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ETHICS IN ACTION FOR INTERNAL COMMUNICATORS

CIPR

CHARTERED INSTITUTE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

Foreword

Understanding ethics, how they affect our decision making, the businesses we work in and our daily practice of communication is important to our success.

But often we don't have the internal frameworks, the skills or knowledge or perhaps the professional experience to feel able to question and challenge where we could or should.

"Although there is much discussion about the ethics of public relations, largely due to the association of public relations with manipulation, propaganda and spin, there is little systematic empirical or theoretical research on ethical leadership in public relations," Lee and Cheng (2011: 47) in *Exploring Internal communication, 3rd edition*.

This paper looks at ethics from an internal and strategic communications perspective. For all communicators, ethics should be an important consideration in their work. Within internal communication, dealing with the unique contract employees have with their employers puts a different emphasis on communication and what's ethically appropriate. From the language we use, to the wider ethical frameworks within the organisations we work with, we should be acutely aware of the impact of our work and decisions.

Each situation is different and should be taken on its own merits. Understanding provides clarity and when it comes to ethics, we need to be able to think objectively and clearly about a situation.

CIPR has placed increasing emphasis on ethics through its drive for professionalism in PR and communication. Ethics was added as a compulsory CPD element from March 2015.

Ethics is core to the *Code of Conduct* for CIPR members and helps to set membership apart as a professional standard. *Integrity, Setting the CIPR Code of Conduct in context* is a useful supporting document that helps us to interpret the principles of the Code in practise. There is also an ethics section on the CIPR website, providing best practice guidelines and other useful tools including an ethics helpline to support members.

"Speaking up to leaders can often be difficult to do, especially when it's about the sentiment in the organisation that's very different to their own narrative of what people think. I've found myself speaking up to leaders in many different scenarios about the organisation. Each time, it has needed careful handling, a clear step by step approach that presents the facts and the challenge, but that does not accuse or blame, and that presents a solution that leaders are able to own." Communications Consultant

We may often think that we only face ethical challenges in extreme scenarios and situations. But the reality is we face them more routinely. We've compiled examples, like the one above from members of CIPR Inside. Each is anonymous and based on a real-life experience.

The rise of ethics

In the last two decades, significant events have given organisations of all shapes and sizes cause to reflect on their ethical behaviours and to place greater emphasis on the outcomes of their actions and decisions. The internet has played a huge part in providing a level of transparency, creating advocacy and facilitating open conversations between the many and varied stakeholders an organisation interacts with. From TripAdvisor to Glassdoor, there's a window into what a business or organisation is like before you've booked your holiday or applied for the job.

As a society, we've grown accustomed to speaking up, challenging when things are not right and making our concerns known as consumers and employees. Gone are the days of deference and blithely accepting what we're told. We can check and verify what we're told before we make a commitment to buy or apply.

For internal communications, we've seen the long overdue rise and recognition of diversity and inclusion in the workplace, flexible working practices, a leadership shift from command and control to flatter structures demanding more authentic and human communication. Add to that the 24/7 nature of business and the technology that allows us to work flexibly from anywhere at any time, but also to be contacted at any time - balanced against individual needs and work-life preferences. Historically, much of the discussion of ethics in communication centres on external communication and PR, but the ethical impacts internally are deep and visible beyond organisational boundaries. This needs attention from communications practitioners and leadership.

All of these positive shifts in society, business and working practices present ethical challenges for businesses and for us as communicators.

Significant moments in wider society and culture in recent years have pushed ethics, and specifically the role of internal communications within it, up the agenda. For example, the banking crisis of 2008 and the working practices it exposed have shifted our perceptions of an industry that had previously been held in relatively high esteem. The list of scandals is long, with MP's expenses, workplace bullying in public services, cheating CO_2 emissions standards, sexual abuse and harassment in the media, and avoidable patient deaths in the NHS all being exposed in the last ten years.

Edelman's Trust Barometer has tracked public trust in different organisations across the globe for the last 20 years. It makes for uncomfortable reading as the figures show the credibility of CEOs and politicians in the UK in 2018 flatlining. Currently trust in business stands at 43 percent, while trust in politics is even lower at 36 percent. There's an opportunity for business to fill that trust gap in society, if they tackle the issues affecting reputation. That means going beyond the legal requirements and industry standards, and taking a firm, positive and ethical stance on issues like gender pay gaps, executive pay and environmental impact.

The Institute of Business Ethics' 2018 survey of employees, *Ethics at Work,* found that in Europe, 67% of employees are more likely to speak up about misconduct when a framework is in place. However, the pressure to compromise ethical standards has risen to 16% of employees who say they had felt some pressure to compromise their organisation's ethical standards. Interestingly, 86% of employees in organisations with an ethics programme say their organisation acts responsibly while the figure for those without such a programme is 57%.

"I think the biggest ethical dilemma I have experienced in internal communications was around an organisational change and the impact that it was going to have on the people I worked with.

"I've been in the position of writing communications plans for redundancies and job moves, when the people impacted are friends who I know are currently making life decisions outside of work that may be badly affected. In situations I've worked in, those plans have been under non-disclosure agreements, so there was no question of my being able to discuss them until the embargo was lifted. Nonetheless, it puts you in a difficult position.

