

Evolution of a Code of Conduct, Part 1

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Right before we rounded the corner to 2023, the staff of Natural Encounters, Inc., embarked on a collaborative journey to revise our company Code of Conduct. As something that has always been a living document, we felt that the time had come once again to involve our staff to get their input on the things that they felt were an important part of the standards and expectations of behavior we should have for our team members. In this article, I hope to share a bit of the history of the NEI Code of Conduct and the way it has evolved over the time I've been with the company, and in the next issue of *The Flyer* we will revisit the topic to share the current process we're utilizing for a new revision, as well as our finalized Code of Conduct for 2023.

History of the Code

When I started working for NEI in 2005, our employee handbook included the following for what was then referred to as our Code of Professional Ethics, a document influenced heavily by the "team commitment creation" experiences of Marty MacPhee, a fellow animal trainer and behavior specialist who'd been part of the "NEI extended family" since the 1980s:

As employees of Natural Encounters, Inc., we are committed to:

A. *Clear, Honest Communication*

Good communication is the key to effective relationships with coworkers, and equally important with all persons we encounter while performing our duties. We understand that honesty and integrity are essential to our individual growth and to our collective success as a company. We will continually strive to develop our communication skills and maintain a supportive environment with coworkers that promotes growth, teamwork, and creativity.

B. *Exemplary Teamwork*

We will establish a family of employees where all staff is in pursuit of a common goal and work in concert with one another in the performance of our duties. We will realize that an efficient team consists of people who understand that the objective of our company supersedes their own desires for personal gain.

C. *Responsible Show Production*

Producing educational animal shows is the key to our success as a company and the most essential component of our being. We will produce animal shows that engage, inspire and empower our audience; we will avoid compromising the dignity of the animals with unnatural

acts. Our messages will be clear, important, and driven by our mission statement. We will always pursue our conservation goals and avoid compromising these goals for monetary gain or self-promotion. Entertainment is a tool we use to build an engaging environment where compassion can grow, understanding will take place, and attitudes can be changed.

D. Responsible Animal Care

As primary caregivers to the animals in our charge, we realize our momentous responsibilities to our animal collection. Each animal will be housed in a clean, comfortable, safe, and enriching environment. The health and welfare of our animals are our highest priority and will not be unnecessarily compromised. Training of the animals in our care will be performed with the most humane and compassionate manner possible. We will follow expressed training guidelines to ensure that our training strategy is in the best interest of the animal. We will keep current on the latest animal husbandry and training techniques and continually grow in our ability to care for and train our animals.

E. Professional Representation/Professionalism

To ensure that we promote a professional appearance while representing NEI, we supply uniforms that have been selected for durability, comfort, and appearance. Uniforms are to be clean, appropriately sized and worn while working at any of the NEI locations. This includes conferences where NEI supports the attendee, roadshows, consultations, and any time that you are representing NEI.

While it provided a solid overview of the commitments and philosophies of the company at the time, if I'm completely honest I believe the first time I saw this document was in preparing to write this article! As a part of our Employee Handbook, most staff would only see it during their onboarding process (if they were paying better attention than I did) or if they dug into the manual on their own.

A More Actionable Code

A few years later, however, the staff gathered in a conference room near our stage at Disney's Animal Kingdom to produce a new revision of the Code that reflected that team's commitments and ideals. We had some preliminary conversations about best practices for husbandry, training, enrichment, and team communication, and after several hours of brainstorming, revising, and editing as a team, what resulted was the following updated Code of Conduct (Figure A):



NEI Team Code of Conduct

As an NEI Team Member, I agree to:

- Give, receive, and seek feedback with the intent of improving myself and/or my team
- Be aware of and help to accomplish team needs
- Be respectful of all team members
- Demonstrate commitment to the overall health and welfare of the animal collection
- Be trustworthy/ honest
- Seek conflict resolution
- Take personal responsibility for the team's goals
- Be flexible
- Keep an open mind
- Be self-motivated/ take initiative
 - o Be solution oriented
 - o Seek projects/ opportunities
 - o Take responsibility for my own success and happiness (be a positive thinker)
 - o Prioritize responsibilities/ projects
 - o Remain willing to learn
 - o Demonstrate/ maintain high integrity
 - o Be passionate about my goals and priorities
 - o Follow through
 - o Seek to excel
 - o Work with efficiency
- Utilize time in a manner that benefits the team
- Represent the company and team well at all times

FIGURE A: The NEI Team Code of Conduct circa 2006

While covering much of the same subject matter as its previous iteration, this version of the Code was meant to contain more concise, actionable statements that (after being printed, framed, and hung at each of our work locations) would be visible reminders for the staff of what they had determined together as a team should be the driving statements that provided the support structure for everything we did. With shorter statements bolstered by active verbs, it was a much more immediate, accessible, and vibrant document, and it remained untouched for more than a decade.

