nevertheless, studies of ethical failures cited by Seeger, such as the EXXON Valdez oil spill, do not go far enough to uncover important issues of ethics in the everyday life of organizational employees during non-crisis moments.

Seeger reminds us of several important aspects of current practice in organizational ethics that are potentially problematic. First, he warns of the difficulty of using theories that suggest that "responsibility must be an individualized construct" to examine issues of organizational responsibility. Second, he notes the lack of sustained discussion of ethical issues in organizations as part of what he terms "the ongoing discourse of the organization." Third, since organizational ethics are often not seen as contributing to the efficiency or effectiveness of the organization, they are ignored. Of course, this often results in organizational crises that have a serious impact on the organization's profitability or even continued existence.

Primeaux and Hartman's wide-ranging article demonstrates the importance of considering philosophical and religious precepts in our ethical decision making as well as gathering empirical data on how corporate citizens approach ethical issues. These authors weave together a discussion of individual ethical decision making grounded in values that reflect spiritual and emotional (as well as rational) bases for action with the perceptions of top executives and their approaches to balancing their often-conflicting responsibilities to various corporate stakeholders. As these authors note, the "American dream" often draws us toward obtaining external rewards such as financial success, but other motives for action are often followed and result in success that comes in more intangible forms. They discuss the movie representation of Erin Brokovich to illustrate an individual who is drawn to a cause that benefits others at great cost to her personal life. Primeaux and Hartman use their discussion of moral precepts to ask the question, "How do we know whether someone is an ethical person?" They answer this question with a discussion of a lengthy study of corporate executives who are "people-focused" and are mindful of the interests of multiple stakeholders for the "long-term." These leaders do not rely solely on rational decision making, but include emotional and spiritual dimensions in their work. Primeaux and Hartman's term for this is the "triple

bottom line”—a term that should be disseminated throughout the literature on business and organizational ethics.

Montgomery and DeCaro echo Seeger’s conclusion that applied ethics has not received the academic and organizational attention that is warranted, and they provide one suggestion for remedying this situation. They propose that empirically examining the relationship between the organizational environment and ethical conduct will provide a solid research base to be used to credential this field for both academic and corporate audiences. They specifically suggest using Applied Behavior Analysis and Performance Management to accomplish this task. They note once again the difficulty of conceptualizing an ethic of *organizational* communication using theory based on the *individual* as the source of ethical and unethical behavior. To begin to address this deficiency, they call for a renewed emphasis on the organizational environment. They rightly point out that organizations often ignore the systemic aspects that contribute to employee misconduct in favor of identifying and punishing the “guilty party.” Performance Management is one way to link individual behavior with the larger environment to begin to address how organizations themselves increase or decrease the probability of a specific behavior occurring. In addition, this approach provides systematic data that can be used to compare various approaches to ethical issues in organizations and potentially solve typical organizational problems.

Just as Seeger notes the need for ethical codes and guidelines for corporate organizations, Montgomery, Wiesman and DeCaro provide a model code for organizational communication consultants and trainers. Given the contemporary tendency to downsize organizations which results, in part, in an increasing number of communication professionals who are not employed as permanent employees but as consultants on an as-needed basis and a growing number of communication faculty who are engaged in activities outside the traditional classroom setting, the need for a code such as this one is paramount. Montgomery, Wiesman and DeCaro’s well-considered and thoughtful code attempts not only to identify potential problems in organizational communication consulting relationships but also to prevent them from occurring. They point out the difficulty of relying on a code developed by another profession (such as the APA) and provide a clear rationale for a separate code that would “help to establish the identity of communication consulting and training as a distinct discipline.” In addition, they highlight the very real necessity to examine our own professional activities and to struggle with questions of values, standards, and public education. While this code provides an excellent model for systematically examining the relationship between a communication consultant or trainer and a client, developing a code of ethics for communication researchers would also be an effective way to reinforce our commitment to upholding the standards of ethical research in other contexts. Given the current attention to the significance of informed consent in the research process and the crucial role played by institutional review boards, the development of such a code should be a priority for our field.

Overall, these papers address a common theme from four different perspectives. Nevertheless, they have a common core of concern that leads to four major conclusions about applied ethics in an organizational context:

(1) Our theories of applied ethics must reach beyond the individual level and posit ethical principles for organizations as well as for individuals. While individuals populate organizations, there are certain issues (such as community relations, balancing responsibilities to multiple stakeholders, and environmental protection) that extend beyond any one individual and must be seen as the actions of the organization as a whole. Our ethical theories need to be able to address this situation and not rely solely on identifying individuals for either praise or blame. Systemic aspects of organizations that contribute to unethical conduct must be examined and ameliorated before a true conceptualization of organizational communication ethics can be developed.

(2) Ethics and organizational effectiveness are inextricably linked. Dramatic examples of organizations that ignore their ethical responsibilities to various stakeholders and suffer serious consequences abound. Nevertheless, even in the absence of such drastic examples, organizations suffer serious consequences from their failure to address ethical issues. These consequences include high (and often unexplained) levels of employee turnover, poor reputations in local communities, and the inability to provide and sell products that are well respected in the marketplace. Attention to making ethics a regular part of the organizational discourse can provide tangible benefits to the organization.

(3) Codes of ethics are not just a means of regulating employee and other professionals' behavior, they provide an important means of facilitating communication with employees and clients. Seeger notes the need for such codes, and Montgomery, Wiesman and DeCaro provide a model for one particular profession. The National Communication Association Credo of Ethical Conduct provides a framework for viewing the ethical responsibilities of individuals concerned with issues of communication in a larger context. Individual codes of ethics, built on this framework, will help communication professionals to engage more ethically in various aspects of their chosen profession and to serve as a model for others engaged in similar work.

(4) Thinking about ethical issues in organizations must be multi-dimensional. Primeaux and Hartman remind us to examine not only the rational dimension of decision making but also the emotional and spiritual. Complex decisions are best made with the long-term interests of multiple stakeholders in mind. Organizations are multi-dimensional and our theorizing in applied ethics needs to reflect this fact.

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