"I guess each person who does this kind of work has to find their own way to deal with the dilemma, but it's worth considering the broader implications - you may think it's unethical to keep a secret from a friend that will impact them personally, but it's also unethical to breach a contract, or to fail to deliver against your job requirements. I guess it's up to everyone to consider how they would feel about being in these situations before they sign up for them." Communications Manager

Summary

This guide aims to give you a broad understanding of what ethics are, what they mean for internal communicators and how we can enhance our own ethical practice.

This guide covers:
- What are ethics, morals, values, beliefs and attitudes? How do they interact with each other when making ethical decisions?
- What do ethics mean to us? In our role as communicators in organisations and in our lives as individuals?
- How do ethics help us in our practice and professionalism?
- What tools can help us to understand the role of ethics in our work and help us to make ethical decisions in practice?
- How do ethics interact with our professional judgements and our competencies?

"When communicating to staff about changes to come, messaging and communications were woolly and tended to divert attention from the real issues. I advised the CFO and CMO (senior leadership), on being clear and honest about our position throughout the process. It was important that I steered them towards being authentic about the process to ensure staff didn't feel deceived. Also, to alleviate their fears of repercussions in a heavily unionised organisation, I encouraged engagement with all parties. This would help to take people along with them, rather than leaving employees to make assumptions and possibly shut down the required change." Communications Consultant

What ethics are and what they are not?

Ethics and morals are inextricably linked, and the terms are often used interchangeably when we describe what guides our behaviours and choices. But they are different.

What are ethics?

Ethics are how we organise moral principles into a system or framework to help make decisions about what is right or wrong. Ethics allow us to make decisions with a rational and structured approach.

Defined: "Moral principles that govern a person's behaviour or the conducting of an activity", Oxford dictionary.

Example: Innocent drinks

- Good to the core - ensuring every area of our supply chain meets our sustainability standards.
- Protected futures - protecting the future of our planet and the future of our business.
- Heroes of change - the big stuff we're working on between now and 2020 which we think is pretty special.

What are morals?

Morals are the set of rules or principles, the individual values that we use to guide our lives. They are formed from our experiences of family life, the societies we've grown up in, the people who raised us, the education we have had and our own personal reflections on our actions and beliefs. Many factors help to make us who we are as individuals, and they can evolve as we grow and learn.

Defined: "Concerned with the principles of right and wrong behaviour", Oxford Dictionary.

Example: Teaching children to be good and kind is a core responsibility of parenting. There may be many morals people teach their children to show what it means to be good. Being kind and treating others as you'd like to be treated, being honest and sincere, being courageous and accepting of others are a few examples of family morals.

What are values?

Cultural values are those that guide behaviour in an organisation. As internal communicators we are often helping the organisation share its values and embed them with employees to ensure everyone understands the values and how they interact with their work. Corporate values can range from the survival of the organisation, through financial stability, to protecting the environment. They show the world what an organisation stands for and they should be a true

reflection of the behaviours in the organisation. If there's a gap between what organisations say and what they do, all of their stakeholders can see it, and can hold it to account.

Defined: "Values are the organisation's 'true north', its point of reference" according to Anne Gregory and Paul Willis 2013.

Example: IKEA

- Humbleness and willpower.
- Leadership by example.
- Daring to be different.
- Togetherness and enthusiasm.
- Cost-consciousness.
- Constant desire for renewal.
- Accept and delegate responsibility.

As individuals we all hold our own personal values, a set of ideals that help us form our attitudes and beliefs. Every employee will have their own set of values and will make choices about joining a company depending upon the shared values. For example, if you fervently believed in protecting the environment, it may be a difficult decision for you to work with a company in the oil and gas industry despite desperately wanting to take on the professional challenge that the job may offer you. Values underpin our choices and have a hierarchy to help us make those decisions. What's more important to you, your environmental protection value, or your desire to succeed professionally?

Individual values defined: "conceptions of the desirable means and ends of action" according to Kluckhohn (1951) and "the most important and central elements in a person's system of attitudes and beliefs" Oskamp (1977).

Example: Individual values can be a range of ideals that are important to someone, such as equality, achievement, curiosity or tradition.

What are beliefs?

Beliefs are individual thoughts that we hold about other people, ideas, places, objects or entities. They are subjective and an assertion of what we believe to be true. But beliefs are not necessarily true, and what's more, we may all have different beliefs of the same subject. They can also vary in strength. We tend to categorise our beliefs and when a belief from one category is challenged or inconsistent with another belief, one is liable to change.

Defined: "An acceptance that something exists or is true, especially one without proof." Oxford dictionary.

Example: As individuals we may have a range of beliefs, from religion, politics, climate change to believing in extraterrestrial life.

What are attitudes?

Attitudes are learned, enduring and an emotional response or evaluation of a person, an idea, a place, object or entity. We all have attitudes towards a whole range of subjects and objects. They help us make sense of the world. Attitudes help us understand the rules and how to abide by them, our societal groups and how to fit within them to form relationships, and they can help us express our values (our identity) and to protect us from difficult truths about ourselves and defend our ego. They direct our behaviour and predispose us to act in certain ways. They can be favourable or unfavourable. Because of their influence on behaviour, they are of great interest to researchers and organisations alike. They can change during life and as a result of different experiences.

