

Ethics in the workplace

by Joseph Sherren

... an organizational and individual choice

A RECENT INTERNATIONAL STUDY by Walker Information and the Hudson Institute found that 55 percent of workers who describe their workplace environment as ethical are more likely to be loyal and stay with the same organization. It also found that Canadians are among the least loyal employees in the world, with only one in seven classified as “truly loyal” to their employer!

There are many benefits for organizations that maintain strong ethical practices. According to Steven Cross, executive director of the Canadian Centre for Ethics and Corporate Policy, “these organizations get a higher degree of employee loyalty,” tending to attract better talent and retaining their employees longer – in spite of the fact that people don’t always get rewarded when they do something good. (The centre, www.ethicscentre.ca, promotes ethical values in corporate decision making through workshops and seminars, and through an annual Canadian ethics summit.) “There’s a lot of evidence that companies considered to be ethical are very successful companies,” he says. “Yet,” Cross continues, “society’s perception is that there’s not as much

managers who are unethical by design. Specific individuals within organizations, or systemic errors can usually trace unethical situations to a sequence of actions in the system. Therefore, the key to implementing an organizational culture that does not tolerate unethical behaviour comes down to individual value choices. The good news is that it appears more organizations are attempting to implement a code of conduct and become more responsible.

But what if they and the people who work there don’t make that effort? Thomas Hobbes, who lived in the sixteenth century, imagined a world without ethics. He concluded that the result would be simple. There would be no farming because others would help themselves to the farmers’ labour. There would be no building because others would move in and throw the builder out. There would be no art because everyone would be concerned about their own basic survival. There wouldn’t be a calendar because no one would adhere to it. Promises would be meaningless because no value would be placed on keeping one’s word. People would kill each other whenever it proved advantageous.

Shared values

Values represent your most basic fundamental beliefs. They are the principles that will arouse an emotional reaction if you perceive them to be threatened. They can also spur on your greatest achievements. If your work incorporates your values, you are likely to find that what you do is meaningful, purposeful and important. Anne Greenblatt, from Stanford University, states it very well when she says, “When your work is aligned with your values, you tap into ‘the fire within.’”

Let’s face it, you spend more time at work than in any other single activity, including sleeping. It is therefore crucial that the place where you work, a place that has the greatest potential to satisfy your basic needs, has a code of conduct that easily matches your primary values.

Bottom line, if the people you work with don’t respect your values, you’ll find another place to work. Conversely, if you don’t respect or honour your organization’s values, you will be asked to leave.

You are the sum of the value you contribute to society and the values by which you live; it is also how you will be remembered

trust in business as they would like to have.” However, Cross does not share the public perception of corporate bad guys.

I agree with Cross. In my experience, it is extremely rare to find employees or

What will save us from this type of world is what Hobbes called a “social” contract: I respect you and yours, and you respect me and mine. It is an enlightened premise, but a difficult one to enforce.

What’s to stop someone from breaking the agreement and taking advantage of the situation? Laws and punishments have some effect, but the law cannot cover every situation and catch every transgressor.

There has to be something more that will maintain this unwritten code. Hobbes recognized that in order to exist as a society, we require a general, built-in desire to live cooperatively so that we will keep promises for the sake of keeping promises and abstain from deceptive behaviour because deceptive behaviour is undesirable in and of itself. Adherence to a basic moral code needs to be as natural as breathing air,

if we are to create a life that is communal, rich, kind, generous and lengthy.

This society can only be realized if we all take the responsibility to ensure a sense of scruples – and we can model that in the workplace by instilling scruples in our employees during their first five working years. Scruples are defined as the restraining force that will stop us from violating our fundamental values. Having direct and immediate consequences for day-to-day behaviours can only enhance scruples.

There's a value shift going on in the world and this is affecting organizational focus. For government and business, the code of conduct now defines the framework within which all employees must work. An individual's values define how they will approach their work. To ensure compliance, government departments must make ethics training a part of their orientation programs.

So how do you ensure your department behaves ethically?

- How the leader behaves at the top sets the standard that will cascade down to all levels of management and employees. All ethical behaviour has to start at the directors' level.
- There must be transparency and honesty in the decision-making process, and the department must be committed to dealing with ethical issues – no sweeping stuff under the rug. The department should have social values embedded as an ongoing part of strategy, not as a public relations exercise. Some organizations I work with actually have adherence to shared values as part of their performance measurement and review system.
- It all comes down to sincere intent. If the intent is really to be ethical, people will sense it. If it appears to be a public relations exercise, then employees' "BS" metres go off, causing cynicism.

Remember that opportunity may only knock once, but temptation will kick the door down. Make sure your staff knows the difference. ♫

Joseph Sherren, CSP is the author of Vitamin C for a Healthy Workplace published by Creative Bound Inc (www.creativebound.com), providers of on-demand access to authors and speaking professionals who are experts in a wide range of life and workplace issues.