Evaluating the Tone of IG Policies

BY LEWIS EISEN

This article advocates for a shift from authoritative language to a more respectful and collaborative approach in IG policy writing.

Securing stakeholder engagement at all levels of the organization remains a persistent challenge for Information Governance (IG) professionals. Within organizations, commitment to the various aspects of an IG program can vary widely, from robust compliance to near indifference. For IG practitioners, this engagement gap has long been a source of frustration. That situation is not optimal because comprehensive engagement is critical for the success of the program. Could part of the problem be the way the IG policies are worded?

Practitioners who belong to RIMPA pledge to uphold its values and principles, including Collegiality, which RIMPA defines as working together to willingly serve members, the profession and the community with diligence and respect. This value suggests that, as part of an enterprise IG program, its policies and standards will be developed in a manner that is inclusive, collaborative, and respectful, intending they are not merely adopted but also integrated into the organization's culture.

MISALIGNMENT OF TONE

Against this background, the tone employed in IG policies and directives often seems misaligned. Authoritative language in policy— for example, "Employees must keep personal information secure at all times" and "Employees must comply with all metadata standards" —can come across as dictatorial or patronizing. Even when the substance of the rule is defensible, the language and tone in those examples are decidedly heavy-handed, potentially alienating staff and hindering the cooperative spirit needed for effective IG on an enterprise-wide level.

The distinction between operating in a culture of trust versus one of distrust be determined by examining the language found an organization's policies. You can tell that your organization is functioning in a culture of distrust when the overarching philosophy sounds something like this: "If we don't explicitly put a statement into the policy telling people not to steal company information, then somebody is going to do it and claim that they didn't know it wasn't allowed." That approach is overtly symptomatic of a defensive policy culture.

Sometimes, though, the symptoms are less conspicuous. Consider the tone of the following two statements addressing the same procedural requirement:

A) When requesting retrieval of boxes from storage, staff must complete the Box Request Form in full. Forms not filled out properly will be returned."

B) Boxes are retrieved from storage upon receipt of a completed Box Request Form.

These statements convey the same factual request: the Records office wants the forms completed properly. So why the difference?

Looking at Statement A, it's obvious that the office has received too many incomplete forms in the past. More seriously, what's also apparent is the underlying emotion. Read between the lines and listen carefully to the language in Statement A and you will detect a subtle—but clearly perceptible—undertone of frustration: the people in the Records office are fed up with the lack of compliance with this rule and have no bones about sharing that sentiment.

Statement B is neutral. The requirement is still strict, yet it's expressed in a helpful, rather than reproachful, manner.

"If we don't explicitly put a statement into the policy telling people not to steal company information, then somebody is going to do it and claim that they didn't know it wasn't allowed." That approach is overtly symptomatic of a defensive policy culture.

While it's understandable that from time to time we all might experience a feeling of frustration around repeated rule violations, the salient question is whether it's appropriate that emotions permeate policy documentation. The presence of negativity within policy language not only reflects the tensions of the group internally, but then broadcasts those sentiments to the rest of the organization. That disclosure potentially undermines the professional reputation of the records office, diminishing trust between it and the rest of the organization.

The situation is even worse if your corporate policies are posted out on the Web in an effort to be more transparent. In that case, the entire world will find out about the low compliance level and the frustration of the Records staff. Not exactly a good image to project to the public.

MAKING RULES ENGAGING

Policies, done properly, are about getting clarity and setting targets. No matter what the field—Operations, HR, Finance, Security, and IG—rules are about helping people do the right thing.

With well-crafted policy language, people don't merely comply; they become advocates. They will encourage others to follow them, and often express a wish for such policies to be more widespread.

Achieving this level of endorsement requires rules are framed to sound positive and helpful, rather than negative or authoritarian. Consider this example:

C) You must be a metadata specialist to be given access to the Metadata Database.

Why "must"? Why is someone issuing an order about this requirement?

No one talks to their employees in a condescending manner anymore. Yet a lot of people still write like that. As a result, too many policies today still sound like parents admonishing their children.

The access condition might be strict, but there's no reason to make it a commandment, especially when there are many less aggressive ways to put it, such as:

D) Only metadata specialists are eligible to apply for the Metadata Database.

E) The Metadata Database is accessible exclusively by metadata specialists.

