CHAPTER 3

Speaking Ethically

Sometimes, a speaker succeeds in getting a point across or in persuading an audience but does so in a manner that is manipulative, exploitative, dishonest, or otherwise offensive. These cases raise questions about the ethical obligations of all speakers. Ethical questions do not ask, What works? but rather ask, What is right?

Fortunately, effective speaking and ethical speaking usually go together. There are no guarantees, though, that audiences will always respond best to those speakers who take the moral high ground; history is replete with examples of speakers who used all sorts of questionable tactics and were rewarded with great success. Ultimately, the question transcends the simple yes/no choice of, Can I get away with it? and moves to the more complex realm of personal values, where each speaker has to decide what is ethically justifiable, based on beliefs about such fundamental matters as how people should treat one another and what counts as honesty.

In one sense, ethical beliefs are so individual that they seem almost to be a matter of each person’s own conscience. Yet our beliefs about right and wrong are highly influenced by other people. The National Communication Association has established a code of ethics to guide communicators that can be reviewed at http://www.natcom.org/policies/External/Ethical/Comm.htm. Other, less formal, codes of ethical conduct come to us through family, religion, and culture.

3a. Be aware of ethical implications of your choices

Every human action has an ethical dimension. No decision a speaker makes is morally neutral. We speak because we believe that what we say will make a difference. And it does. The results of a speech can be as serious as persuading others to follow a dangerous course of action or as apparently harmless as wasting their time with an unprepared and unfocused message. Every time you speak, you exercise power and assume responsibility for the consequences of what you do or do not say.

1 Ethical decisions are rarely clear-cut

Often, the answer to questions about what works in public speaking is, It depends. Questions about what is the right or ethical course of action are just as complex. Our ethics grow from our values, and values sometimes conflict. Rarely are there black-and-white choices. The best we can do most of the time is to select the lighter shade of gray. As communicators, we are obligated to think hard about each case and to develop our judgment through experience and reflection.
2 Ethical decisions vary with context

In a speech tournament, a debater might argue for legalized prostitution at 9:00 and argue against it at 10:30. In this context, it is understood that the rules of the game are to defend the assigned side of a topic as vigorously and skillfully as possible. This is considered no more unethical than the case of the football team that defends the north goal in the first and third quarters and just as vigorously defends the south goal in the second and fourth. However, we judge as very unethical a candidate who takes one position when addressing voters in Oregon and the opposite position in Kansas. This is because, as critical listeners in the political arena, we view such public speeches not as part of a game but as sincere statements of the speaker’s true beliefs.

What you can pass off as your own words varies as well. Political leaders are assumed to employ speechwriters who draft many of their speeches for them. This is considered ethical because the demands on public servants make it impossible for them to personally prepare each speech they give. However, in an academic speech class, it is well understood that students are expected to create and deliver their own speeches because the learning experience depends on acquiring a variety of skills and being assessed in them. To use your friend as a ghostwriter is clearly plagiarism in this context. (See 3b.)

KEY POINT Be True to Yourself and Your Listeners As a public speaker, you are not simply a transmitter of messages; you also put yourself (your individual self) in contact with an audience. Though you may adapt and adjust and accommodate to meet your goals, you have an ethical obligation to be true to yourself. When you’ve finished a speech, regardless of how anyone else responds, you should always feel good about what you said and how you said it.

Public speakers have a special kind of power. When audience members entrust you with their time and attention, you take on an obligation to treat them with fairness and concern. You have every right to pursue your own reasons for speaking, but not at the expense of your listeners’ welfare.

3b. Respect the integrity of ideas

A commitment to this principle requires that you take a larger view of how each individual speech act either reinforces or abrades the fabric of society. To live and work together, people have to trust that, on the whole, communication proceeds honestly and reliably.

1 Don’t plagiarize

Besides yourself and your audience, there are others, not present, to whom you have some ethical obligations. These are the people
whose ideas and words you draw into the speech situation. Some individuals who would never dream of stealing another person’s property seem to think it is somehow acceptable to steal a scholar’s solution to a problem or to borrow a friend's outline for a speech. The ethics of public speaking generally proscribe using another’s major ideas or exact words—or even paraphrasing them—without giving credit to the source. Plagiarism is a serious offense in academic institutions and in the world of publishing. Careers have been ruined when public leaders have been exposed as plagiarists.

To avoid even the appearance of unethical appropriation of speech content, form the habit of taking careful notes of the sources of all your ideas, statistics, and evidence. And when you hear a wonderful anecdote, story, or turn of phrase you might like to quote someday, make a note right then so you will remember to give credit to the source. (See 16d, f.)