> **Defined: "An attitude describes a set of beliefs or views held about something and is defined in consumer psychology as an enduring inclination or tendency to respond to a brand or product in a specific way." Defined by the Association of Qualitative Research.**

> Example: We may express our attitudes by publicly displaying them in slogans on clothing or car stickers, for example. In this way we're reinforcing our attitudes with our identity and displaying them to others. Trump supporters wearing 'Make America Great Again' baseball caps are a good example. If our attitudes are used to protect our ego, it may be in response to being embarrassed and having our pride hurt. A child who is ridiculed for poor sporting performance, may develop a dislike for sport, and respond "well I don't like football anyway" to help them protect themselves from the hurt.

How do morals, ethics, values, attitudes and beliefs interact with each other?

As unique individuals we have a complex range of values, beliefs, attitudes and morals. They all help us to be true to ourselves and guide our actions, for both better and worse. But there can be conflicts between them and they may not always be helpful in making the right decisions. Ethical frameworks help us to create clarity around difficult decisions. They allow us to rely less on our own individual and sometimes unreliable belief system, and more on a robust process or framework to guide our decision-making. This is especially important as many decisions are rarely black and white, right and wrong.

"I guess the right to anonymity plays into ethics too. I've had plenty of planned surveys derailed in the past, because it's been impossible to guarantee anonymity to the respondents. This can be frustrating, where you're working hard to establish a culture of dialogue and feedback (as I was!) but the vehement complaint of one person who feels their promotion / bonus / training funding prospects will be ruined by revenge following a breach of anonymity can set back your communications efforts quite a lot! Does the right of one person to anonymity outweigh the helpfulness of a tool to, say, thousands of employees?" Communications Consultant

What do ethics mean to us? In our work as communicators and in our personal lives?

As internal communicators, we need to understand how we make decisions, how our leaders make decisions and how employees make decisions. Every one of us has our own set of morals, values, attitudes and beliefs. In turn, each belief system is the context into which our communication and leadership decisions are processed by individuals.

When we're faced with an ethical challenge, our own personal systems may respond in very different ways. What's acceptable to some may be unacceptable to others. For example, different people may view what's acceptable behaviour differently, with sexual discrimination or harassment this is an especially prevalent discussion currently. What the giver may consider as an off-the-cuff comment or even compliment, could be viewed as inappropriate by the recipient and make them feel uncomfortable.

Knowing how to behave and what is acceptable in different settings helps us all.

Having conversations with different people can show us just how varied our values and beliefs are. This is why an ethical framework is needed within organisations, one that guides behaviour but doesn't dictate. Frameworks guide our practice and decision making without relying so heavily on individual interpretations, of which there are many, and where any single dilemma could be anywhere on a sliding scale from awful to fine.

Awareness

We need to have awareness in the first instance, to recognise that something isn't right or that an ethical dilemma exists. This can depend upon many individual factors, not least your experience and knowledge, but also, critically, on professional competence.

As internal communicators we often reach all parts of the organisation and can be in a unique position of trust and confidence. Where we bring stakeholders together (for example, to share ideas at events or discuss in workshops) we can expose ethical dilemmas. Recognising when we're facing an ethical dilemma is the first hurdle.

Understanding

Understanding your own position on the dilemma is a second important factor, understanding how you judge the situation and being aware of your own limitations and how your views may affect your decision making.

It could be helpful to ask yourself some questions to clarify the situation and your position before seeking advice.

- How do I behave?
- What guides my decision making?

- What are my attitudes, beliefs, values and morals?
- How are they affecting my perspective on the issue at hand?
- Where can I get advice, who can I speak to in confidence to help provide clarity?
- Are there ethical guidelines in the organisation?

Action

Understanding our own position and recognising that we face a dilemma is the first step. Then we need to understand how this affects our practice.

Ethical considerations for our day-to-day work:

1. Be aware that we make decisions on behalf of the organisation that require reflection on our beliefs, values and ethics in our work. The impact of our decisions can have an impact on business, the livelihoods of employees and a wider impact on society.

2. We have obligations and duties to abide by laws, the objectives of our organisations, the push from shareholders and the membership codes of our professional bodies – these can be in conflict sometimes. Ethical frameworks can help us through that maze of conflicting standards and demands.

3. Sometimes, the consequences of our actions need to take precedence – such as protecting employees. Other times, it may be values or principles such as human rights that eclipse the corporate values in our decision making. For example, the Modern Slavery Act 2015 has ensured that businesses 'confirm the steps taken to ensure that slavery and human trafficking are not taking place in the business (or in any supply chain)' as stated in the law.

4. Understand the frameworks that can help us make ethical decisions with confidence. Know that our approach is consistent with leaders and managers in the organisation, and that if needed our decisions made on behalf of the organisation should be able to stand up to scrutiny.

5. As communicators we can help promote ethical practice across organisations. The guidelines / frameworks should be clear and easy to follow, provide standards, reporting processes, an advice line and training. Clarity is key to helping people adopt the ethics and frameworks into their working practices.

6. We use storytelling and language as our canvas to bring ideas and corporate objectives to life. When we use our stories and our language we're embedding the corporate culture through the narrative. Using emotion helps foster connection, but be mindful of the emotions you're appealing to with your communication and the ethics of that approach.

