Evolution of a Code of Conduct, Part 2
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In the last issue of The Flyer, I shared the history of how the Code of Conduct of Natural Encounters, Inc., has evolved over the years through a variety of collaborative exercises meant to give the company's employees an active role in shaping the expectations they felt were an important part of what our company should be. In this issue, I'll share our most recent revision of the Code, the steps we took to build it, and some final thoughts on the process.

Time to Take Another Look?

In late November of 2022, NEI Supervisor of Training Amy Fennell emailed the rest of the managers in the company to ask what we thought about doing a revision of the Code of Conduct for 2023, five years from when it was last revised. Coincidentally, I and several of the other leaders had been discussing that idea that same week, so we moved ahead with Amy's suggestion of letting the staff know at our 2022 Holiday Party that we would be doing another revision of the Code in the new year, and to look out for further information.

On January 1, 2023, I sent an email to staff letting them know that we would be working on new Code of Conduct together as a team at our upcoming all-staff Town Hall meeting later that month, and included a link to an anonymous survey with the following instructions:

> *Please submit at least 3 statements that you feel should be a part of a revised Code of Conduct. These statements should be presented in the form of actionable behaviors that reflect expectations that you would like NEI to have if its staff and leadership. (Ex: "Offer to help others when you have extra time available.")*

Within a week, we had received 99 suggested statements from staff. Some were brand new ("Set realistic expectations for yourself and others around you"), some were requests to tweak statements from the existing Code ("Change 'maintain a positive attitude' to 'ask others how you can help them have a better day'"), and some were calls to strip out elements from the existing Code entirely ("Remove 'walk the talk' – WHAT DOES THAT EVEN MEAN?!").

On the evening of January 18, 2023, we gathered our staff at our Training and Education Center (aka "The TEC Building") at our homebase in Winter Haven, FL, for our first Town Hall meeting of the year. After a quick "State of the Union" update on our current and future projects from NEI President and CEO, Steve Martin, we split the staff randomly into six groups to take on the challenge of whittling down the staff's ideas for the new Code of Conduct into something more manageable. To focus everyone's efforts, each group was given a block of statements to evaluate from one of the following themes that the 99 statements had been divided into:

1. Attitude

2. Self-Management
3. Team
4. Communication
5. Conduct, Development, and Welfare
6. "Assume Good Intentions"

Each group was given a list of about 10-20 items from the pool of feedback that matched their theme, an oversized Post-It pad to take notes on (which, coincidentally had been purchased for – and not used since – our 2018 Code of Conduct revision exercise), and the challenge of trying to pare down all the feedback in their given theme to three or four statements that they felt captured the spirit of everything that had been submitted to their group in just one hour. For some groups, this was easier said than done. The "Self-Management" group had the largest number of statements to try to boil down (23, covering several smaller topics within their theme), while the "Assume Good Intentions" group had the unique task of dealing with the opposing feedback we'd received about this statement from our previous Codes, with many people feeling that it was an important point to keep, while many others felt strongly that it should be removed because it gave license for people to behave poorly towards people who would then be forced to give their intentions the benefit of the doubt. We requested that each team identify a leader to moderate their group's work who was not a member of management, split the groups across 3 rooms to keep things from getting too noisy, and set a timer for 60 minutes to keep everyone on task.

What followed was an explosion of productivity and creativity! Steve and I were the only ones not assigned to a group, and as we floated around to check on the teams' progress and offer our thoughts on all the themes, I was impressed by the level of engagement and participation across the board, with every member of staff contributing to their group's efforts. The highlight for me was seeing people navigate not interrupting one and other, and gracefully adding their thoughts in a "yes, and" fashion instead of saying that they disagreed with what someone else had to say. The time flew by, and by the time we asked for "pencils down," the groups had come up with 25 new statements, some of which were concise and complete ("Communicate constructively and with respect"), while others were sketches meant to inspire further contemplation ("If you give the advice of 'assume good intentions,' commit to checking back with the person/situation so it doesn't get lost in 'gas light limbo' and people get left unsupported"). Each group shared their responses with the rest of the staff, and we ended the night one step closer to our goal.

