

Teamwork Training

Ethical Communication

Generally in small group work our concern is focused on getting the job done while still maintaining reasonable relationships among group members. Although ethical communication is implicit in small group work, we seldom discuss it openly.

Ethics in small groups involves three levels:

- Individual group member

"I didn't complete the research on time for my part of the project. Should I think up an excuse? Or tell my group what happened: that I went to Las Vegas for the weekend instead of doing my research?"

- Group

Group A finds a published study that is identical to its project. Group members are pressed for time to complete their report. Should they just copy the study, making a few minor changes?

- Group environment

An organizational task force on safety identifies several current practices that put organization members at risk. Changing all those practices will cost the organization millions of dollars. Should the task force report all the findings to management? Report only those that would be less costly?

Ethical Dilemmas

Although some ethical dilemmas are more easily solved than others, all involve making evaluations and judgments about what is morally right and wrong, what is fair and what is not fair, and what will cause harm and what will not cause harm.

What is Ethical Communication?

Ethics in small groups refers to the moral aspects of group interaction. The National Communication Association (NCA) states:

"ethical communication enhances human worth and dignity by fostering truthfulness, fairness, responsibility, personal integrity, and respect for self and other."

Thus, ethical communication in small groups takes into account caring and responsibility for oneself and the other group members.

Ethics in Communication

NCA recently adopted a Credo for Ethical Communication. It is included here, although some principles are more applicable than others to small group communication.

- Truthfulness, accuracy, honesty, and reason are essential to the integrity of communication.

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- Endorse freedom of expression, diversity of perspective, and tolerance of dissent to achieve the informed and responsible decision making fundamental to a civil society.
- Strive to understand and respect other communicators before evaluating and responding to their messages.
- Access to communication resources and opportunities are necessary to fulfill human potential and contribute to the well being of families, communities, and society.
- Promote communication climates of caring and mutual understanding that respect the unique needs and characteristics of individual communicators.
- Condemn communication that degrades individuals and humanity through distortion, intolerance, intimidation, coercion, hatred, and violence.
- Commit to the courageous expression of personal convictions in pursuit of fairness and justice.
- Advocate sharing information, opinions, and feelings when facing significant choices while also respecting privacy and confidentiality.
- Unethical communication threatens the quality of all communication and consequently the well being of individuals and the society in which we live.
- Accept responsibility for the short- and long-term consequences for our own communication and expect the same of others.

In reading over these principles, you can note the two ethical communication themes of caring and responsibility. Some are obvious, such as: "Promote communication climates of caring and mutual understanding that respect the unique needs and characteristics of individual communicators," and "Accept responsibility for the short- and long-term consequences for our own communication and expect the same of others."

These principles also apply to important aspects of effective small group communication, such as teamwork, critical thinking, creativity, and diversity. Thus, ethical communication in small groups means that group members respect and encourage diverse opinions, do not tolerate communication that degrades and harms others, balance the sharing of information with a respect for privacy, and listen for understanding and empathy before evaluating and critiquing.

Applied Ethics

Ethical communication requires effective critical thinking skills, recognizing the importance of diverse perspectives, respect for the well being of self and others, taking responsibility for individual and group actions, and reflecting on the choices group members make.

Culture and small groups

There are many different definitions of culture, yet all stipulate that communication is necessary to develop, maintain, and change culture. Members of a culture share similar interpretations and similar visions of the world. Those similarities in interpretation and representation are evident in the cultural practices performed by the group. It is through communication, language and nonverbal messages that we exemplify and perform cultural practices with others. The link between communication and culture is not unidirectional. The symbols we use, both verbal and nonverbal, arise from the culture into which we were born. In turn, we create culture through the symbols we use. Our personal and group identities cannot be separated from the cultures in which we are enmeshed. We learn about culture from obvious sources, including our families, peers, teachers, and religious organizations. We also learn about culture through more transparent sources, such as proverbs; folk tales, legends, and myths; art and mass media. Because our experiences are not the same, we don't know the same things about particular cultures. Our individual views of culture are unique. There is a tension in everyone that arises from the conflict between that which we have in common with others and that part of us which is unique. Culture can be studied in terms of commonality (what we share as a group), and differences, (what makes our group different from others).

Cultural Norms

Cultural norms and rules change the way individuals interact, although these norms are guidelines rather than laws. Cultural norms limit the way we interact with others, yet at the same time, those norms are a resource for us; we refer to them so we don't have to develop rules every time with communicate with others. Still, we don't always have to follow the rules; that is why they are rules rather than laws. In our interactions with others, we can negotiate conversational rules. If cultural norms were laws, then all categories of communicative events, such as "committee meeting," "dinner party," and "brainstorming session," would be exactly the same.

Culture in an Information Age

Culture no longer fits into the neat boundaries it once did, when a culture's parameters were defined by a particular nation-state. The Internet and World Wide Web changed the dynamics of culture. Our ability to connect with others around the world makes the geographical borders traditionally associated with culture all but irrelevant. As our everyday lives have changed due to new communication technologies, culture and what constitutes culture have changed as well. Thus, it is less useful to identify culture based on physical location, and more useful to identify culture based on shared values, beliefs, and ways of understanding the world.

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Culture and small groups

Culture and small groups are intertwined in three ways.

First, different cultures have different conceptualizations of small groups and the norms governing those groups. Thus, groups embedded in different cultures will likely share some similarities, but exhibit differences as well.

