Designing documents: Using the art of persuasion to influence with integrity

by Teri Quimby

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Did you send or receive an email today? Or a text? These tools are some of our most common communication choices. Whether we're talking about emails or components of compliance and ethics programs, the written words we choose likely have a purpose: to compel or prevent an action by a person or otherwise provide information.

But are we making these and other communications as effective and efficient as they can be, and are we constructing them with integrity?

Close the communication loop

Communication is not a one-way street. The email author, code of conduct creator, or rule drafter may think a message is clearly received from the sender's perspective. However, an accurate and shared understanding of the content may not occur on the receiving end. Unless a complete communication loop happens, results may not meet the sender's expectations. Specifically, we may think the code of conduct is clear, yet wonder why misconduct occurs.

Poorly executed communication is more common than we think. This is likely because we often make messages more complex than they need to be, which lessens the likelihood that a reader starts, finishes, or comprehends the content. Communication design flaws may occur due to hastiness, carelessness, lack of planning, and more. Regardless of the reason, if the communication falls short of achieving the intended purpose, is the reader or receiver of the information to blame? Closing the communication loop requires careful planning and consideration of the intended purpose and receiver's needs.

The human component

As humans, we may often find ourselves speaking with some degree of sloppiness. Colloquialisms and filler words are excused—and often expected—in conversation. But with written words, we can carefully craft communication and edit excessive or unnecessary parts. Further, we can focus on communicating with clarity. We have time to think about our audience, their needs, and our purpose. What are we sharing? What message are we trying to convey? What are we trying to persuade people to do or not do? How are we getting them to reach a decision—a decision that must be their own and made for their own reasons? We can both maintain our professionalism and humanize our messages to meet our needs by keeping in mind that multiple people are involved in the communication loop.

The idea of "humanizing" our messages is not new, although our individual discovery and implementation of it may be. In his book *Humanizing Rules, Bringing Behavioural Science to Ethics and Compliance*, Christian Hunt makes insightful observations. One of the many observations offered includes this: "Whenever things go wrong – in

organisations or society – there is always a human component involved."[1] The author also highlights the point that people can create problems or make them worse with their responses. Keeping these thoughts in mind can assist in creating better compliance and ethics programs.