Soon after, the staff were sent another SurveyMonkey link that sent them to the results of the Town Hall group exercise and again asked only one question:

> *Is there anything missing from the statements the groups put together at the Town Hall that you feel strongly should be added to the Code of Conduct?*

We realized that the structure of the Town Hall exercise might have led to people not being able to offer feedback about the parts of the Code that were most important to them, and as such

we wanted to open up an opportunity to add anything that they felt hadn't been adequately captured by the groups before we continued the processes of whittling the list down further. This produced an additional 7 statements for consideration, and on February 5th an email was sent to all staff sharing the new additions and letting them know that the next step would be an attempt on my part to boil the following 32 "concepts" into something shorter that captured the spirit of everyone's contributions thus far:

- *Communicate constructively and with respect.*
- *Strive to give, take, and ask for feedback professionally and with the best intentions.*
- *Always be ready to back up or explain feedback and/or opinions and understand we are all working towards the same goal.*
- *Consider positive intentions, allow interpersonal trust accounts to move forward with curiosity instead of judgement. Create a shared responsibility of communicating and moving forward.*
- *Recognize that considering good intentions is a skill and commit to practicing and developing that skill.*
- *Have a lens of all possible intentions. Move further through communications in hopes to fully realize or find positive intentions.*
- *"Assume good intentions" can't be the beginning/middle/end, it's a hopeful jumping off point and we need to operationalize it as a way to move forward.*
- *Assumptions are not what we do, behavior is what we do.*
- *If you can't find good intentions, especially with trust account, have neutral intentions until you have more info.*
- *If you give the advice of "assume good intentions," commit to checking back on the person/situation so it doesn't get lost in "gas light limbo" and people get left unsupported.*
- *Look for ways to increase your trust account with your team over time.*
- *Demonstrate empathy. Seek and give support as needed.*
- *Accept responsibility for your actions.*
- *Treat others with respect and empathy.*
- *Ask questions so that we can reflect and adapt.*
- *Keep an open mind.*
- *Accept mistakes will happen as an opportunity to learn and grow together.*
- *Seek to improve the quality of life for animals through maintaining and prioritizing the highest level of animal welfare.*
- *Set realistic and empathetic expectations based on current conditions for individuals and teams.*
- *Share mistakes; mistakes are an opportunity for more information.*
- *Advocate for your personal growth while sharing knowledge and skills with the intent they can succeed just as you did.*
- *Strengths and weaknesses? (note: this was a point that didn't get fleshed out in time)*
- *Shared responsibilities*
  - *All of the responsibilities are all of our responsibilities.*
- *Support*

- o *Support the team around you to better everyone through learning, listening, and teaching.*
- *Compassion*
  - o *Show compassion to others; you don't always have the information about the animal's or human's histories.*
- *Unlabel and operationalize whenever possible and understand that behavior can change, and past behaviors do not define a person or animal (or do not equal future behavior).*
- *Do what's right and not just what's convenient.*
- *Help create a culture of warmth and belonging where everyone is welcome.*
- *Be willing to show weakness today to be stronger tomorrow.*
- *Be purposeful about understanding the unique experiences of everyone around you.*
- *Uphold your own standard of integrity even if those around you do not.*
- *Demonstrate bravery by speaking up for what is important, with the understanding that what Steve thinks is important takes priority.*

Drifting from the Spirit of Collaboration

On February 6, 2023, I sent out yet another survey to all staff asking for feedback on the following draft statements that I created to take a stab at condensing everything the team had done thus far into something clearer and more concise:

- *Seek to improve the quality of life for animals through maintaining and prioritizing the highest level of animal welfare.*
- *Communicate constructively and with integrity and respect.*
- *Give, take, and seek out detailed feedback professionally and with the intention of working towards shared goals.*
- *Keep an open mind, and get curious and ask questions when you need more information about a situation, a conversation, or feedback you've been given.*
- *Look for ways to increase your trust account with your team over time.*
- *Demonstrate compassion and empathy, and seek and give help as needed to create a supportive and inclusive environment for everyone.*
- *Accept responsibility for your actions, and share responsibility for the actions of the team.*
- *Accept that mistakes will happen, and share yours with others to create opportunities to learn, grow, and build skills together.*
- *Be a vocal advocate for yourself and others, and support NEI's growth by sharing your strengths, building on your areas for improvement, and celebrating what everyone's diverse experiences bring to the team.*
- *Evolve goals and expectations based on current conditions to set others up for success.*
- *Operationalize labels, understanding that the past does not equal the future.*
- *Do what's right instead of what's convenient, and explore antecedent changes that might make them the same thing in the future.*

The survey was open for a week, but at the end of that time we had received only four responses, two saying "looks good," one saying, "a little wordy, but gets the job done," and one suggesting a few tweaks (and also stating that it was too wordy). I attributed part of the low participation amongst staff as poor timing on my part; at that point we were only a week away from hosting the IAATE Conference in Orlando, and by the end of the week a significant portion of our staff found themselves committed to what would end up being an epically long flyoff of one of our marabou storks. I offered to keep the survey open until further notice so people could deal with more pressing matters and get back to it when they had a chance.

At a meeting of NEI's recently-formed Executive Committee (Steve, myself, Executive Vice President Rob Bules, and Show Manager Ari Bailey) towards the end of the month, I let the others know that I wasn't happy with where the revision process had gotten us. Interest had dried up, and I felt like I had taken the process out of people's hands by personally creating a major revision of what had been up till that point a collaborative exercise. I also knew that we couldn't continue to iterate on it as a group forever, though, so I was reaching out to the rest of the Committee for suggestions on a new path forward. Steve shared that, years ago, he worked with a team outside of NEI to help them draft a Code of Conduct for their organization and ended up with a process he was proud of that focused on narrowing in on statements that people felt they could *actually* commit to adhering to, as opposed to things that people just liked or thought looked good as a part of the Code. With that as inspiration, we went back to the drawing board to bring the rest of the staff back into the process.

Belonging and Commitments

At the end of February, I emailed the staff to let them know that we were going to take a new angle on how to move forward and "reboot" the revision process:

> *Hello NEI Team - at our last Executive Committee meeting at the Ranch we took a look at where we are at with the Code of Conduct, and decided to roll things back a step so that we can better capture the thoughts of the staff and give everyone more of a voice in what they personally feel should or should not be a part of the new Code of Conduct.*
>
> *In order to do that, we're going to shift gears a little to add a few more opportunities for capturing people's thoughts in a way that was inspired by some of our previous revisions we've done in the past.*

The first step was to once more share – via yet another survey – the 32 "concepts" that had been shared thus far to give people one final chance to add more ideas for consideration. This resulted in a few more entries, and after a packed March that saw the back-to-back staffing and time sinks of the joint ABMA/IMATA Conference, the recovery of our errant stork, consulting trips, and a training workshop at the Ranch, on March 21 I emailed the staff to share another survey (number five, for anyone counting) to ask them to look at the now 39-strong list of potential additions to the code and choosing whether each one should stay or if it should go based on the following instructions:

*This one should be pretty easy: this survey includes the 39 statements that have been submitted as possibilities for the revised Code, and asks you to answer the following question for each one: "**do you think this statement belongs on our Code of Conduct, as something you can commit to doing on a daily basis?**"*

Our hope is that the final Code we land on will represent a list of expectations of behavior that we can all hold ourselves and each other accountable for, so your feedback on whether each statement meets the above criteria is very valuable. There are repeated themes across the submissions and other tweaking that will be addressed in the next round of the process, but for now all you have to do is answer "should stay" or "should go" based on the whether you think it belongs as something you personally can commit to.

