

## 2.2 Ethics in Public Speaking

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand how to apply the National Communication Association (NCA) Credo for Ethical Communication within the context of public speaking.
2. Understand how you can apply ethics to your public speaking preparation process.

The study of ethics in human communication is hardly a recent endeavor. One of the earliest discussions of ethics in communication (and particularly in public speaking) was conducted by the ancient Greek philosopher Plato in his dialogue *Phaedrus*. In the centuries since Plato's time, an entire subfield within the discipline of human communication has developed to explain and understand communication ethics.

### Communication Code of Ethics

In 1999, the National Communication Association officially adopted the Credo for Ethical Communication (see the following sidebar). Ultimately, the NCA Credo for Ethical Communication is a set of beliefs communication scholars have about the ethics of human communication.

#### National Communication Association Credo for Ethical Communication

Questions of right and wrong arise whenever people communicate. Ethical communication is fundamental to responsible thinking, decision making, and the development of relationships and communities within and across contexts, cultures, channels, and media. Moreover, ethical communication enhances human worth and dignity by fostering truthfulness, fairness, responsibility, personal integrity, and respect for self and others. We believe that unethical communication threatens the quality of all communication and consequently the well-being of individuals and the society in which we live. Therefore we, the members of the National Communication Association, endorse and are committed to practicing the following principles of ethical communication:

- We advocate truthfulness, accuracy, honesty, and reason as essential to the integrity of communication.
- We endorse freedom of expression, diversity of perspective, and tolerance of dissent to achieve the informed and responsible decision making fundamental to a civil society.
- We strive to understand and respect other communicators before evaluating and responding to their messages.
- We promote access to communication resources and opportunities as necessary to fulfill human potential and contribute to the well-being of families, communities, and society.
- We promote communication climates of caring and mutual understanding that

respect the unique needs and characteristics of individual communicators.

- We condemn communication that degrades individuals and humanity through distortion, intimidation, coercion, and violence, and through the expression of intolerance and hatred.
- We are committed to the courageous expression of personal convictions in pursuit of fairness and justice.
- We advocate sharing information, opinions, and feelings when facing significant choices while also respecting privacy and confidentiality.
- We accept responsibility for the short- and long-term consequences of our own communication and expect the same of others.

Source: <http://www.natcom.org/Default.aspx?id=134&terms=Credo>

## Applying the NCA Credo to Public Speaking

The NCA Credo for Ethical Communication is designed to inspire discussions of ethics related to all aspects of human communication. For our purposes, we want to think about each of these principles in terms of how they affect public speaking.

### **We Advocate Truthfulness, Accuracy, Honesty, and Reason as Essential to the Integrity of Communication**

As public speakers, one of the first ethical areas we should be concerned with is information honesty. While there are cases where speakers have blatantly lied to an audience, it is more common for speakers to prove a point by exaggerating, omitting facts that weigh against their message, or distorting information. We believe that speakers build a relationship with their audiences, and that lying, exaggerating, or distorting information violates this relationship. Ultimately, a speaker will be more persuasive by using reason and logical arguments supported by facts rather than relying on emotional appeals designed to manipulate the audience.

It is also important to be honest about where all your information comes from in a speech. As speakers, examine your information sources and determine whether they are biased or have hidden agendas. For example, you are not likely to get accurate information about nonwhite individuals from a neo-Nazi website. While you may not know all your sources of information firsthand, you should attempt to find objective sources that do not have an overt or covert agenda that skews the argument you are making. We will discuss more about ethical sources of information in [Chapter 7 "Researching Your Speech"](#) later in this book.

The second part of information honesty is to fully disclose where we obtain the information in our speeches. As ethical speakers, it is important to always cite your sources of information within the body of a speech. Whether you conducted an interview or read a newspaper article, you must tell your listeners where the information came from. We mentioned earlier in this chapter that using someone else's words or ideas without giving credit is called **plagiarism**. The word "plagiarism" stems from the Latin word *plagiaries*, or kidnapper. The American Psychological Association states in its publication manual that ethical speakers do not claim "words and ideas of another as their own; they give credit where credit is due." American Psychological Association. (2001). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association* (5th ed.). Washington, DC: Author, p. 349.