7. Our work leaves a lasting legacy about a moment in time for the organisation. We have a responsibility to take due care with our words and our actions and be prepared to challenge leadership when asked to communicate what we feel would not be appropriate or ethical.

8. The say/do gap is a challenge for many and has the potential to undermine any communication. Securing buy-in and participation from leadership and team leaders is

essential for us as communicators to ensure that what we share is authentic and we are closing the gap between what we say and what we do as an organisation.

9. Our behaviours show the world what we really think. Business processes should make it easier to make the right choices, and employees should feel trusted and empowered to make the right choices. For ethics, rewarding positive choices is more effective than compliance and punishment for making poor choices.

Considerations for when facing an ethical dilemma:

1. When you think you're facing an ethical dilemma, get support - from your business, from your colleagues, or use the confidential helpline from CIPR.
2. Consolidate your thinking around the dilemma. What is the problem, how it does it manifest itself, what are the possible or actual outcomes?
3. Speak up – don't ignore it, be bold and discuss the concern or dilemma with those who have the power to help and support you.
4. Sometimes you have to stand alone in your viewpoint. There may be competing opinions and other professions, such as legal or finance who oppose your view. Be prepared for this to happen and unless the facts change, be firm in your professional advice.
5. Use the experience to help your organisation create an ethical framework.

"It's surprising that company values can be hard to replicate like-for-like in different cultural territories. Once while working in a global team, we were planning to uphold the organisation's support for International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia, Biphobia (IDAHOBIT) day by hosting a live link-up showing the colleagues who had come in dressed in purple and sporting rainbows etc.

"All the teams signed up to the idea and there was an element of light-hearted competitiveness in the planning discussion. Later, one of the members of an overseas team contacted me privately to point out that we were asking his team to act in breach of local laws by supporting illegal activities.

"The ethical dilemma was: do you cancel the event or pretend the live link won't connect to the territory with the challenge, or surface this as an issue everyone should be aware of..?"
Communications Manager

What do ethics mean in organisations and our role within them?

The interaction between an individual's ethics and the ethics of the organisation will be different for each individual. As we've covered previously, we are all different, have had different life experiences and hold different belief systems so our ethical framing may be different (if only slightly) to that of our colleagues. That doesn't make one's views or choices more right or wrong, but it does make the process of ethical decision making a grey area in the absence of an organisational framework. An employee's experience of raising a concern to management may vary considerably depending upon who they report the issue to, for example.

As communicators we have significant influence in the organisations we work in. We are often the bridge between employer and employee, reporting back on surveys and audits about how people feel about their work, the organisation and their managers. What's more, the communication we work on demonstrates the culture and reinforces behaviours, so our language, stories and content need to be consistent and demonstrate ethical approaches. It's important to consider as internal communicators who we serve: the employees or the senior leadership?

Leaders and how they conduct themselves, how they communicate and what they pay attention to maintains or changes an organisational culture. As employees we can respect leaders who are authentic, speak the truth (even when it's not favourable) and who have the courage to stand up for what's right. As internal communicators we support leaders to be open and honest which will in turn increase trust in them from employees. And here again, as internal communicators, we need to be aware of how far we coach leaders or 'ghost write' for them before they lose their authenticity.

Within organisations, the processes and even our workspaces can shape our behaviours. Processes should make it easier to make the right choices, rather than short cuts that cheat the system. Using rewards for ethical behaviour rather than relying on compliance and punishment also help to elevate ethical behaviour. Our knowledge of behaviour change, organisational culture and employee sentiment in our workplaces should be used to highlight and improve the way our organisations work, to mitigate (where possible) unethical behaviours and to reward and recognise good decisions across the organisation.

Internal communicators taking an ethical viewpoint will be mindful of making sure information is timely and relevant for employees, that we give them the opportunity to have their say and that it's listened to.

Five principles to guide ethical communications in practice:

1. Ensure employees receive important organisational information at the right time for them.

2. Ensure employees have a say about what goes on in the organisation and what is said is treated seriously.
3. Ensure senior managers communicate regularly with employees, providing them with important organisational information, listening to their opinions and suggestions and responding to them.
4. Challenge senior managers when important information is not forthcoming.
5. Challenge senior managers when employee voice is not in place across the organisation.

(Walters (2013) in Kevin Ruck's Exploring internal Communication, Third Edition)

"Running internal communications audits can sometimes uncover information and details that can challenge the organisation and culture beyond channels and messaging. I've had people tell me about some very challenging experiences in focus groups and interviews. How you manage those situations as a human-being wanting to support that individual, make their voice heard, retain their anonymity and help the leadership listen and act is a fine balance. I've had scenarios where leaders have been open to criticism and then be really successful, and in contrast those who lock down and refuse to listen. This is hard and they can need encouragement and support to help them to listen and respond. This takes some careful reflection, following a decision-making process that allows you to think clearly, bring objectivity to the situation, create a good outcome for the individual and allow the leadership and organisation to address the issues is ideal. Taking an ethical approach can really help in a situation where the challenges may feel impossible." Communications Consultant

What do ethics in organisations mean in wider society?