Second, individual group members bring their own cultural backgrounds and experiences with them to a small group, which will itself exhibit similarities and differences among its members.

Third, each small group will develop its own distinctive culture, evident in norms of interaction, language used, stories told, rituals observed, and practices followed. Although we can observe similarities across small group cultures, we can also observe differences rooted in the unique interactions of small group members.

Small Groups within Culture

Different cultures will have different definitions for "group," and will have different ways of determining who can belong to particular groups, what behaviors are acceptable within specific groups, the level of conflict allowed in a group, and norms for group member interaction. Different cultures define groups and the criteria for membership and behavior in different ways.

Cultures differ in many important ways, but the individualism vs. collectivism difference is one of the most-studied, and has the most effect on culture as a whole. Western cultures, such as the dominant U.S. culture, are grounded in an individualistic orientation that prioritizes the needs of individuals above the needs of the group. Individual goals, individual identity, individual needs, and personal autonomy are features of an individualistic orientation. Thus, we are concerned with protecting the rights of the individual as well as making individuals accountable for their actions. In contrast, Eastern cultures, such as Indonesian and Chinese cultures, are grounded in a collectivist orientation and think of the group before the individual. Group identity, group rights, intra-group harmony and collaboration, and group needs characterize the collectivist orientation. In such cultures, people are more concerned with group consensus than with individual expression and recognition.

These two orientations, collectivism and individualism, have different approaches to group work and result in different group processes. For example, one foundation of the U.S. government is "one person, one vote" (although the meaning of that phrase has changed over the course of our history). Thus, it seems perfectly natural for individual group members to vote on an issue and carry out the wishes of the majority. From a collectivist perspective, voting is not a viable option. Rather, group members must to discuss the issue until everyone can support a particular course of action.

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Cultural Differences within Small Groups

Cultural differences within small groups affect group processes and outcomes. For example, not all cultures share the same way of reasoning, rules governing conversation, parameters for effective leadership styles, emphasis on conformity, or concern for social relationships among group members. These differences influence group characteristics such as cohesiveness, decision quality, and group member satisfaction.

Cultural diversity within small groups is both a source of creative energy and unproductive conflict. Melding different perspectives can encourage people to understand problems in new way, and to develop creative solutions. Such alternative understandings can produce unique and viable responses to complex problems. Homogeneous groups are more likely to experience defective decision-making such as groupthink and shared biases. Research has found that groups composed of members from diverse cultural backgrounds tend to perform better and produce higher-quality decisions than groups that are homogeneous. Although interpersonal relationships among group members with similar backgrounds are initially easier to establish than relationships among group members with more diverse backgrounds, the lack of variety does little to produce group synergy and creativity.

Unfortunately, while cultural diversity within small groups allows members to pool information and ideas from a wide range of sources, fundamental differences can also lead to destructive conflict. Different communication styles, beliefs, and values can cause conflict in small groups. For example, group members from more individualist cultures tend to have a direct verbal interaction style that is "I" or "me" oriented. Such communicators are talkative and freely promote their needs, ideas, and accomplishments. Group members from more collectivist cultures use an indirect interaction style that is more "we" and "us" oriented. Such communicators are less talkative, feel comfortable with silence, attend to status differences in the group, and downplay their own contributions and accomplishments. Failing to recognize or acknowledge these differences in communication styles can result in misunderstandings and miscommunication.

Small Group Culture

As group members work together, they develop practices, vocabulary, rituals, stories, and other symbolic behavior unique to the group. For example, some small groups begin each meeting with 5-10 minutes of small talk that addresses group members' social needs. Other groups intersperse such social talk throughout the meetings. Others set aside the last 10 minutes or so of the meeting for socializing.

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Identifying Group Culture

Although group culture is complex, you can get a general idea of the culture that has developed in your group's interactions by examining some key cultural indicators.

1. **Vocabulary:** words group members use that are unique to the group. By studying the vocabulary people use, it is sometimes possible to determine who is part of the group, who isn't, who is new to the group, and who the "old-timers" are.
2. **Practices:** unique group processes. For example, the group may have written documents that detail meeting procedures, yet meetings may not follow those guidelines. Practices are how group members go about accomplishing their tasks.
3. **Stories:** narratives group members tell about the group. Stories often convey the group's values, priorities, power distribution, and member relationships. Stories often have a moral, although the moral may not be explicitly stated. Stories told to newcomers often let the rookie know how group members are supposed to interact and accomplish their tasks.
4. **Metaphors:** the way group members relate unfamiliar things to things they are all familiar with in order to describe an idea or experience. Metaphors are often implied rather than stated explicitly. For example, group members may say, "We hit some bumps in the road at first, but we finally found the right road." This suggests that the group process is an excursion or automobile drive. Some metaphors are more explicit, as when group members refer to the group as a "garden" or a "plane without a pilot."
5. **Rituals:** provide structure for group work. Rituals include group customs, daily activities that group members perform regularly, and ceremonies, infrequent activities that mark a particular occasion. For example, groups may have parties for members who leave the group.
6. **Objects:** nonverbal symbols that represent key aspects of the group. Logos or emblems are good examples of objects that reflect the culture of a group.

These cultural indicators alone do not constitute group culture. However, by examining group communication in all these areas, you can get a sense of group values and beliefs.