

## **Essence of Ethics in Communication in a Global Climate**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The implications of unethical conduct can no longer be overlooked if the intention is to protect one's reputation, hence the importance of having detailed codes of ethics and quality communication devices in business. The cultivation of a moral culture through appropriate modes of communication is a necessary condition if the business corporation is to preserve its reputation and maintain good business relations worldwide. Good communication is a pre-condition if this is to be achieved as ethical differences may arise from divergences in culture across borders. New demands associated with globalisation incorporate a need for greater vision, creativity and quality communication, and therefore requiring the essence of ethics in communication. Often, miscommunication distorts information, with the potential to lead to ethical issues that can be costly to the business entity. At a micro-level, corporate codes of ethics should complement communication. While business partners fulfil their responsibility towards their stakeholders, it is the duty of CEOs to foster corporate social responsibility and sustain efforts towards the convergence of ethics by providing the necessary infrastructure at the organisational level. This includes putting in place appropriate communication mechanisms and ensuring adherence to codes of ethics. Such initiatives would help maintain healthy business relations while contributing to sustained competitive advantage and economic growth. This paper focuses on how to potentially foster ethics and socially responsible behaviour through good communication.

**Keywords: Ethics, business, communication, socially responsible behaviour, globalisation**

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The common perception that business and ethics are not compatible somehow contributes to unethical modes of interacting with business partners. However, considering the costs associated with unethical business, the trend is slowly changing as executives recognise that business decisions impact on the goodwill of their organisation. Unethical modes of doing business tend to affect business relations and economic growth ultimately. In the absence of proper codes of ethics and appropriate communication devices, people may engaged in unethical business. In an attempt to surpass their competitors, business people are prepared to take initiatives that do not respect norms of ethics. Ethics in communication is crucial if we are to stop this tendency and encourage socially responsible conduct. As business partners evolve on an international scene, the climate of globalisation calls for vision, imagination, creativity and judgement (Johnson *et al.*, 2006; Jones and English, 2004; Ratcliffe, 2006).

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This paper focuses on how to foster ethics and socially responsible behaviour through good communication. Measures that help promote ethical behaviour in a global context include codes of ethics, the setting up of appropriate divisions to monitor ethical conduct, the formulation and implementation of ethics training programmes and extensive communication through the introduction of hotlines to encourage people to denounce acts of unethical conduct (Alatas, 1999; Davis *et al.*, 1998; Moran, 1999). More importantly, ethics in communication is vital if the above is to be accomplished. With business growing on the global scene, new and critical perspectives in the form of improved communication technologies and increased involvement of institutions capable of influencing corporate behaviour are being developed to promote the integration of corporations at an international level (Albareda *et al.*, 2006). Ideally globalisation should bring in positive changes in people's lives such as better standards of living as a result of consistent economic growth that is derived from increased trade and investment. However, we must bear in mind that there are real communication problems in the developing world and that in these conditions, the people have yet to be prepared to contribute to technological change and modern communication (Richter and Buttery, 2002).

## 2. ETHICAL ISSUES ACROSS CULTURES

Ethics in communication has enabled recent corporate scandals like Enron, WorldCom and Tyco (USA.), Paramalt and Credit Lyonnais (European context) to shift more attention to the ethical behaviour of organisations. It can therefore be said that ethical issues are not only important to academicians. As ethical dilemmas continue to characterise the world of business with the potential to result in financial and economic crises (Blowfield, 2005; Low and Leong, 2001; Pedigo and Marshall, 2004; Ratcliffe, 2006), it is clear that business decisions involve an element of moral judgement. The implications of immoral conduct in business and costs associated with unethical business can no longer be overlooked. Corporations, as complex social systems evolving on the global scene, need to be managed as such and communication constitutes a crucial part of good management.

The rapid growth in transnational business requires basic consensus on acceptable business practices across cultural boundaries (Argandona, 2003). One of the challenges associated with globalisation has to do with respect for cultural diversity (Gonzalez, 2003). The contemporary confluence of globalisation and ethical pluralism is accountable for many ethical challenges that confront business nowadays. Ahmed *et al.* (2003), like Singhapakdi *et al.* (2001) point out that as more and more nations with different cultural and historical experiences interact in the global economy, the potential for misunderstandings based on different expectations and poor communication is magnified. As more firms either choose to or are forced to compete internationally, ethical questions inevitably arise. This makes it imperative to provide stakeholders with the necessary information through proper communication channels, in an attempt to maintain trust levels and minimise deceptive practices. The quality of communication that one has recourse to, can certainly make a difference.