F) You qualify to use the Metadata Database if you are a metadata specialist.

Each of those alternatives communicates the same requirement without resorting to the Parent-Child dynamic that is so toxic to good working relationships.

Whether intended or not, the message that Statement C delivers is, "Don't try to get around this rule." It's working from a defensive posture, revealing an underlying policy culture of distrust. It's hard to build positive relationships with colleagues when your policies are loaded with negative messaging.

A HOLDOVER FROM THE PAST

Why is that dictatorial language there in the first place? More importantly, why is it still with us?

Think back. Our earliest encounters with rules were with our parents and our teachers, who constantly told us how to behave: Do this. Don't do that. If you don't do what I say, there will be consequences. Those interactions ingrained the belief that rules should sound forceful and unquestionable. That tone emphasized the power hierarchy: "I am in charge and you will obey me."

To be fair, as children, we were only seeing part of the picture. What we were witnessing at the time was how caretakers instruct children. Wording rules directed at adults is a different skill altogether, and most of us weren't taught how to do that.

In addition, for centuries up until only a couple of decades ago, that dictatorial tone of voice was reinforced by a too prevalent social dynamic in the office. In the past, it was not uncommon to hear bosses berating or verbally abusing their employees and, most unfortunately, there was

nothing the poor employees could do about it. Bosses spoke like that and they wrote like that, and that dynamic was the norm in the workplace.

Times have changed. Today the predominant trend is to maintain a respectful workplace. Management promotes awareness of issues around collaboration, diversity, and inclusion. <pull quote> No one talks to their employees in a condescending manner anymore. Yet a lot of people still write like that. As a result, too many policies today still sound like parents admonishing their children.

That relic of the past is a serious impediment to an optimally functioning workplace. Adults hear that heavy-handed tone of voice as disrespect and instinctively tend to resist. It's called psychological reactance, and it's well documented.

Obviously, a range of factors affect compliance issues in the office, from practical impediments to dysfunctional enforcement mechanisms. The rules themselves may be weak and, in some cases, you might need to strengthen them; however, don't confuse strict requirements with harsh language.
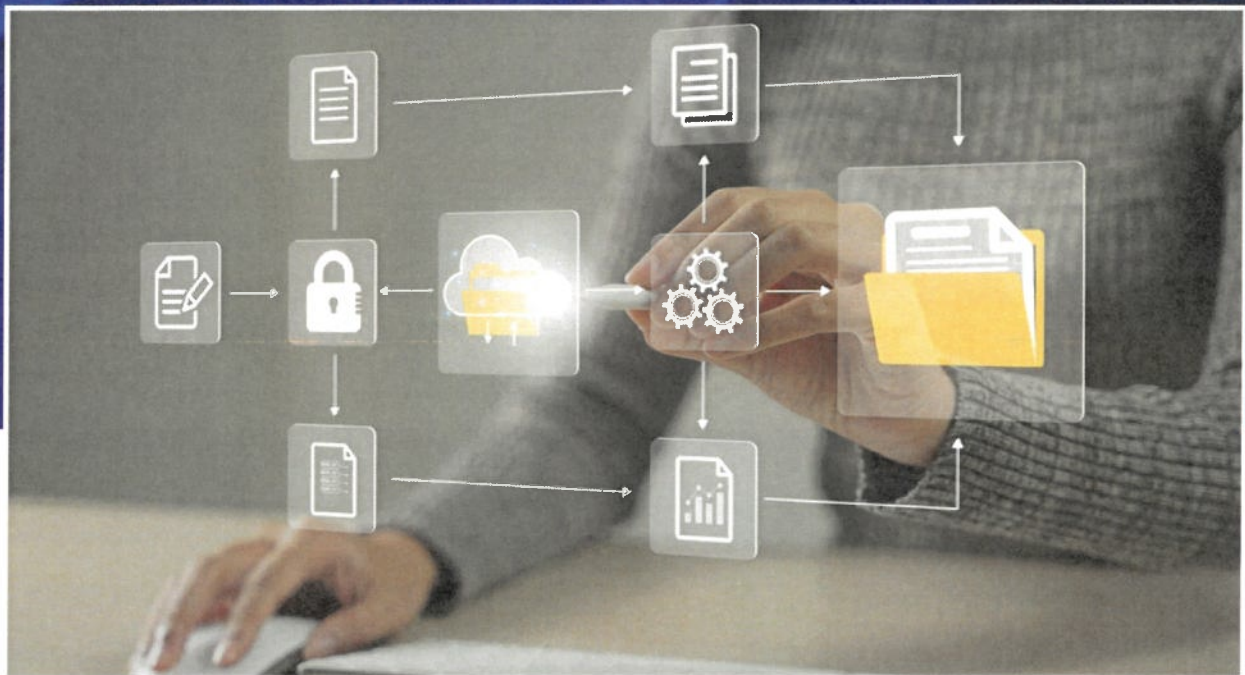
Making your requirements stricter has the power to effect changes in behaviour; in contrast, making your language harsher engenders more resistance.