All organisations operate within society. They rely on the community for employees who want to work for them, customers who want to buy their goods and services and suppliers who want to do business with them. Acting ethically and responsibly is more than a 'nice to do' in the UK in 2018. In our connected and transparent world, businesses are open to scrutiny by anyone, from the delayed traveller on a train journey home to the parents of neuro-diverse children poorly treated in social care settings. As consumers and employees, we are able to access the information and systems we need to challenge organisations more easily than ever before. There really is nowhere to hide.

How organisations behave is visible to anyone who interacts with them. Day-to-day actions matter and how organisations respond during times of crisis is held under even more scrutiny as actions are brought into sharp focus. Everyone can see an organisation's values at their best, or at their worst, during a time of crisis.

An organisation's behaviour fits with the set of social norms, the law, industry standards and cultural and national context. How a Chinese company operates may be very different to how a UK firm may be run. Different cultural norms that may be considered unethical in the UK could be quite normal and even expected in Asia, for example.

Having clear ethical guidelines in place can help employees across an organisation make decisions within the framework, no matter which country they are based in, so that decisions are appropriate and consistent.

How employees feel about their work and their employer is shared with their friends and family. Each employee makes choices as part of their work. Ethical frameworks and a clear understanding of them can aid organisational reputation beyond the 'walls' of the business.

What happens when it goes wrong?

Despite extensive preparation and good organisational values, there is always a chance that 'good people' can do 'bad things'.

In the last 20 years there have been many notable crises affecting organisations from the BBC to the NHS, Tesco to Volkswagen. Many of the crises that hit the headlines could have been avoided or prevented were it not for the behaviours of some people in organisations who behaved unethically and others who either didn't report it, didn't think it was unethical, or were complicit in the behaviour.

What can happen in organisations in these instances?

- Financial shock as share prices fall, sales drop and customer loyalty is damaged.
- Internal turmoil as people close to the crisis are caught in the crisis cycle, whilst those outside its immediate impact will need to talk with colleagues to make sense of it, and try to understand it in the context of the business they work for and their own values. Depending on the situation, there may be a sense of embarrassment, shame or guilt by association.
- Longer-term damage to the reputation of the organisation – industry and government regulators, professionals working in the industry, financial services, employees and existing and future customers.
- Some people may lose their jobs, either because of their actions, or the knock-on effect of those actions on the organisation.

When things have gone wrong, the outcome can be much harder to fix and each situation is unique. Changes of leadership, culture change programmes and transformation are common responses to significant challenges and crises.

Prevention is always better than cure, so how can organisations protect themselves?

- Open collaborative cultures that provide the right environment for good behaviours, and fewer places for poor behaviours to 'hide'.
- A culture of listening to employees, so that speaking up is normal and a part of the 'nervous-system' of the business.
- Ethical frameworks and values embedded in the workplace and practices.
- Physical space, systems, work practices, and role models provide and demonstrate the expected working systems and standards in the organisation. Ignoring bad behaviours allows for others to imitate. Like broken windows in empty homes become a target for stone throwers, a little 'petty theft' or 'inappropriateness' going unchallenged can present an opportunity for the repetition of these and other unethical behaviours.

Minimising the opportunity for people to make bad choices through positive role models, workplace design, social norms, open cultures and ethical frameworks reduces the chance of temptation.

How do ethics help us in our practice and professionalism?

Ethics and professionalism

Having a code of conduct as CIPR members helps to protect and guide us as individual practitioners.

- A code of conduct can help us succeed and make good decisions for our future, our clients, our employers and their employees. It gives you confidence in your decision making.
- Ethics help us to raise standards, to take a strategic approach, to understand differences and consider the wider implications of our practice across a range of stakeholders.
- Professional ethics are specific to how you do your job.
- Abiding by the *CIPR code of conduct* as a member holds you personally responsible for the actions of your team, staff or subcontractors, even if they are not CIPR members. This means you need to speak out in the event of a situation that you feel is unethical and you may need to stand against other professions when your viewpoint conflicts with theirs.
- For internal communicators, ethics and having a framework is a vital aspect of the balancing act between employee and employer where we often act as the conduit for both to meet at a place of understanding.

How does the code of conduct help us in practice?
- Helps us to work through and demonstrate our thinking and rationale with clarity.
- Helps us to be bold in decision making and clear on our viewpoint.

- Demonstrates a commitment to professional and ethical standards.
- Provides support through contingency and scenario planning and to take preventative steps.
- Helps communicators to listen to employee feedback and for them to express their concerns objectively.
- When communicators report employee feedback they can deliver it on time, with discretion, focussing on what's relevant, accuracy and fairness.

"I was once working on the communications campaign for a large organisational restructure which would fundamentally change how and where many of our staff worked. We collected a number of case studies from some members of staff who were willing to share their stories about the new ways of working and their experience of transitioning into the new organisational structure. These would be used in the last phase of the campaign to help reduce anxiety of those members of staff who were in the later stages of the restructure.

"Just before we were due to release the communications, including the case studies, the senior manager who was sponsoring the project and signing off the communications told me that he felt that the case study material wasn't strong enough.