Pedigo and Marshall (2004) propose relationship building, a strategy that deviates from approaches like imperialism, relativism and universalism, as a means to avoid cross-

cultural ethical dilemmas in international business operations. Complemented with proper systems of communication, this strategy enables business partners to establish mutual trust and relationships with their overseas counterparts so as to facilitate the process of international trade. Education and quality communication must be promoted to assist people and ensure they know what constitutes ethical conduct and good practice. This is particularly important in a context where global partners may encounter divergences of opinion as to what constitutes ethical/unethical behaviour.

As much as it is important for businesses to consider the social, cultural, political and legal differences across the globe and ethical guidelines should be widely communicated to employees. Business executives must identify values that are best for their purpose and for the cultures in which they operate (Pedigo and Marshall, 2004) and communicate those to their stakeholders. Perhaps, an ongoing communication strategy could be devised to positively influence commitment to a culture of ethics in business thereby fostering ethical conduct amongst business partners. There is a call for greater responsibility on the part of business people amidst increasing globalisation, inadequate laws and moral rules and the need to respect stakeholder interests and dignity (Carson, 2003; Garofalo, 2003; Piker, 2002; VanSandt and Neck, 2003). Appropriate means of communication should be established to enable the exchange of information and ideas, encourage discussion (Richter and Buttery, 2002) and arrive at ethical decision-making.

If developing nations are expected to match the standard of ethics observed in developed settings, more effort is needed in emerging economies to inculcate values in the people, create a culture of ethics and promote good communications. Only education and communication can help here. Environmental responsibility is giving way to ethical statements. Global ethics is above all about businesses taking care of the interests of their stakeholders in the course of their transactions (Garofalo, 2001; Garofalo, 2003). Benson (1989) and McClenahan (1995) view the social duty of business from a human relations perspective, emphasising that this includes treating people with respect and honesty. Good people management techniques inclusive of a focus on soft skills, that is both formal and informal modes of communication amongst other attributes, will certainly contribute to accomplishing one's social duty. Employers are expected to fulfil their moral obligation of corporate citizenship. Similarly, some researchers (Armstrong, 2000; Beardwell and Holden, 2001; Ford and Richardson, 1994) consider that business should address ethical issues like worker participation in decision-making and cultural diversity so as to promote ethics in communication and contribute to moral decision-making.

While moral rules may be similar across cultures, their application to specific situations differs across the globe (Miesing and Preble, 1985; Murray, 1996; Wines and Napier, 1992). Jeurissen and Van Luijk (1998) explore intercultural tensions in managerial values and norms in an attempt to identify internationally shared moral principles of business conduct. In this context, empirical fact-finding in the field of diverging and converging ethical cultures becomes significantly important for ethics in international business. Studies in the area of business ethics must keep pace with business development and increased international trade, hence the need for adequate communication across borders so as to ensure cultural

divergences are managed positively (Al-Khatib *et al.*, 2005; Al-Khatib *et al.*, 2007; Cornwell *et al.*, 2005; Dempster *et al.*, 2004; Lopez *et al.*, 2005).

Some studies prove that the influence of culture on the ethical perceptions cannot be underestimated (Husted *et al.*, 1996; Kujala, 2001; Singhapakdi *et al.*, 2001; Tsui and Windsor, 2001). Similarly, demographic and organisational factors can be strong determinants of ethical thinking (Loe *et al.*, 2000). Demographic factors would relate to the ethics of the individual whereas organisational factors would be derived from the corporate culture. One complements the other and both are likely to impact on ethical decision-making. There may, however, be instances where divergences in interpretation lead to ethical dilemmas. Such dilemmas are commonly encountered in global businesses, hence the need to adopt a more proactive approach and enforce ethical communication at national and international levels to minimise the likelihood of problems arising from such divergences.

Davis and Ruhe (2003) are of the opinion that globalisation has increased the need for both existing and future managers to predict the potential for country corruption. Conducting business in a global context requires new cultural vocabularies, new ways of thinking about what is right and what is wrong, and about modern communication devices (Ferrell and Gresham, 1985; Hunt and Vitell, 1986; Murphy and Laczniak, 1981; Paolillo and Vitell, 2002; Singhapakdi *et al.*, 1994; Tsalikis and Nwachukwu, 1991). Culture standardises relationships and provides a common vocabulary that helps individuals adopt a particular pattern of behaviour. Based on Digh's work (1997), one could say that as organisations choose to grow by embarking on global business, they have to envisage the possibility of cultural confusion about rules, ethics and HR policies, potentially leading to communication issues, with potentially distressing and costly results. This justifies greater focus on education and quality communication if businesses are to be cost-efficient and secure ethical convergence. Business executives working across borders are expected to have basic conceptual frameworks that would assist them in their operations. These frameworks would help both understand and confront differences in ethical attitudes and behaviour.