AVOIDING THE PARENT-CHILD DYNAMIC

The easiest way to avoid sounding like a parent talking to a child in policies and directives is to leverage the power of the present tense. It's plain and simple, conveying matter-of-fact information:

G) The office is open to the public from 8:00 to 16:00.

H) File inventory reports are due at the end of every fiscal year.

I) Expenses are reimbursed when submitted within one month of the trip.

"...don't confuse strict requirements with harsh language."

The present tense informs you about the high-level executive decision that was made on the matter. There's no "must," "shall," or "will" about it. It just is.

Not convinced that the present tense will be strong enough for you? Take a look at the world of legislation. The strictest rules anywhere are the criminal laws: the rules against murder, assault, kidnapping— you know, the nasty stuff.

Those rules are crafted very deliberately. They don't say, "You must not murder other people" or "It is strictly prohibited to kidnap anyone." They are much more dispassionate than that. Here's the prohibition on destruction of properly from the Crimes Act of New South Wales:

A person who intentionally or recklessly destroys or damages property belonging to another or to that person and another, is liable—

(a) to imprisonment for 5 years...

Look at that! It's drafted in the present tense. Look at the advantage of that formulation: there is no commanding, no finger wagging, no we-know-best or we-are-in-charge attitude. No Parent-Child dynamic. It's a simple, respectful statement of the decision on the topic.

As leaders, we cannot promote collaboration, inclusion, and respect, when a simple reading of the policies makes it clear that the real goal is old-fashioned obedience.

Here's the same law in Western Australia:

Any person who wilfully and unlawfully destroys or damages any property is guilty of a crime and is liable —

(b) if the property is not destroyed or damaged by fire, to imprisonment for 10 years...

And Queensland:

Any person who wilfully and unlawfully destroys or damages any property is guilty of an offence which, unless otherwise stated, is a misdemeanour, and the person is liable, if no other punishment is provided, to imprisonment for 5 years.

The same holds true for South Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the UK.

Victoria puts a subtle twist on it, using the present tense to describe the offence, but the future tense for the declaration of guilt. Tasmania is the sole outlier, using more antiquated language.

AN ABSURD SITUATION

What exists now is an absurd situation: the strictest laws for the most heinous crimes in the country are worded more respectfully than many of the IG policies in our organisations.

Ponder that for a moment. Going solely by the tone of voice, an employee could be forgiven for wondering if the office considers murdering one's boss to be a less serious offence than putting documents on a C:\ drive. From a totally objective examination of the text, we speak more nicely to criminals than to our own colleagues. That's just plain wrong.

There's no reason why IG policies can't be worded more respectfully, and all practitioners need to be sensitive to the issue. As leaders, we cannot promote collaboration, inclusion, and respect, when a simple reading of the policies makes it clear that the real goal is old-fashioned obedience.

The takeaway is clear: If organizations generally—and IG professionals specifically—are serious about supporting "respect" as a core, then we all need to walk the talk. Updating the tone in our organizational policies will encourage the engagement from others that is so critical to the success of the IG program.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lewis S Eisen CIP, SIPC is the leading authority on the use of respectful language in policy drafting. He draws on over 25 years' experience as a practising lawyer, business consultant, and federal civil servant. His Amazon international bestseller Rules: A Guide to Drafting Respectful Policies and Directives, is now in its third edition. Lewis has delivered two RIMPA webinars over the past year, and his approach to drafting policies using respectful language has been adopted at organizations around the world. Lewis Eisen, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. Founder, Perfect Policies. Contact leisen@pfx.ca; www.lewiseisen.com/ www.linkedin.com/in/lewiseisen/