Inspired by the process Steve had helped lead years ago, this new approach allowed us not only to see how many of our employees were in support of each statement, but also to rank all the statements by "most to least supported." In contrast to the last few exercises, most staff participated in this step, with lots of comments amended to their choices explaining why they picked certain statements over others…and again hoping that eventually this thing would become shorter and less wordy.

High Support for "The Final 12"

Once everyone's feedback was collected on what they felt should stay and should go from the almost 40 statements that were in consideration for our new Code of Conduct, we ranked the statements from highest to lowest percentage of "should stay" votes and kept only the statements that at least 75% of respondents agreed should be kept and could be adhered to. With some editing to tighten up language and combine some redundant statements, what resulted was the following "Final 12":

- *Prioritize high levels of welfare for the humans and animals in our company.*
- *Accept responsibility for your actions.*
- *Communicate constructively and with respect.*
- *Commit to environmentally friendly practices whenever possible.*
- *Strive to give, take, and ask for feedback professionally and with the best intentions.*
- *Treat others with respect and empathy.*
- *Look for ways to continually build on your trust account with your teammates.*
- *Seek support when you need it and offer it to others when they need it.*
- *Share mistakes so we all can learn from them.*
- *Support the team around you to better everyone through learning, listening, and teaching.*
- *Do what's right and not just what's convenient.*
- *Help create a culture of warmth and belonging where everyone is welcome.*

On April 24, 2023, the FINAL survey of our Code of Conduct revision process went out to all staff, sharing the statements that at least 75% of respondents had chosen to stay, my condensing of those statements into "The Final 12," and the following information on how they could help:

> *To simplify some language and eliminate some redundancies, I have edited [the results] down to the following 12 statements that I would like everyone's final thoughts and feedback on. This could be suggestions for word choice, editing, organization, or anything else that you feel like would maintain the spirit and goals of these statements while also shooting for a document that is as clear and concise as possible. Please avoid suggesting new statements for inclusion at this time, keeping in mind that just because something didn't make the list doesn't mean that it can't be a part of your contribution to your role, your team, and the company!*

The staff were given a week to complete this final survey, and notification that the Executive Committee would work together to consider and integrate their feedback into a final draft of the revision. Several useful and thoughtful adjustments were suggested, and on May 1, the final version of the 2023 NEI Code of Conduct was finally shared with all staff!

Natural Encounters, Inc., Code of Conduct

· **Prioritize high levels of welfare for the humans and animals in our company.**
· **Accept responsibility for your actions.**
· **Communicate constructively and with respect.**
· **Commit to environmentally friendly practices whenever possible.**
· **Strive to give, take, and ask for feedback professionally and with the best intentions.**
· **Treat others with respect and empathy.**
· **Look for ways to continually build on your trust account with your human and animal teammates.**
· **Seek support when you need it and offer it to others when they need it.**
· **Share mistakes along with successes, as they are an opportunity to start again with more information.**
· **Seek growth through learning, listening, and teaching.**
· **Do what's right and not just what's convenient.**
· **Help create a culture of warmth where everyone is welcome.**

NATURAL ENCOUNTERS INC.

Final Thoughts

So here we are with our new NEI Code of Conduct, five months to the day of when the assignment was first proposed to our staff. The process of getting to this current Code of Conduct was not without its hiccups, but at the end of the day I'm proud that we committed to a process that involved a high degree of participation, and multiple opportunities for everyone on the team to offer their thoughts about how the process was going. At the same time, I'm also glad that participation was not mandatory, and I also believe that without a few points where a much smaller groups determined the next steps along the way, the process had the potential to go on for an almost limitless amount of time where it would be easy to get stuck in an endless "revision, feedback, revision" cycle.

At the end of the day, it's possible that this updated Code of Conduct represents something that's no one's perfect version of what they wanted the end product to be. But, as Rob Bules stated in an email in the final days of the process: "Since we all had input, we all have buy in." As a Code of Conduct meant to define the expectations we should all have of ourselves and each other, I think that was worth a little bit of time (and a whole lot of surveys).