In the previous sentence, we placed quotation marks around the sentence to indicate that the words came from the American Psychological Association and not from us. When speaking informally, people sometimes use “air quotes” to signal direct quotations—but this is not a recommended technique in public speaking. Instead, speakers need to verbally tell an audience when they are using someone else’s information. The consequences for failing to cite sources during public speeches can be substantial. When Senator Joseph Biden was running for president of the United States in 1988, reporters found that he had plagiarized portions of his stump speech from British politician Neil Kinnock. Biden was forced to drop out of the race as a result. More recently, the student newspaper at Malone University in Ohio alleged that the university president, Gary W. Streit, had plagiarized material in a public speech. Streit retired abruptly as a result.

Even if you are not running for president of the United States or serving as a college president, citing sources is important to you as a student. Many universities have policies that include dismissal from the institution for student plagiarism of academic work, including public speeches. Failing to cite your sources might result, at best, in lower credibility with your audience and, at worst, in a failing grade on your assignment or expulsion from your school. While we will talk in more detail about plagiarism later in this book, we cannot emphasize enough the importance of giving credit to the speakers and authors whose ideas we pass on within our own speeches and writing.

Speakers tend to fall into one of three major traps with plagiarism. The first trap is failing to tell the audience the source of a direct quotation. In the previous paragraph, we used a direct quotation from the American Psychological Association; if we had not used the quotation marks and clearly listed where the cited material came from, you, as a reader, wouldn’t have known the source of that information. To avoid plagiarism, you always need to tell your audience when you are directly quoting information within a speech.

The second plagiarism trap public speakers fall into is paraphrasing what someone else said or wrote without giving credit to the speaker or author. For example, you may have read a book and learned that there are three types of schoolyard bullying. In the middle of your speech you talk about those three types of schoolyard bullying. If you do not tell your audience where you found that information, you are plagiarizing. Typically, the only information you do not need to cite is information that is general knowledge. General knowledge is information that is publicly available and widely known by a large segment of society. For example, you would not need to provide a citation within a speech for the name of Delaware’s capital. Although many people do not know the capital of Delaware without looking it up, this information is publicly available and easily accessible, so assigning credit to one specific source is not useful or necessary.

The third plagiarism trap that speakers fall into is re-citing someone else’s sources within a speech. To explain this problem, let’s look at a brief segment from a research paper written by Wrench, DiMartino, Ramirez, Oviedo, and Tesfamariam:

The main character on the hit Fox television show *House*, Dr. Gregory House, has one basic mantra, “It’s a basic truth of the human condition that everybody lies. The only variable is about what” (Shore & Barclay, 2005). This notion that “everybody lies” is so persistent in the series that t-shirts have been printed with the slogan. Surprisingly, research has shown that most people do lie during interpersonal interactions to some degree. In a study conducted by Turner, Edgley, and Olmstead (1975), the researchers had 130 participants record their own conversations with others. After recording these

conversations, the participants then examined the truthfulness of the statements within the interactions. Only 38.5% of the statements made during these interactions were labeled as “completely honest.”

In this example, we see that the authors of this paragraph (Wrench, DiMartino, Ramirez, Oviedo, & Tesfamariam) cited information from two external sources: Shore and Barclay and Tummer, Edgley, and Olmstead. These two groups of authors are given credit for their ideas. The authors make it clear that they (Wrench, DiMartino, Ramirez, Oviedo, and Tesfamariam) did not produce the television show *House* or conduct the study that found that only 38.5 percent of statements were completely honest. Instead, these authors cited information found in two other locations. This type of citation is appropriate.

However, if a speaker read the paragraph and said the following during a speech, it would be plagiarism: “According to Wrench DiMartino, Ramirez, Oviedo, and Tesfamariam, in a study of 130 participants, only 38.5 percent of the responses were completely honest.” In this case, the speaker is attributing the information cited to the authors of the paragraph, which is not accurate. If you want to cite the information within your speech, you need to read the original article by Turner, Edgley, and Olmstead and cite that information yourself.

There are two main reasons we do this. First, Wrench, DiMartino, Ramirez, Oviedo, and Tesfamariam may have mistyped the information. Suppose the study by Turner, Edgley, and Olmstead really actually found that 58.5 percent of the responses were completely honest. If you cited the revised number (38.5 percent) from the paragraph, you would be further spreading incorrect information.

