Seven Practical Applications Of Ethics

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An organization and each of its employees, wherever they may be located, must conduct their affairs with uncompromising honesty and integrity. Business ethics are no different than personal ethics and the same high standard applies to both. As a representative of their company all employees are required to adhere to the highest standard, regardless of local custom.

Everyone is responsible for their own behavior. We live in a culture where responsibility and accountability are minimized, with individuals hiding behind the label of "victim" as an excuse for their actions. There is right and wrong, black and white, but many would prefer to operate in shades of gray. As long as they do not cross the line, they feel that they are fine. As long as no one catches them, their behavior is acceptable.

Individuals operating in shades of gray feel ethics are not as important as the legality of their actions and think the ends justify the means. After all it is a results-driven environment and it is the results that matter.

While certain actions might be legal, they may also be unethical and reflect poorly on an organization as well as the individuals responsible for them. If these actions are tolerated and allowed, an organizational culture is created that undermines the customer's confidence in the company, as well as its products and services and ultimately destroys its reputation in the marketplace.

Allowing even a single unethical activity can pull a thread that ultimately unravels the cloth of an organization. Actions have consequences and unethical actions and their consequences can have a rippling effect within a company. If all employees understand this and apply it to their actions and the actions of their colleagues, it will result in a stronger company. Both the company and an employees' ongoing employment within it require compliance to this philosophy.

Ethical behavior cannot be legislated. It is a combination of strong values and the impact of the example set by peers and superiors. To better appreciate ethics, individuals must understand how the following factors interact with each other to impact their actions, behaviors and decisions:

Values

Values are the principles or standards of personal behavior. Most values are shaped early in life by parents, families, friends, teachers and spiritual leaders. As individuals mature, their values can be changed or biased by their experiences and the choices they make in life. Specific examples of sound values include honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, fairness and a sense of justice.

A primary value possessed by most individuals is acknowledging the difference

between what is right and what is wrong. How one acts on this knowledge is the core of both value-based and ethical behaviors.

Norms

Norms are the guidelines or guiding values that define behavior in specific situations. Norms governing employee behavior can be formed by organizations, informally created by groups, or established by individual values. Some examples of organizational norms include:

- Every employee is 100% responsible for their behavior.
- Ethics are ethics.
- There is no difference between business and personal ethics.
- Ethics are critically important in both business and in life.
- Employees are expected to act ethically 100% of the time.
- Whether they will be discovered or not, employees must always do the right thing.
- Leadership obligations, which include giving clear direction and teaching fellow employees by example.
- It is an employee's obligation to keep those they supervise acting ethically.
- Employees are expected to stop unethical acts, even if they think it will jeopardize their job.

Convictions

A conviction is a firmly held belief or opinion and can include one's values, beliefs, corporate values and norms. A company's strong ethical program relies upon employees' uncompromising belief or conviction in "always doing the right thing." This underlying conviction is the foundation for success.

Integrity

Integrity means acting unbiased by self-interest and within the framework of one's values and norms. One of the most generally accepted norms of organizational behavior is that an individual's private interests or desire to benefit personally should not influence how they carry out their responsibilities. An employee is corrupt when he or she damages the company by deriving personal benefits and gains from their decisions and actions.

Choices

Ethics is the collection of values, norms, standards and principles that provides a framework for action. Action requires individuals to make choices. Ethical choices often create personal dilemmas, where decisions may conflict with one's personal values and beliefs. The bottom line in ethical behavior is determined by the individual choices one makes in both their business dealings and in their personal lives.

Ethical choices and decisions are unquestionably difficult to make. Some may impact profitability, employment or even personal relationships. The dilemma often lies in defining "the right thing," which is not always obvious. This often involves determining and weighing the various consequences specific decisions will have on the problem or situation. Ethical decision making is further complicated by all

involved parties emotionally arguing their positions. Emotional arguments are subjective and tend to charge the decision making environment. The right choice or "the right thing" will be an objective choice free of emotionalism. Once identified, the decision should be straightforward.

Courage

It takes courage to be ethical in the current cultural environment. Ethical decisions can be unpopular because of their impact on both the company and other employees. They can be stressful because of a fear of retribution or reprisals within the company and from others.

Courage must come from the uncompromising convictions, values and beliefs supported by an organization's ethical philosophies and reinforced by the belief in "always doing the right thing."

Behaviors

Integrity or ethical behavior is guided by each of the factors discussed within this lesson including values, norms, convictions, integrity, choices and courage. None is independent of the others and each supports the others. They are what define your behaviors as either ethical or unethical. Together they provide you with the guidelines that define your behavior.

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