"Due to the short timescale we were working to, I was asked to manufacture some case studies to highlight the key issues he thought were important, and to attribute these to some of the staff members who had contributed without their permission. I refused, as this would have been a contravention of the integrity, honesty and transparency elements of the CIPR Code of Conduct. I negotiated and bought some extra time to strengthen the case study content, by asking for further contributions from staff who were willing to participate and which could be properly attributed. Coincidentally this ethical issue took place shortly after the story broke about the DWP using fake case studies in some of their welfare reform communications https://www.prweek.com/article/1360627/dwp-admits-using-fake-case-studies-communicate-impact-welfare-changes. " Communications Manager

The Chartered Institute of Public Relations

In 2005, the Royal Charter was awarded to the CIPR which was founded in 1948. The key objective of a Royal Charter is to promote high levels of professionalism which encompass skills, knowledge, competence, practice and professional conduct. Ethics are central to this and the *Code of Conduct* encapsulates these principles. Every member who signs up makes an active decision to abide by that *Code of Conduct*. It helps individual professionals demonstrate their commitment to ethical standards to their employers, clients and others who they work with.

According to the Professional Associations Research Network (PARN) ethical competence is "a key distinguisher between simply having skills and having a true sense of professionalism." Read more about the *Code of Conduct* at cipr.co.uk and the paper, *Integrity, Setting the CIPR Code of Conduct in context*, October 2017.

The core principle of the code of conduct which sets out members' ethical guidelines states that:

Principle 1. Members of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations agree to:

a) maintain the highest standards of professional endeavour, integrity, confidentiality, financial propriety and personal conduct;

b) deal honestly and fairly in business with employers, employees, clients, fellow professionals, other professions and the public;

c) respect, in their dealings with other people, the legal and regulatory frameworks and codes of all countries where they practise;

d) uphold the reputation of, and do nothing that would bring into disrepute, the public relations profession or the Chartered Institute of Public Relations;

e) respect and abide by this Code and related Notes of Guidance issued by the Chartered Institute of Public Relations and ensure that others who are accountable to them (e.g. subordinates and sub-contractors) do the same;

f) encourage professional training and development among members of the profession in order to raise and maintain professional standards generally

Read more on the *Code of Conduct* on the CIPR website cipr.co.uk

"I was once responsible for a regular series of internal communications which covered my organisation's performance against a number of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). The purpose of the communication was to help our staff to better understand current performance, how this linked back to their individual job roles and where extra focus and effort was required. Some of the indicators were influenced by performance reporting which was outside the direct control of our organisation, for example information which was released by a regulator.

"During a particularly difficult time for the organisation I was asked to omit certain information which had been released by the regulator from our internal performance communications. This was because some senior managers felt it would be detrimental to employee morale and this might further impact on how well the organisation was doing.

"I resisted, by explaining that the information I was being asked to omit was in the public domain, could be easily found by anyone choosing to look and by challenging senior management that their leadership would appear to be weak and disingenuous if they were perceived to be burying bad news at a critical time for the organisation. I also pointed out that doing as they asked would mean that colleagues would not have a true picture of what was happening and would therefore be unable to properly contribute to getting things back on track. My challenge was accepted and we continued to provide our staff with a comprehensive and honest view of how well we were performing." Communications Manager

The Institute of Business Ethics

The Institute of Business Ethics (IBE) was created in 1986 by business people for business people. Today it provides advice to a range of businesses.

It's definition of business ethics is:

Business ethics is the application of ethical values to business behaviour. Business ethics is relevant both to the conduct of individuals and to the conduct of the organisation as a whole. It applies to any and all aspects of business conduct, from boardroom strategies and how companies treat their employees and suppliers to sales techniques and accounting practices. Ethics goes beyond the legal requirements for a company and is, therefore, about discretionary decisions and behaviour guided by values.

The IBE aims to demystify the topic of business ethics and to make it practical and tangible. The IBE focuses on how ethical values and standards apply to the world of business. It takes a practical rather than an academic or philosophical approach to helping organisations and their employees with ethical dilemmas so that they are able to 'do the right thing'.

The field of 'professional ethics' is similar but instead focuses on the expected behaviours of professionals, such as doctors, lawyers, accountants and engineers, who are required to follow specific principles or codes or of conduct, usually as members of a professional body or holders of a professional qualification.

For more information on The Institute of Business Ethics visit their website ibe.org.uk

"While in an interim contract, I was subcontracted to manage a project at a company that I had left through redundancy. There were two issues, contractually I was not allowed to work there for two years after leaving and some of the work might clash with the existing IC team. When I was asked to cover the assignment, I immediately raised this so all parties were aware. In the end it wasn't an issue, however to uphold the code around misrepresentation I was willing to back out of the contract if necessary." Communications Consultant

Ethical frameworks

Understanding different approaches to ethics and decision making can help us find clarity in our ethical dilemmas.

These three frameworks are drawn from Anne Gregory and Paul Willis's book, *Strategic Public Relations Leadership*.

Consequentialism

This approach focuses on the outcome of the action. Primarily, it considers the right action is the one that creates the best outcome, which is important. However, be critical and consider how can we know for sure what the outcome of our actions may be? Often our dilemmas are more grey than black and white, good or bad. What if there are conflicting 'benefits' such as more money for shareholders, but less job security for employees? Focusing on the end benefits can also allow companies to excuse their 'poor' behaviour because it's a part of the bigger picture benefits.