The second reason we do not re-cite someone else’s sources within our speeches is because it’s intellectually dishonest. You owe your listeners an honest description of where the facts you are relating came from, not just the name of an author who cited those facts. It is more work to trace the original source of a fact or statistic, but by doing that extra work you can avoid this plagiarism trap.

## **We Endorse Freedom of Expression, Diversity of Perspective, and Tolerance of Dissent to Achieve the Informed and Responsible Decision Making Fundamental to a Civil Society**

This ethical principle affirms that a civil society depends on freedom of expression, diversity of perspective, and tolerance of dissent and that informed and responsible decisions can only be made if all members of society are free to express their thoughts and opinions. Further, it holds that diverse viewpoints, including those that disagree with accepted authority, are important for the functioning of a democratic society.

If everyone only listened to one source of information, then we would be easily manipulated and controlled. For this reason, we believe that individuals should be willing to listen to a range of speakers on a given subject. As listeners or consumers of communication, we should realize that this diversity of perspectives enables us to be more fully informed on a subject. Imagine voting in an election after listening only to the campaign speeches of one candidate. The perspective of that candidate would be so narrow that you would have no way to accurately understand and assess the issues at hand or the strengths and weaknesses of the opposing candidates. Unfortunately, some voters do limit themselves to listening only to their candidate of choice and, as a result,

base their voting decisions on incomplete—and, not infrequently, inaccurate—information.

Listening to diverse perspectives includes being willing to hear dissenting voices. Dissent is by nature uncomfortable, as it entails expressing opposition to authority, often in very unflattering terms. Legal scholar Steven H. Shiffrin has argued in favor of some symbolic speech (e.g., flag burning) because we as a society value the ability of anyone to express their dissent against the will and ideas of the majority. Shiffrin, S. H. (1999). *Dissent, injustice and the meanings of America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Ethical communicators will be receptive to dissent, no matter how strongly they may disagree with the speaker's message because they realize that a society that forbids dissent cannot function democratically.

Ultimately, honoring free speech and seeking out a variety of perspectives is very important for all listeners. We will discuss this idea further in the chapter on listening.

### **We Strive to Understand and Respect Other Communicators before Evaluating and Responding to Their Messages**

This is another ethical characteristic that is specifically directed at receivers of a message. As listeners, we often let our perceptions of a speaker's nonverbal behavior—his or her appearance, posture, mannerisms, eye contact, and so on—determine our opinions about a message before the speaker has said a word. We may also find ourselves judging a speaker based on information we have heard about him or her from other people. Perhaps you have heard from other students that a particular teacher is a really boring lecturer or is really entertaining in class. Even though you do not have personal knowledge, you may prejudge the teacher and his or her message based on information you have been given from others. The NCA credo reminds us that to be ethical listeners, we need to avoid such judgments and instead make an effort to listen respectfully; only when we have understood a speaker's viewpoint are we ready to begin forming our opinions of the message.

Listeners should try to objectively analyze the content and arguments within a speech before deciding how to respond. Especially when we disagree with a speaker, we might find it difficult to listen to the content of the speech and, instead, work on creating a rebuttal the entire time the speaker is talking. When this happens, we do not strive to understand the speaker and do not respect the speaker.

Of course, this does not just affect the listener in the public speaking situation. As speakers, we are often called upon to evaluate and refute potential arguments against our positions. While we always want our speeches to be as persuasive as possible, we do ourselves and our audiences a disservice when we downplay, distort, or refuse to mention important arguments from the opposing side. Fairly researching and evaluating counterarguments is an important ethical obligation for the public speaker.

### **We Promote Access to Communication Resources and Opportunities as Necessary to Fulfill Human Potential and Contribute to the Well-Being of Families, Communities, and Society**

Human communication is a skill that can and should be taught. We strongly believe that you can become a better, more ethical speaker. One of the reasons the authors of this

book teach courses in public speaking and wrote this college textbook on public speaking is that we, as communication professionals, have an ethical obligation to provide others, including students like you, with resources and opportunities to become better speakers.

## **We Promote Communication Climates of Caring and Mutual Understanding That Respect the Unique Needs and Characteristics of Individual Communicators**

Speakers need to take a two-pronged approach when addressing any audience: caring about the audience and understanding the audience. When you as a speaker truly care about your audience's needs and desires, you avoid setting up a manipulative climate. This is not to say that your audience will always perceive their own needs and desires in the same way you do, but if you make an honest effort to speak to your audience in a way that has their best interests at heart, you are more likely to create persuasive arguments that are not just manipulative appeals.