There are several resources to guide you in avoiding even the appearance of plagiarism. Refer to http://northwestern.edu/uacc/plagiar.html or http://washington.edu/courses/tc231/course_info/plagiarism.htm or http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/print/research/r_plagiar.html.

2 Don’t lie

Rarely do we live up to the standard of “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth” in everyday interactions. The phrase it depends always crops up in conversations about what counts as a lie, a white lie, a fib, a prevarication, or tactful phrasing. In public speaking, however, the following categories of behavior cross the line between honest and dishonest speech.

- **Making statements that are counterfactual.** This is pretty obvious. Saying, “I have no financial interest in this fitness center. I just care about your health” when you receive a commission for every new member you enroll is dishonest.

- **Playing word games to create a false impression.** Sometimes, a speaker can use words with precise definition, being technically correct but totally misleading: “In response to allegations of illegal drug use, let me say that I have never broken the laws of this country” [when the drug use was in another country].

- **Leaving out some part of “the whole truth” that, if known, would reverse the impact of the statement.** Saying “We have totally dominated the Smurge Company in our market” is misleading if you neglect to mention that the domination happened in only one quarter out of four.

3 Don’t oversimplify

Another dimension of the integrity of ideas has to do with faithfulness to the facts and realities of your subject matter. Although we can hardly say that there is one “real truth” on any complex issue,
we can say that some accounts are so shallow or oversimplified as to provide a basically false picture. Before you speak in public, thus contributing to and shaping the public discourse on a topic, you have an ethical obligation to look beneath the surface.

### CHECKLIST

**Finding a Balance in Ethical Decisions**

- Balance the value of using language in a lively and forceful manner against the risk of causing pain and offense.
- Balance the importance of appealing to your audience at an emotional level against the risk of abusing emotional appeals.
- Balance the right to use compelling persuasive appeals against the obligation to avoid simplistic persuasive techniques.

Another form of oversimplification is exemplified by the classic list of propaganda devices identified by a group of journalists some decades ago that sets forth the techniques unethical speakers can use to short-circuit an audience’s rational processes.\(^1\)

- **Name-calling.** By attaching a negative label to an idea or a person, a speaker can provoke fear or hatred in an audience. The speaker hopes this tide of emotion will gloss over the lack of substance in his or her position.

- **Glittering generalities.** At the other extreme is the use of words or phrases that represent some abstract virtue like patriotism or motherhood to generate a positive response rather than dealing with the merits of a position.

- **Testimonials.** Another way to generate positive emotions is to link a popular figure with some cause or product. Here, the speaker replaces sound argument with a possibly inappropriate extension of the person’s credibility from another area.

- **“Just plain folks.”** It is fine to build identification with an audience so that members are receptive to the ideas presented. This process goes too far, though, when the speaker implies, “You should believe me, not because of the inherent validity of what I say, but because I’m just like you.”

- **Card stacking.** In this method, a speaker carefully uses only facts or examples that bolster a particular position, and the highly biased selection is passed off as representative.

- **The bandwagon.** This technique is useful to a speaker who wishes to discourage independent thinking. The “everyone is

doing it” approach appeals to the need for security and plays on fears of being different or left out. A proposition should be sold on its merits, not on its popularity.

This list is far from comprehensive. Effective persuaders also use such techniques as snob appeal (the opposite of “just plain folks”) and stand-out-from-the-crowd (the opposite of the bandwagon). Such persuasive appeals are questionable whenever they serve to distract listeners from important issues, cloud important distinctions, introduce irrelevant factors in the decision-making process, or use emotional appeals inappropriately or excessively.

CHAPTER 4
Overcoming Fear of Speaking

Stage fright, communication apprehension, speech anxiety, reticence, shyness—these are among the most researched and analyzed variables in the literature on communication, precisely because the problem of feeling fearful about a public presentation is so widespread. Experts offer some ways of thinking about this problem that can help you become more comfortable and confident when you speak in public. There are techniques you can use to work toward this goal as well.

4a. Put your fear into perspective

Many speakers try to be calm in every speech situation. This is unrealistic.

1 Accept some fear as normal

All speakers feel some fear, and for most of us the feeling can be managed and sometimes even turned to positive effect. The more speeches you give, the more confident you will become. You will recognize that fear is usually worst just prior to the speech and during the introduction. Once your speech is under way and the audience responds to you, negative emotions are often replaced by exhilaration.

2 Analyze your fear as specifically as possible

“I’m scared to death” is a common statement that describes the emotional intensity of stage fright, but in reality, few people expect the experience to be fatal. An amorphous, ill-defined fear cannot be dealt with, though. Dealing logically with this fear requires examining its components so you can isolate a number of specific problems to be solved.