### **3. GOOD BUSINESS PRACTICES AND GLOBAL CHALLENGES**

There are some initiatives that governments can adopt at a national level to ease the process of doing business internationally and project a positive image of their economy. These include leading by example and instilling a moral culture by establishing appropriate communication mechanisms, enforcing legislation and rules of morality and providing education in ethics nationwide. This could assist in securing professional conduct on the part of executives in both the public and the private sector. Many developing nations have well-defined legislation but ethical problems persist as the problem lies with law enforcement and poor communication. If there is consistency and uniformity in implementing the legislation across a nation, this can only encourage businesses to operate in a climate of trust and transparency. The right message needs to be communicated and people must be educated as to the costs associated with unethical conduct. In the long term, communication and education contribute to good business practices, greater equity and higher standards of living. Ethical problems must be handled at a national level so as to ensure better coordination internally, prior to interacting with international business partners. If the

necessary infrastructure is provided, and this includes proper communication devices, the whole of society would benefit in the long run. Customers would eventually have access to better-quality and higher-value products. Good business practices focus on equity and justice enabling business partners to sustain a competitive edge as they communicate resourcefully and operate in transparency. This makes them more credible on a global scene.

Challenges associated with globalisation include integration with society and this entails adapting to other cultures. Business corporations must be proactive and responsive to the needs of their stakeholders on the global market (Carson, 2003; Gibb, 2005; Piker, 2002). They must anticipate the long-term implications of their decisions and acts and fulfil their civic duty accordingly (Ratcliffe, 2006). Business corporations can no longer afford to operate in isolation from their respective community, overlooking the need to communicate proficiently and bypassing laws and moral rules in the profit-making process. Corporations worldwide need to develop a profound sense of responsibility. The challenges accompanying globalisation and economic change call for corporate responsibility as a concept in government action (Albareda *et al.*, 2006). This includes giving a new dimension to public policy that would give way to better communication and more ethical leadership. Corporate responsibility relates to issues that influence government agendas and the relationship between various groups of stakeholders including social agents, governments, business entities and civil society, hence the need to communicate professionally.

Good business practices require adherence to high standards of ethics and quality communication. There is increasing pressure on global businesses to communicate creatively and act in a socially responsible manner. Measures adopted by different organisations, in an attempt to foster ethical communication include the implementation of codes of ethics, the employment of ethics officers, preparation and the implementation of comprehensive corporate training programmes and communication mechanisms like hotlines to encourage employees to report acts of unethical conduct (Granitz, 2003; Miner and Petocz, 2003). There is the belief that corporate codes of ethics must be accompanied by appropriate education and communication, if they are to be fully effective (Cohen *et al.*, 2001). A visible formula is needed if ethics in communication and, along with this, ethical modes of behaviour are to be promoted on the global market. One of the conditions to securing good conduct on the part of employees is proper communication and ethical management on the part of business leaders. As global businesses aspire to greater integration and cohesion, people at the head of those institutions need to demonstrate new leadership abilities, human relations skills, be good communicators, and act in a socially responsible manner.

Global businesses should focus on value-based management, corporate social and ethical responsibility and accountability through better systems of communication. Bell (2005) and Albareda *et al.* (2006) share similar ideas, highlighting the role of government in the advancement of corporate responsibility and sustainable business. Other than control mechanisms and institutions that are normally viewed as obstacles to the smooth running of business in capitalist systems, survival in this rapidly evolving global economy requires the acquisition of more relevant competencies like high-level performance in cultivating organisational alliances, partnerships and synergy across frontiers (Gibb 2000; Ghoshal,

2005; Ratcliffe, 2006). Global business partners aspire to trust relationships and value maximisation, which necessitates a deeper understanding of ethical standards than what the typical economics discussion of short-run profit maximisation recommends. Good communication is a prerequisite to making this work, hence minimising conflicts. Considering the common perception that ethics is incompatible with business, business executives have yet to be convinced that ethical behaviour is beneficial and particularly important in financial services, where reputation and goodwill are as important as performance and profits (Zekos, 2004). Global challenges across cultures involve psychological contracts appropriate for both an international context and an information era. Engaging in multicultural business requires both adapting one's ethical perceptions to those of global partners and providing the transfer of technology as deemed appropriate (Gibb, 2005).