Second, it is important for a speaker to create an atmosphere of mutual understanding. To do this, you should first learn as much as possible about your audience, a process called audience analysis. We will discuss this topic in more detail in the audience analysis chapter.

To create a climate of caring and mutual respect, it is important for us as speakers to be open with our audiences so that our intentions and perceptions are clear. Nothing alienates an audience faster than a speaker with a hidden agenda unrelated to the stated purpose of the speech. One of our coauthors once listened to a speaker give a two-hour talk, allegedly about workplace wellness, which actually turned out to be an infomercial for the speaker's weight-loss program. In this case, the speaker clearly had a hidden (or not-so-hidden) agenda, which made the audience feel disrespected.

## **We Condemn Communication That Degrades Individuals and Humanity through Distortion, Intimidation, Coercion, and Violence and through the Expression of Intolerance and Hatred**

This ethical principle is very important for all speakers. Hopefully, intimidation, coercion, and violence will not be part of your public speaking experiences, but some public speakers have been known to call for violence and incite mobs of people to commit atrocities. Thus distortion and expressions of intolerance and hatred are of special concern when it comes to public speaking.

**Distortion** occurs when someone purposefully twists information in a way that detracts from its original meaning. Unfortunately, some speakers take information and use it in a manner that is not in the spirit of the original information. One place we see distortion frequently is in the political context, where politicians cite a statistic or the results of a study and either completely alter the information or use it in a deceptive manner.

FactCheck.org, a project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center (<http://www.factcheck.org>), and the St. Petersburg Times's Politifact (<http://www.politifact.com>) are nonpartisan organizations devoted to analyzing political messages and demonstrating how information has been distorted.

Expressions of intolerance and hatred that are to be avoided include using **ageist**, **heterosexist**, **racist**, **sexist**, and any other form of speech that demeans or belittles a group of people. Hate speech from all sides of the political spectrum in our society is

detrimental to ethical communication. As such, we as speakers should be acutely aware of how an audience may perceive words that could be considered bigoted. For example, suppose a school board official involved in budget negotiations used the word “shekels” to refer to money, which he believes the teachers’ union should be willing to give up. Associated Press. (2011, May 5). Conn. shekel shellacking. *New York Post*. The remark would be likely to prompt accusations of anti-Semitism and to distract listeners from any constructive suggestions the official might have for resolving budget issues. Although the official might insist that he meant no offense, he damaged the ethical climate of the budget debate by using a word associated with bigotry.

At the same time, it is important for listeners to pay attention to expressions of intolerance or hatred. Extremist speakers sometimes attempt to disguise their true agendas by avoiding bigoted “buzzwords” and using mild-sounding terms instead. For example, a speaker advocating the overthrow of a government might use the term “regime change” instead of “revolution”; similarly, proponents of genocide in various parts of the world have used the term “ethnic cleansing” instead of “extermination.” By listening critically to the gist of a speaker’s message as well as the specific language he or she uses, we can see how that speaker views the world.

### **We Are Committed to the Courageous Expression of Personal Convictions in Pursuit of Fairness and Justice**

We believe that finding and bringing to light situations of inequality and injustice within our society is important. Public speaking has been used throughout history to point out inequality and injustice, from Patrick Henry arguing against the way the English government treated the American colonists and Sojourner Truth describing the evils of slavery to Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech and Army Lt. Dan Choi’s speeches arguing that the military’s “don’t ask, don’t tell policy” is unjust. Many social justice movements have started because young public speakers have decided to stand up for what they believe is fair and just.

### **We Advocate Sharing Information, Opinions, and Feelings When Facing Significant Choices While Also Respecting Privacy and Confidentiality**

This ethical principle involves balancing personal disclosure with discretion. It is perfectly normal for speakers to want to share their own personal opinions and feelings about a topic; however, it is also important to highlight information within a speech that represents your own thoughts and feelings. Your listeners have a right to know the difference between facts and personal opinions.

Similarly, we have an obligation to respect others’ privacy and confidentiality when speaking. If information is obtained from printed or publicly distributed material, it’s perfectly appropriate to use that information without getting permission, as long as you cite it. However, when you have a great anecdote one of your friends told you in confidence, or access to information that is not available to the general public, it is best to seek permission before using the information in a speech.

