Ethical Leadership for Everyone

Good ethics is good business, and every employee at our company can and should aspire to be an ethical leader. But it's not always easy to set a good example and hold both oneself and one's colleagues accountable to high ethical standards, particularly when pressures to "bend the rules" intensify during a time of tight budgets and heightened competition.

When ethics issues arise, we want to do the right thing, of course. Yet circumstances and other voices often make it difficult to speak up. Silence may seem like the better option, and we choose to live with an uneasy conscience rather than risk our reputation, our relationships at work, and perhaps even our job.

Given these challenges, it helps to think of ethical leadership as a matter of performance and acknowledge the need for greater self-awareness as well as some preparation and training. Because ethical leaders are made, not born, we can take steps to improve our own integrity performance.

Steps Toward Effective Ethical Leadership

Each of us can become a more effective ethical leader in the workplace by developing our own self-understanding and acquiring a set of attitudes and skills. Drawing on the work of *Giving Voice to Values*, a collaborative project sponsored by the Aspen Institute and the Yale School of Management, here are several steps each of us can take (along with some help from supportive co-workers):

Normalize value conflicts. An essential first step is to recognize that ethics issues are a normal part of business life, rather than a strange and unexpected interruption from routine. For example, if we are in sales, we can expect to find ourselves in situations where a competitor suggests collusion on prices as a win-win or a buyer solicits a bribe in exchange for a contract renewal. Again, if we're in production, we can expect to face moments where someone proposes to "cut corners" on, say, safety testing in order to meet a deadline.

Whatever our area, whatever our role, we should consider it normal that our values and personal integrity will be put to the test on occasion -- and prepare accordingly.

Appeal to shared values and sense of purpose. We can connect with our fellow employees -- including those on the other side of a specific value conflict -- by tactfully recalling widely shared values such as respect, honesty, and fairness. In many cases, these are our company's core values. Similarly, we can establish common ground with our colleagues by appealing to a shared sense of purpose. Gently reminding others of their common commitment to "walking the talk" when it comes to values and mission can create space for a more constructive dialogue in ethics-related situations.

Before value conflicts arise, it helps to define our own personal and professional purpose broadly, and to ask ourselves: What do I really want to accomplish? People with a clear and well-articulated sense of purpose are typically more influential in groups.

Align self-image with values. Are you risk-averse or comfortable being "out there" in moments of conflict? Are you idealistic or more pragmatic in making trade-offs and sacrifices to resolve an ethical dilemma? Knowing your own strengths and preferred style for dealing with others in situations of value conflict can help you act on principle more effectively.

Imagine, and then practice, finding your voice. Visioning is a well-known technique employed by many successful performers in a variety of fields. If you actively envision and pre-script what you'll say -- and how you'll say it -- when value conflicts arise, you are more likely to "find your voice" when the time for a "live performance" arrives. Practice giving voice to values with your peers and learn from their coaching and feedback.

Anticipate reasons and rationalizations. Arguments for ethically questionable behavior typically don't hold water, but they can win the day if left unchallenged. These reasons and rationalizations are predictable: "everyone does it," "it's not our problem," "no one will find out," and so on. Anticipate common reasons and rationalizations and develop clear, concise counter-arguments. You don't need to be a star debater to expose a bad idea and present a sound alternative, but it helps enormously to be prepared.

Re-affirm the power of choice. One of the most common rationalizations for unethical behavior is the "we have no choice" argument. This argument can seem irrefutable, especially if a reputation, job, or big contract is (or at least appear to be) at stake. When faced with a value conflict, it's vital that we re-affirm our capacity to speak up for our values rather than being silenced by a compelling yet false claim.

You can re-affirm the power of choice by recalling your own experience: what has enabled or disabled you in the past? An honest self-appraisal can help you draw on or work around these factors. Finally, make it a habit to honor and appeal to the capacity for choice in others.

A Final Word

Most of us are neither moral heroes nor villains. The truth is that, on any given day, each of us is capable of standing up for what's right, or standing down and letting others determine what happens -- for good or ill. But when workplace ethics issues do come up -- and they *will* surface as a normal part of doing business -- it's important to know that we *can* exercise effective ethical leadership. And we are more likely to do so if we take steps to prepare for a good performance.