Employees may need assistance if they are to successfully address ethical dilemmas (Burns and Brady, 1996; De Arruda and De Arruda, 1999; Dharma Deo Sharma, 1998; Digh, 1997). Failure to help them develop ethical thinking at an operational level may deprive them of the ability, knowledge and ethical judgement necessary to effectively handle ethical issues that arise in the normal course of their activities, particularly in a context of globalisation where trust, personal shrewdness and personalised service are preconditions to good business (Albareda *et al.*, 2006; Ratcliffe, 2006). At the same time, if people are unable to act in a professionally acceptable manner and are unable to apply moral reasoning to resolve ethical problems, this can only add to the cost structure of their organisation (Robinson, 1998; Segal, 1999; Tanzi, 1998). General rules should be established to minimise the likelihood of unethical conduct in the context of international business. Pedigo and Marshall (2004) emphasise the essence of corporate policy or specific organisational standards of conduct that lay out preferred operating practices and behaviour when embarking onto international business. A means of achieving such objectives is to communicate proficiently and ethically at all levels. After all, the aim is to reflect corporate values and norms and guide policy makers in their decision-making process when confronted with ethical dilemmas, particularly where the payment of bribes and gift giving is concerned. This can be accomplished if all stakeholders willingly unite their efforts and there is good communication.

Ethics can act both as a preventive and remedial measure to ensure professional conduct in business, encourage adherence to legal and moral rules and promote trust (Argandona, 2003; Albareda *et al.*, 2006; Ratcliffe, 2006). However, in spite of efforts undertaken by researchers and practitioners in the first world, the results of the contemporary ethics movement are unclear. If fear, frustration and cynicism act as barriers to the convergence of ethics (Garofalo, 2003), such factors are bound to hinder the communication process and lead to potential misunderstandings. In fact it is quite common to come across such negative feelings amongst industry leaders considering the prevailing perception that ethics is incompatible with business. Can ethics training through proper communication help change mindsets as stated in the literature (Baker and Veit, 1998; Zekos, 2004)? Or is ethics training rule- or compliance-oriented, legalistic and superficial, leading to cynicism, boredom and passivity, that it is a meaningless exercise that is not at all motivating for the individual? Ideally ethics training, assuming there is proper communication, should bring along more positive attitudes and behaviours, thereby broadening individual and organisational

perspectives and contributing to an ethical culture. Other than providing training in ethics, it is the responsibility of the business executive to foster an ethical climate by communicating essential messages on a regular basis, instilling trust in the system. The aim should be to create a sense of belonging with the organisation and eliminate the compelling factors and negative feelings that cause the individual to engage in unethical behaviour. Ethics has been incorporated in training programmes worldwide but yet, there is little evidence of ethical leadership in the business community (Garofalo, 2003).

Although “corporate codes of ethics play a key educational role by efficiently communicating corporate expectations to employees and by demonstrating to them how certain kinds of behaviour reduce the value of the company” (Zekos, 2004: 634), it is even better if governments support the move towards ethical convergence by assisting businesses that develop appropriate programmes of ethics and corporate responsibility. Governments should encourage exchange across borders so as to identify and implement the best practices at international level (Albareda *et al.*, 2006). Communication should be fostered, mass education provided and every citizen be trained in ethics so as to be able to apply moral reasoning objectively when faced with ethical dilemmas. Although it is easy to generalise about ethics, it is more difficult to make a decision when confronted with an ethical problem. One must be careful when faced with such a situation because the decision opted for may have repercussions on both the ability of the organisation to do business profitably and the welfare of stakeholders, hence affecting the reputation of the organisation. Clear communication systems coupled with clear rules of ethics can assist in making ethical choices.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This paper considered ways of deterring unethical conduct. These include communication, education through the formulation and implementation of ethics training programmes, control systems, and extensive communication at all levels. Corporate codes of ethics and training in ethics offer possible solutions, assuming CEOs believe in the essence of good communication, are committed to ethics, and lead by example. This means that it is worth nurturing values that would lead to the development of an ethical climate in the workplace. The influence of communication and culture on ethical decision-making is significant as prevalent norms and beliefs impact on ethical thinking and ultimately on decision-making. Consumers as stakeholders, expect ethical behaviour on the part of business corporations, which implies that businesses have a social duty to fulfil, hence the notion of stakeholder theory. Research findings show that it is possible to control unethical conduct by devising a particular strategy that incorporates efficient communication, management commitment, role modelling and ethics training. With increasing globalisation, it is important to avoid confrontation with business partners, as cultural differences are likely to be encountered throughout interactions in a global environment with the potential to lead to communication issues. The essence of civic duty in global business needs to be reinforced. Today, business entities are expected to fulfil their social responsibility and demonstrate a sense of caring towards their stakeholders (Collier and Fuller, 2005; Kujala, 2001; Pruzan, 1998; Ratcliffe, 2006). Ethics in communication is certainly the key to strengthening the ethics of caring.

Limited academic work has been conducted in the field of business ethics in the developing world, the existing literature being limited to general statements of distaste that deplore the decline of ethical standards. More in-depth research in the field of ethics is required and more emphasis should be put on the essence of ethics in communication and education. Existing methodologies and findings must be expanded in ethical research and efforts must be deployed to address the inaccuracies of research conclusions in differing cultures.

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