This ethical obligation even has legal implications in many government and corporate contexts. For example, individuals who work for the Central Intelligence Agency are legally precluded from discussing their work in public without prior review by the agency. And companies such as Google also have policies requiring employees to seek

permission before engaging in public speaking in which sensitive information might be leaked.

## **We Accept Responsibility for the Short- and Long-Term Consequences of Our Own Communication and Expect the Same of Others**

The last statement of NCA's ethical credo may be the most important one. We live in a society where a speaker's message can literally be heard around the world in a matter of minutes, thanks to our global communication networks. Extreme remarks made by politicians, media commentators, and celebrities, as well as ordinary people, can unexpectedly "go viral" with regrettable consequences. It is not unusual to see situations where a speaker talks hatefully about a specific group, but when one of the speaker's listeners violently attacks a member of the group, the speaker insists that he or she had no way of knowing that this could possibly have happened. Washing one's hands of responsibility is unacceptable: all speakers should accept responsibility for the short-term and long-term consequences of their speeches. Although it is certainly not always the speaker's fault if someone commits an act of violence, the speaker should take responsibility for her or his role in the situation. This process involves being truly reflective and willing to examine how one's speech could have tragic consequences.

Furthermore, attempting to persuade a group of people to take any action means you should make sure that you understand the consequences of that action. Whether you are persuading people to vote for a political candidate or just encouraging them to lose weight, you should know what the short-term and long-term consequences of that decision could be. While our predictions of short-term and long-term consequences may not always be right, we have an ethical duty to at least think through the possible consequences of our speeches and the actions we encourage.

## **Practicing Ethical Public Speaking**

Thus far in this section we've introduced you to the basics of thinking through the ethics of public speaking. Knowing about ethics is essential, but even more important to being an ethical public speaker is putting that knowledge into practice by thinking through possible ethical pitfalls prior to standing up and speaking out. [Table 2.1 "Public Speaking Ethics Checklist"](#) is a checklist based on our discussion in this chapter to help you think through some of these issues.

Table 2.1 Public Speaking Ethics Checklist

Instructions: For each of the following ethical issues, check either "true" or "false."		True	False
1.	I have knowingly added information within my speech that is false.		
2.	I have attempted to persuade people by unnecessarily tapping into emotion rather than logic.		
3.	I have not clearly cited all the information within my speech.		
4.	I do not know who my sources of information are or what makes my sources credible.		
5.	I wrote my speech based on my own interests and really haven't thought much about my audience.		
6.	I haven't really thought much about my audience's needs and desires.		
7.	I have altered some of the facts in my speech to help me be more persuasive.		
8.	Some of the language in my speech may be considered bigoted.		



9.	My goal is to manipulate my audience to my point of view.		
10.	I sometimes blend in my personal opinions when discussing actual facts during the speech.		
11.	My personal opinions are just as good as facts, so I don't bother to distinguish between the two during my speech.		
12.	I've used information in my speech from a friend or colleague that probably shouldn't be repeated.		
13.	I'm using information in my speech that a source gave me even though it was technically "off the record."		
14.	It's just a speech. I really don't care what someone does with the information when I'm done speaking.		
15.	I haven't really thought about the short- or long-term consequences of my speech.		
Scoring: For ethical purposes, all your answers should have been "false."			

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- All eight of the principles espoused in the NCA Credo for Ethical Communication can be applied to public speaking. Some of the principles relate more to the speaker's role in communication, while others relate to both the speaker's and the audience's role in public speech.
- When preparing a speech, it is important to think about the ethics of public speaking from the beginning. When a speaker sets out to be ethical in his or her speech from the beginning, arriving at ethical speech is much easier.

## EXERCISES

1. Fill out the "Public Speaking Ethics Checklist" while thinking about your first speech. Did you mark "true" for any of the statements? If so, why? What can you do as a speaker to get to the point where you can check them all as "false"?
2. Robert is preparing a speech about legalizing marijuana use in the United States. He knows that his roommate wrote a paper on the topic last semester and asks his roommate about the paper in an attempt to gather information. During his speech, Robert orally cites his roommate by name as a source of his information but does not report that the source is his roommate, whose experience is based on writing a paper. In what ways does Robert's behavior violate the guidelines set out in the NCA Credo for Ethical Communication?