Non-consequentialism

Making ethical decisions in this way refers to using core duties or principles to make choices. For example the UN declaration of human rights. Article 1 of 30 states: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." Again, maintaining an open mind and recognising that a set of principles based on this approach may create conflict with each other is critical to ethical decision-making. How do you manage that conflict or grey area? Sometimes maintaining your principles can lead to even wider negative outcomes. Recognising the potential shortcomings of any decision-making framework, even when it's as principled as those listed in the UN declaration of human rights, is important to help you reach a sound outcome.

Virtue

As the name suggests, this focuses on what it is to be virtuous, a good person, a great place to work, or even an inspiring leader. Making decisions in this way puts the emphasis on what it means for example to be a good person, then the choices made are focussed on the individual and how they 'fit' that meaning. But the challenge is vague and unclear. And because it's vague, it's difficult to know what good looks like. Therefore, the decision may vary from person to person, organisation to organisation, industry to industry.
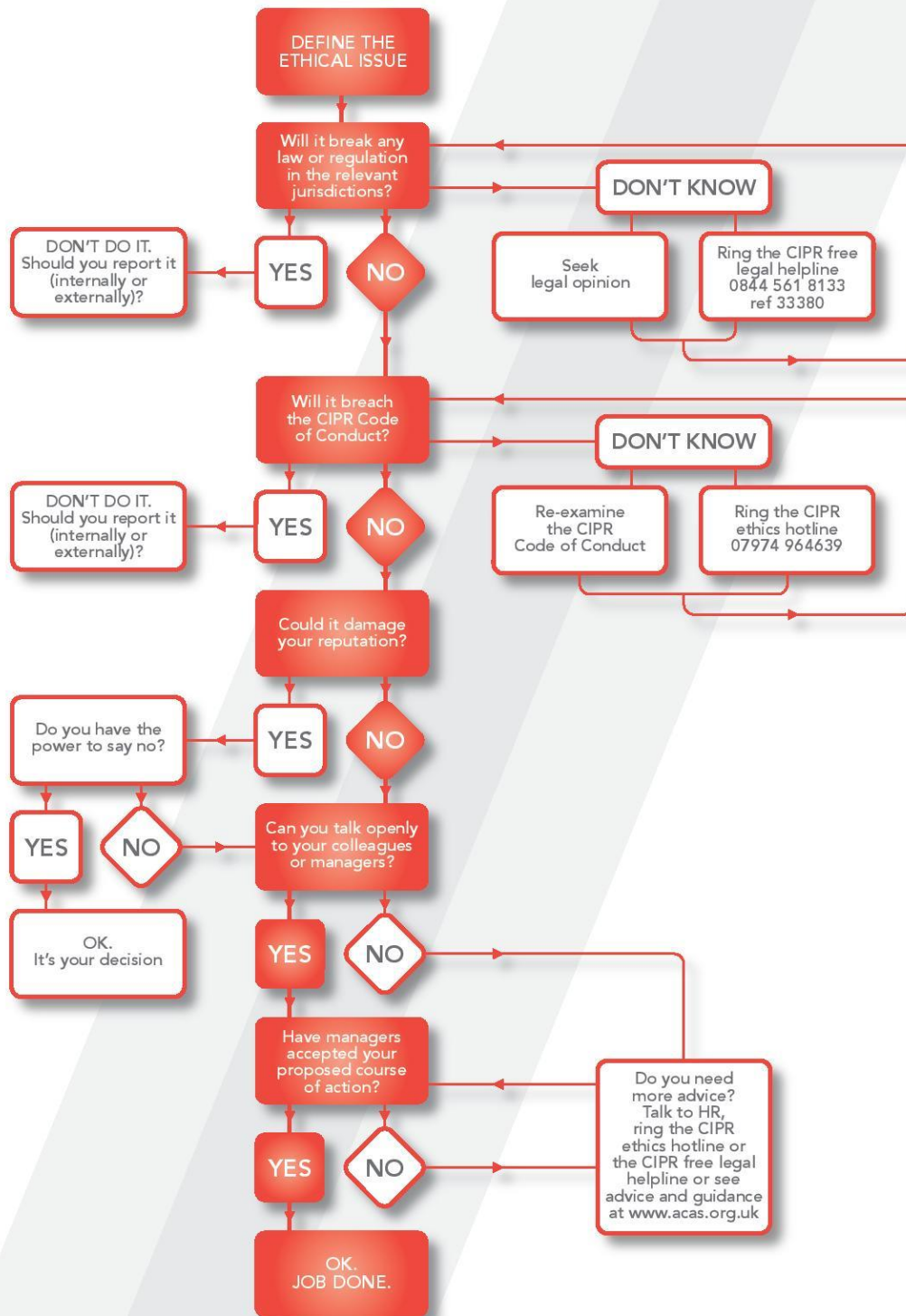
How can ethical frameworks help us?

As practitioners, understanding these ethical frameworks and how they can help our decision making but also their shortcomings, is critical to helping resolve ethical dilemmas in the workplace.

The CIPR decision making tree has been created as a practical tool.

CIPR Code of Conduct Decision Tree VERSION 1

DEFINE THE ETHICAL ISSUE

Will it break any law or regulation in the relevant jurisdictions?

DON'T KNOW
- Seek legal opinion
- Ring the CIPR free legal helpline 0844 561 8133 ref 33380

YES → DON'T DO IT. Should you report it (internally or externally)?

