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Code of ethics: The power of words

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The renowned philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote: “The limit of my language is the limit of my world.”^[1] The power of words—whether spoken or written—is undeniable. As such, they have a powerful influence on behavior. They can inspire people to go beyond the call of duty or lead them in the opposite direction to unethical behavior. The code of ethics is the best known and oldest document for the promotion of the ethical decision-making process. Professions such as medicine have had a code of conduct for more than 2,000 years. A code of ethics not only sets the rules of behavior in an organization but also articulates and formalizes important shared values of an organization. But how we formulate and write a code of ethics—especially from the grammatical and linguistic point of view—is of crucial significance for the effectiveness of a code of ethics.

The effectiveness of a code of ethics

A code of ethics is a document that defines a set of principles and rules that help an organization manage and govern its decision-making process; it also assists decision-makers to distinguish between right and wrong. The most widely accepted definition of a code of ethics is “a distinct and formal document containing a set of rules developed by and for a company to guide the present and future behavior of at least its managers and employees on a range of issues toward each other, the company, external stakeholders, and/or society at large.”^[2]

In general, a code of ethics is an integral part of an organization’s ethical infrastructure^[3] and its compliance programs.^[4] As a result, a code of ethics has become part of regulatory requirements at the national (e.g., Section 406 of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act) or industry level (e.g., European Banking Authority: Guidelines on Internal Governance). However, while a formal code of ethics is now considered a must in organizations, its effectiveness in promoting ethical intentions and behaviors is still debatable.^[5]

The effectiveness of a code of ethics has been studied at several levels, among others:

- Its design, where codes with lower levels of commitment lead to poorer ethical behavior;^[6]
- Its content, where sanctions specified in the code have a limited effect on ethical behavior;^[7] and
- Related compliance programs, where a code with a greater number of other components in compliance programs (e.g., training, communication, compensation, etc.) leads to better ethical behavior.^[8]

While these studies provide vital insight into the complex process of code effectiveness, one aspect remains equally essential. This is the impact of language or written words in a code of ethics on the decision-makers’ behavior.

The purpose of this article is to be a guide to the writing of a code of ethics from a linguistic point of view. Based

on various studies—especially from the fields of psychology and behavioral science—we will show which words and language structure should be used in a code of ethics for maximum impact and effectiveness.

“Must” is better than “should/may”

The most widely researched topic has to do with the use of the word obligation or duty in the code of ethics. Words without a strong connotation of obligation (must, forbid) compared to a lesser tone (should, may) result in lower code compliance. Being negative (forbidding) is also thought to help deter unethical behavior. However, prohibiting too much can also be detrimental.^[9]

This was also confirmed by a later study, as companies and organizations that publish codes of ethics were able to achieve higher levels of compliance with the code when the code language contained medium or high obligations (members will/should) as opposed to low obligation language (members can/may).^[10]

In summary, to ensure that the organization’s expectations for ethical behavior are understood, a negative tone in the code of ethics is necessary.^[11]

“We/I” instead of “they/it”

Using “direct” pronouns (such as we and I) suggests a higher level of acceptance of the code of ethics than using indirect pronouns (e.g., they, it, or organization/company). Research found that the phrase, “We are committed to integrity” achieves higher commitment levels is more effective with promoting ethical behavior than, “The organization is committed to integrity.”^[12]

This approach is highly popular in the new age of thinking (e.g., Simon Sadek), especially in psychology, because it seems that with direct subject words, the brain accepts the wording as its own and not something external. In addition, research has confirmed that people who participated in creating rules—rather than simply being given rules—had higher results in following those rules.^[13]

This also explains the use of active/passive voice in ethical codes. Even though the practice of passive voice is more widespread in the English language than in some others (e.g., French, German, etc.),^[14] research has shown that it is probably because the passive voice forces the nonpersonal relationship to the action; using the passive voice in the code of ethics is not appropriate if the organization wants its stakeholders to accept the code of ethics.^[15]

Keep it simple and clear

Sometimes, people want to be posh, so they use big words to make themselves sound more sophisticated. Unfortunately, this is not the way to go in ethics.

The process of nominalization—in which a noun is formed from another word (e.g., qualify – qualification) or a noun phrase replaces the base phrase (e.g., “adoption of policies and practices” to “we have adopted policies and practices”)—has been shown to have a negative effect on the effectiveness of codes of ethics. The code of ethics is written for people to use in everyday practice. As such, it should be easy to understand.^[16]

The same is true of grammatical metaphors. In everyday communication, the speaker or writer often uses expressions that are not taken literally by the listener or reader. Grammatical metaphors (often nominalization) can be used as nonliteral usage to give the text an academic message (e.g., “improving the performance of chemical production and transport” where performance is understood as “the way chemicals are produced and

transported” versus “in the daily performance of one’s work”). The code of ethics has recently become a tool for compliance officers, usually law graduates, which could explain the imposition of legalese to sneak into the code of ethics.^[17]

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