

ETHICS IN THE WORKPLACE

Of all the topics I encounter in my work, the range of moral dilemmas clients have to contend with never ceases to amaze me. Some individuals may wonder, isn't the scope of ethics limited mostly to bribery? I have heard some client argue 'thankfully, they are not a banker, politician or newspaper'. The fact is, lack of ethical awareness at any level can rapidly damage an organisations image, impact sales and lead to irrecoverable damage regardless of current good reputation. Some of those who have suffered by delayed or wrong responses include Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS), Toyota and Perrier.

It's not limited to large organisations and I'm not only talking about individual 1:1 situations. When working with pairs, groups and teams, I've also pointed out the potential and risks in not doing 'the right thing'. I've found this is a subject unconcerned with organisational boundaries – it affects public, private and third sectors.

The scope of the subject is wide and includes, theft, social networking misuse, 'dodgy' expense claims, bribery, taking a 'sickie', on-line pornography, abuse of company systems, fraud, drinking, prosecution, on-line gambling, corruption and more.

So what can an aware organisation do? To check ethical awareness and understating I often share examples of situations with clients and enquire "what would you do..."? A common response from those who are not fully familiar with ethical thinking is 'that's easy, it's company policy - we would just fire them'. When further information is revealed, the dialogue usually becomes 'oh...that's a bit trickier'. Finally, when other contextual information is offered, the talk turns into, 'well, in that instance, I would do this...' It is perhaps no surprise, that 'this' no longer includes firing the individual(s). I've found it's possibly to have a complete change of response and subsequent actions proposed, simply by enhancing the context.

If this is the case, the risk of not getting it right is clearly higher than we would want. After all we might unnecessarily lose good staff (which costs money to replace) and damage the organisations reputation, all for the lack of the right approach to ethical issues. It's not easy; clients have told me they have been amazed by the depth and complexity of ethics. While this may be the case, I believe with the right awareness training, policy adjustments and ongoing monitoring, the right path is identifiable and achievable.

There is a business credo – 'what gets measured gets done', attributed to Peter Drucker, Tom Peters, Edwards Deming, and many others. This is all well and good, yet to date it hasn't always delivered what an organisation needed or wanted. For example we might answer the telephone within 5 rings, 97.4% of the time, Great work! Yet if every time we groan 'hello!!', because the caller is interrupting us, is that going to produce the results we desire?

Business people like numbers and to keep a realistic focus on performance management, some measures are necessary. As a result, some companies have adopted a 'triple bottom line'. This

model was first proposed by Elkington as a method to measure and report corporate performance. He advocated the triple ('TBL or 3BL'), as he called it, must address social, environmental, and economic parameters in ways that offer sustainability. This idea has since been dubbed 'people, planet, and profit'. We are now seeing examples of this models being deployed in organisations such as the BBC and Nokia.

It's a reality that buy-in and subsequent implementation is easier said than done as there are significant philosophical issues to address. Some, including economists and corporate lawyers, insist an organisation must stay targeted on maximising shareholder value within the framework of the law.

This is countered by those who want organisations to have an approach that puts ethics at the front of every activity, so that profit is not put before people or the environment.

My own experience from the in-house 'Ethics in the Workplace' workshops we deliver confirms this is a heated, highly charged topic and ready agreement cannot be taken for granted.

So what can an organisation do to become more aware of how to deal with ethical issues?

Some immediate practical things include identifying and being clear on the organisation's values, morals and principles and knowing how to apply them. This supports the development of ethical codes of conduct. It's also good to raise ethical awareness levels through workshops. Once we have clarified and agreed expectations about confidentiality, we consider ethical dilemmas and how they apply to work. Our approach includes case studies to deepen understanding.

Outside of workshops I have found, when coaching directors or senior executives, that if I sense an ethical issue is involved, the moment will be right to challenge them on their attitude to values in the organisation. I will then support them in evaluating implementation strategies. When coaching individuals who are concerned about how to deal with the behaviour of others, I will coach them in how to get their message across. To be fully effective we must first have considered the available options with associated benefits and downsides. At a future session, we evaluate the success of the approach.

Some worry that ethics could become another 'initiative'. Usually they have encountered 'Quality' and other change programmes and are battle weary. It is important to note that an ethics programme need not consume large resources, or impose an extra burden on employees. Paradoxically, raised ethical awareness usually means it becomes easier for employees to overcome their reluctance to discuss troubling workplace issues with their colleagues.

Organisations are now beginning to realise that even in tough economic times ethics are not just 'nice to have' – they are essential. Ethics and business results are directly related. After our one day workshop employees understand their organisation's position while gaining wider personal

awareness. They leave equipped with a common knowledge and a model to help resolve subsequent ethical problems.

Having ethical awareness become part of the organisations DNA is worth it – the benefits of good ethical practices are many. They include, high morale, lower employee turnover, consistent behaviour – so less surprises for managers, repeat sales with fair margins achieved, enhanced reputation, all leading ultimately for the organisation to become an employer of choice.

In conclusion and returning to however you define the bottom line - this is the right way to resolve ethics in the workplace.