NO

Will it breach the CIPR Code of Conduct?

DON'T KNOW
- Re-examine the CIPR Code of Conduct
- Ring the CIPR ethics hotline 07974 964639

YES → DON'T DO IT. Should you report it (internally or externally)?

NO

Could it damage your reputation?

YES → Do you have the power to say no?
- YES → OK. It's your decision
- NO

NO

Can you talk openly to your colleagues or managers?

YES

NO → Do you need more advice? Talk to HR, ring the CIPR ethics hotline or the CIPR free legal helpline or see advice and guidance at www.acas.org.uk

Have managers accepted your proposed course of action?

YES

NO

OK. JOB DONE.

Some organisations have a comprehensive ethics programme which according to the IBE needs four building blocks to be effective:

1. Having written standards of ethical business conduct.
2. Providing a means of reporting misconduct confidentially.
3. Offering advice or an information helpline about behaving ethically.
4. Providing training on ethical conduct.

IBE, Ethics at work 2018 survey of employees (Europe).

Not all organisations have these building blocks in place, but those that do act more responsibly. According to the IBE report into ethics at work: employees are more likely to speak up; line managers set better examples; and organisations are better at dealing with ethical issues that are raised. So, clear frameworks help us to make better decisions and behave more responsibly.

Using a framework for ethical decision making can:

- Provide clarity in the decision making process.
- Give individuals a wider, more strategic, view beyond their own perspective.
- Reinforce the culture and values of the organisation.
- Support a more open and transparent culture where speaking up is encouraged and supported.
- Provide individuals with reassurance to guide them in their decisions and practice.

As communicators, we're in positions of influence. We can and should encourage a greater sense of ethical behaviour and a clearer approach to ethics in our organisations. As all organisations face greater scrutiny and compete for talent and customers, the great differentiator is our people and how they work.

If your organisation does not have a code of ethics or ethics programme, internal communicators should champion these to help embed consistency across the organisation.

As individual professionals we have our CIPR *code of conduct* to help us guide our decision making. For particularly challenging dilemmas there's a helpline through CIPR that provides advice in confidence.

Next steps
Of course, reading this information is helpful, but change happens when we change as individuals. Consider:

1. How will this knowledge about ethics help you in your professional practice?
2. What are the challenges that your organisation is facing?
3. How can you help your organisation with ethics?

4. Can you help create the clarity and narrative for people to understand and adopt an ethical framework?

5. Can you support leaders to define and adopt an ethical stance for the organisation?

6. What might an ethical framework look like for your organisation?

7. How might an ethical framework be received?

8. What questions might your stakeholders raise?

9. How could you illustrate the benefits of establishing an ethical framework on your organisation and its strategic priorities?

10. Who in your organisation can you work with to make this happen?

References and useful reading

A variety of resources have been referenced in and informed the creation of this paper.

1. CIPR Code of conduct
   https://www.cipr.co.uk/sites/default/files/Appendix%20A%20-%20Code%20of%20Conduct%20-%20Updated%20June%202012_0.pdf

2. CIPR decision tree
   https://www.cipr.co.uk/sites/default/files/10743_CIPR_EthicalDecisionTree_v9.pd

3. CIPR - Integrity – Setting the CIPR Code of Conduct in context (second edition, October 2017) https://www.cipr.co.uk/sites/default/files/Integrity%20FINAL_0.pdf

4. Ethics hotline - For members – If you are concerned about any action you are being asked to take, have any questions or even if you are concerned that you may be at risk of a complaint being made against you, The CIPR Ethics Hotline can advise you. Contact Martin Horrox: 0207 631 6969

5. Edelman trust barometer – annually published report

6. Strategic Public relations leadership, by Anne Gregory and Paul Willis
   https://www.amazon.co.uk/Strategic-Public-Relations-LeadershipGregory/dp/041566795X

7. Exploring internal communication, towards informed employee voice, by Kevin Ruck https://www.amazon.co.uk/Exploring-Internal-Communication-InformedEmployee/dp/1138456098

8. Institute of Business Ethics. Ethics at work survey, 2018 survey of employees, Europe. Online resources and tools. Good Practice Guide - Communicating ethical values internally
   https://www.ibe.org.uk/userassets/publicationdownloads/ibe_survey_report_ethics_at_work_2018_survey_of_employees_europe_int.pdf

Contributors

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Katie Marlow Chart.PR PG (Dip) is a communication consultant who specialises in internal communication. She started her career after graduating in PR from Bournemouth University and has worked in public and private sector in-house roles before founding her consultancy, Little Bird Communication in 2010. Her mission is to help workplaces work better for everyone, and her consultancy supports a range of clients and partners from different sectors to do just that. Katie is also an active member of the CIPR Inside committee and teaches the CIPR Internal Communication Diploma at Bournemouth University.

Helen Deverell

Helen Deverell, BA Hons, PG (Dip), FIIC, is an independent internal communications practitioner with 10 years of experience in both in-house and agency roles. She helps organisations listen to their employees and understand how they can improve their internal communications. She specialises in strategy, content creation, internal communication audits, and writing skills training. Helen is also an active member of CIPR Inside, blogs about the profession, regularly judges awards and has spoken at events, and on webinars, on the topic of internal communication.