Ethics in the Workplace

Start With Honesty

By Tom Asacker

E thics at work is a big issue and a big concern these days—and a big training effort to undertake. What if we broke ethics down and started with one element: honesty. Can people learn to be honest in the workplace?

Before you rush to answer that question, try asking people you know if they believe that they are honest. They'll undoubtedly answer, "Sure." So, what exactly happened in the now-famous examples of Enron, Arthur Andersen, WorldCom, Global Crossing, Adelphia, and others? What happened to all of those "honest" people?

Nothing. They're still honest, at least in their sense of the word: telling the truth when asked. We all are. In fact, we've become highly skilled at knowing precisely when and where to keep our mouths shut, remain honest, and avoid confrontational situations. We go along to get along.

Now, what do you think? Considering that we're all honest anyway, what more could we possible learn? As long as we're asked an unambiguous question directly, there's really nothing to worry about. With that relative definition of the word and the instrumental behavior that supports it, how can honesty possibly be taught, or at least fostered? Is it worth the effort?

You bet it is!

Honesty, the corporate cornerstone

We're all aware of the numerous studies that show how honesty strengthens teambuilding and improves morale, innovation, and productivity (as if we needed a study to tell us that). But what if you're losing 50 percent or more of your employees a year like some organizations already are?

In the March issue of *T+D,* Craig Taylor's article, "Retention Leadership," talks about the importance of leaders as the economy revives and the "war for talent" intensifies. A comprehensive study by Maitland, Florida-based TalentKeepers of more than 40,000 workers and 350 organizations shows that "what employees want is a leader whom they can trust, treats them fairly, and, as individuals, shows care and concern for them, and more." At the top of the list of retention talent capabilities identified by the TalentKeepers study are trust building, esteem building, and climate building. Leaders with those capabilities "develop ways to give team members responsibility, freedom to act, and feel good about themselves" by fostering a trusting work environment.

From a personal point of view, being honest creates more fulfilling relationships and helps to eliminate stress, the primary cause of most anxiety and depression. And we could all use a little help in that regard. So, how do we go about teaching or fostering honesty?

Here are some suggestions.

Define it. The obvious first step in teaching honesty is to define it. For our purposes (the betterment of our colleagues and what we think or feel. In addition, we must also instill in our colleagues that it's dishonest to feel a certain way and *not* communicate it. There are numerous learning tools—videos, simulations, online courses—using real-world situations to teach ethical behavior.

Create it. To have any chance of getting people to communicate in a straight, open, and complete manner, we must create a safe environment for them to speak the truth. Most of us want to be accepted and prove that we're likeable, so it's easier to remain silent and avoid appearing foolish or hurting someone's feelings, which makes instilling honesty difficult. In fact, in a U.S.-wide survey in the early 1990s, "The Day America Told the Truth," 93 percent of Americans admitted that they lie "regularly and habitually" at work.

Reward it. Speaking the unspoken is a radical behavioral change for most people, and one that requires a lot of courage. It's critical that employees are adequately prepared to receive the unvarnished, but tactfully presented, truth from their colleagues. Their reactions will help dictate whether the truth tellers consider it a worthwhile activity to continue. So, be sure to teach and encourage everyone around you to reward honest colleagues. We should truly thank them for speaking their feelings and acknowledge that it was a caring thing to do.

Demonstrate it. Gandhi said, "You must be the change you wish to see in the world." Honesty in the workplace can't be commanded or controlled. It has to be encouraged and inspired by leaders and colleagues who are themselves honest. Demonstrate honesty through your character, rather than by preaching it, and your colleagues will follow suit. In the "2003 National Business Ethics Survey," only 15 percent of employees who said that top management acted ethically observed unethical behavior [by others] in their offices; 56 percent of those who said that management only "talks the talk" saw wrong-doing. So, al-

Maybe ethics in the workplace starts with plain old honesty with others. Here's how to create an honest work environment.

ways be aware of your feelings, words, and actions, especially those unintentional white lies. Don't say, "I'll be with you in one minute," when you actually have no idea when you'll be finished with the task at hand.

A few years ago, I was presenting at *Inc.* magazine's *Inc.* 500 conference. The room was filled with CEOs of fast-growing companies. The purpose of the presentation was to explore advances in strategic sales and marketing practices. During one point in my presentation, an attendee asked me about the best way to improve sales team productivity. I thought back to my days managing a medical products sales team and to the various challenges that I had encountered. "Simple," I replied. "Tell your people that if they feel it, they must find a way to ask it."

I went on to explain that most salespeople are reluctant to ask tough questions of potential clients. But the reality is that most prospective clients wish that salespeople would speak their minds. Speaking the unspoken saves both parties a lot of time. For example, if your salesperson is discussing your products and services with a busy executive and he senses that she isn't fully engaged, instruct him to simply ask a question. "I may be off base, but I'm sensing that you and I are not going to do any business together. Again, I may be mistaken, but are my feelings correct?"

Now, what's the worse that could happen? There are only good outcomes. Either the prospective client explains what she's feeling uncertain about, which helps the salesperson focus on eliminating that doubt, or she says that nothing is bothering her, which allows the salesperson to move forward with greater confidence. And even if she replies, "You're right! We're not going to do any business together," that's still a big plus. Both the prospective client and salesperson can then move on to more productive and worthwhile activities.

That same idea is true within organizations because time is our most precious, and limited, resource. Getting the truth out saves time. But remember what the poet Yeats wrote: "Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire."

So, if you're truly interested in teaching a grand and critically important concept like honesty, you must be willing to except the awkward situations and inevitable flaring of human passions that are certain to occur. However, it's unquestionably worth the effort. In our complex world of breakneck change and talent wars, the keys to success in business are no longer just the strategies or systems of the organization. It's the characters and skills of leaders, managers, and employees who practice what they preach and recognize their role in instilling the right values and behaviors. When honesty—and its natural offspring, trust—exists in an organization or in a relationship, almost everything else is easier and far more enjoyable. And it paves the way for ethical behavior. **TD**

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Training Matters

According to the Ethics Research Center's "2003 National Business Ethics Survey," 44 percent of all nonmanagement employees don't report the misconduct they observe. But when a workplace program is present, more do report. These training tools can help you promote an honest and ethical work environment:

● Business Ethics, an online course by SkillSoft; ◀ɴ)**skillsoft.com**

● Ethical Decision Making and Managerial Business Ethics, online courses by NETg; ◀ɴ)**netg.com**

● *Ethics 4 Everyone*, a video by CRM Learning; ◀ɴ)**crmlearning.com**

● *Ethics for a Modern Workforce*, a video/DVD by Character Training International; ◀ɴ)**character-ethics.org**

● Where Do You Draw the Line?, a customized simulation by Simulation Training Systems; ◀ɴ)**stsinl.com**

● *Character Is Destiny*, a video by VideoLearning Systems; ◀ɴ) **www. videolrn.com**

● Ethical Decision Making, an online course by NETg; ◀ɴ) **www.netg.com**

● *Ethics 4 Everyone,* a video by CRM Learning;

◀ɴ) **www.crmlearning.com**

● *ExperienceCSR*, an online training simulation by ExperiencePoint;

◀ɴ) **www.experiencepoint.com**

● *Six Pillars of Character*, a video by TimeFrame Learning; ◀ɴ) **www.tfvideo. com.**