“A New Commitment to Old Values”

2017 was a very busy year for NEI. We opened a free-flight macaw program at the Indianapolis Zoo, were making regular trips out of Florida to support several long-term consulting projects at zoos around the country, tested out some new show and Summer Camp pilot programs at Disney’s Animal Kingdom (DAK), and had begun rehearsals for what would eventually become “*Up! A Great Bird Adventure*”, the stage show that was slated to replace “*Flights of Wonder*”, the bird show that we had been doing at DAK since the park opened in 1998. With all this change in the air and emboldened to reconsider some of our company’s practices after reading Aubrey C. Daniels’ book “*OOPS! 13 Management Practices That Waste Time and Money (and what to do instead)*”, NEI President Steve Martin called together an all-staff “town hall” meeting where he challenged everyone to make “a new commitment to old values.”

Part of that commitment included asking people to work together to revise our Code of Conduct, since we were, at that point, a very different team than the one that had helped build the previous code. At a town hall meeting in July, we broke the staff into randomized smaller teams with the task of creating statements they felt belonged in an updated Code of Conduct. The group’s contributions were then consolidated into a single list that, with a bit of clean up and consolidation, resulted in the following:

- Assume good intentions in others.*
- Embrace change and be flexible; nothing worth doing is easy.*
- Treat others with respect.*
- Communicate effectively and with care for others.*
- Provide constructive feedback to others when they need more information; embrace feedback when it is given to you.*
- Take responsibility for your actions and for your own happiness.*
- Share mistakes along with successes; mistakes are an opportunity to start again with more information.*
- Share knowledge with others.*
- Apply the art and science of behavior change to all the learners you interact with.*
- Always seek to improve quality of life for the humans and animals in our company.*
- Celebrate the strengths of others; appreciate differences for the ways they improve our team.*
- Seek out opportunities for personal and professional growth.*

- Embody the ideals you want others (and our company) to support – walk the talk!*
- Empower others to have a strong voice.*
- Remember that we are the advocates for our animals, so let each and every guest and visitor see your passion shine through – engage, inspire, and empower!*
- Identify areas for improvement, and be solution-oriented.*
- Commit to environmentally friendly practices whenever possible.*
- Commit to providing the best possible care/welfare for the animals in our care every day.*
- Remember that the team is made up of different roles, and it takes everyone working together to be successful.*
- Always remember that what is convenient or easy is not always what is best, and the best never settle.*
- Always try to check your personal life issues at the door, they will be there to pick up on your way out.*
- Support your teammates like they need you (because they do).*
- Know that the NEI machine (all parts working together) is unstoppable!*
- Be genuine; don't tell others what you think they want to hear, but rather what is true and honest.*

Several busy months passed after that exercise, but eventually we took that list and decided to iterate on it again by sending the statements back to the staff via a SurveyMonkey poll that asked then to answer the following question for each statement: do you feel that this statement belongs in our Code of Conduct? We then “ranked” the statements from most to least “yes” votes, and, at a follow-up town hall meeting that November, we brought the whole staff together again to discuss the results and try to rework the statements to take some of the things that rated lower than others and find ways to reintegrate the core message where people felt that they shouldn't be left behind. This resulted in a shorter, more streamlined list, and after a period where people were able to continue to offer their feedback, the finalized Code of Conduct was finally revealed (in the form of very slick metal signs Steve had printed up as a surprise) at our staff holiday party at the beginning of 2018! (Figure B)

NATURAL ENCOUNTERS, INC CODE OF CONDUCT



Treat others with respect.

Maintain a positive attitude.

Communicate effectively and with care for others.

Seek to improve quality of life for the humans and animals in our company.

Commit to environmentally friendly practices whenever possible.

Embody the ideals you want others (and our company) to support – walk the talk!

Assume good intentions in others.

Share mistakes along with successes; mistakes are an opportunity to start again with more information.

Celebrate the strengths of others; appreciate differences for the ways they improve our team.

Provide constructive feedback to others; embrace feedback when it is given to you.

Seek out opportunities for personal and professional growth, and share knowledge gained with others.

Apply the art and science of behavior change to all the learners you interact with.

Be efficient, identify areas for improvement and be solution oriented.

Embrace change and be flexible.

Take responsibility for your actions and for your own happiness.

Support your teammates like they need you (because they do).

Ask for help when you need it.

Commit to choosing what is best over what is convenient.

Be kind and honest.

...ENGAGE, INSPIRE, EMPOWER!

FIGURE B: The 2018 Code of Conduct Revision. Shiny!

Looking Ahead to 2023...

Around the end of 2022, several members of the NEI leadership team began having conversations about potentially taking another look at the Code of Conduct. Much had changed about our company make up and focus since 2018 (especially during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020), and once we realized that several different people were suggesting another potential revision, we aimed to gather the team once more to create an updated Code of Conduct to roll out for 2023.

In the next issue of *The Flyer*, I'll share the revision process we followed this year (which, at the time of this publication, is still ongoing), as well as what we settled on for our brand-new NEI Code of Conduct!