Going beyond merely "doing the right thing."

The Six Components of Successful Ethics Training

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ETHICS TRAINING IN business represents an earnest attempt on the part of organizations to train employees to engage in morally proper behavior in a business setting. The goal of ethics training is not to teach morality, but rather to help employees make the right decision from a position which is morally comfortable to both the company and the employee. Thus, the company needs to judge the success of its ethics training not by how many questions employees answer correctly in workshops, but by how many questions the training has forced them to ask about their past and future ethical decisions and about the consistency of these decisions with the values of the employee and the organization.

The common excuse that is often heard around business circles is that business persons seldom have well-formed ideas regarding the morality of their decisions. The lack of these ideas often cause them to relinquish any responsibility for ethical actions, thereby inviting amorality and even immorality into the workplace. It is the organization's responsibility, therefore, to structure ethics training so as to help employees clarify both their own expectations and the expectations of the organization, while at the same time examining both sets of expectations within a larger moral framework.

THE SIX COMPONENTS

If we want realistically to prepare employees to deal with the ethical problems they will encounter at work, an ethics training program must not dwell on esoteric philosophical approaches. Rather it must deliver a practical understanding to employees of the ethical issues they face. In this light, we propose that the structure of ethics training should consist of six components. We lay out each of these components in turn along with examples of how they may be carried out.

- **Component 1**: *Provide trainees with an understanding of ethical judgment philosophies and heuristics.* Most trainers wish that they could tell you that there are right and wrong answers to ethical problems. In essence, they realize that finding an answer to ethical problems is like trying to describe a natural shade of grey. It is very difficult to say how dark or light it is; people would prefer to describe it in terms of how it relates to black and white. Indeed, most employees would be surprised about what people (both in and out of the organization) disagree on as being ethically acceptable or unacceptable. Although it is probably presumptuous to think that we can (or should) train employees in the appropriate philosophical approaches that they should take, we would argue that a crucial aspect of training employees to use their critical thinking skills effectively is to help them determine the consistency of their actions with their values and those of the organization.

Training in Component 1 involves a search for common ethical values among employees and between employees and the organization, as well as a respect for various ways these values might be interpreted. Workshops can explore these common threads to discover core values. For example, employees may see the core value of freedom in many different forms: freedom of choice in career

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matters (choosing to accept or reject a transfer), freedom of choice in personal benefits (choice of medical plans), freedom to make decisions about work (empowerment), and freedom of access to important information about their work, jobs, and careers.

Managers, on the other hand, may see freedom as the operation of the free market in the business environment: freedom from government restriction on business operations, freedom of the company to follow new business opportunities, and freedom of customers to choose among products and services.

In the area of heuristics, organizations can provide trainees with critical thinking strategies for approaching ethical situations. In particular, clear, analytically based questions may help trainees to think about issues. Moreover, a series of critical questions can more clearly elucidate the issues and point out alternative avenues for resolving the problem.

For example, an employee can be asked to describe an ethical dilemma that he or she experienced or witnessed. Other participants in the training session can then be given questions that they ask the employee, which are designed to allow them to evaluate critically the information about the dilemma, the ethical goals and assumptions of the people involved, and the values that could be applied to the dilemma. A discussion among the participants of different ethical alternatives would follow:

- **Component 2**: *Provide industry/profession-specific areas of ethical concern.* Many ethics trainers emphasize a broad brush stroke of the endless stream of ethically problematic areas: worker relations, discipline and discharge, and consumer concerns. What they fail to see is that most industries and professions have a host of ethical issues and dilemmas that are peculiar to them alone.

For example, human resources managers face unique ethical problems with job applicants. How much truth should be involved in the hiring process? Should you tell an applicant that he or she does not come across well in the employment interview? Human resources managers also face ethical dilemmas with being honest with employees. Should you tell employees as soon as possible that their jobs may be eliminated by planned downsizing?

Another example can be found in the securities industry. The peculiarities of insider trading and churning of client accounts may render general ethics training of little use. Instead, ethics training in the securities area must carefully delineate the specific aspects of a problem, such as insider trading — how to identify it, what to do if one suspects it is occurring, and how to use personal records to identify insider trading trends.

In order to deal with these specific issues, ethics training should include specific training modules for a particular profession or industry. Whereas combining different types of employees is beneficial for Component 1, trainers should divide out similar groups of employees for modular training and specific discussion in Component 2.

- **Component 3**: *Provide trainees with organizational ethical expectations and rules.* Company expectations about ethical behavior usually are contained in employee handbooks and codes of ethics — two documents that are among the least read in the organization. Training usually involves a short introduction during the indoctrination of new hires, which is quickly forgotten in the rush of newcomers to learn what they should be doing.

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A more workable solution is ongoing training with more extensive (and readable) documents. For example, an effective code of ethics should not read like a legal book of statutes. Rather it should give a definition of the ethical problem in plain English and numerous examples of what is described. The training session should then focus on hypothetical situations that trainees can discuss and evaluate against the standards in the code.

For example, in dealing with sexual harassment, trainees are instructed that harassment is unethical because it robs employees of dignity, creates fear, creates dishonesty, and restricts their freedom to work as an effective employee. Harassment can be in the form of an overt request for sex in return for favors, such as a promotion or raise. Harassment can also include telling off-color jokes, the display of offensive pictures, undue staring, and touching.

Hypothetical situations may include an employee being asked for sex by a boss who offers to transfer her (or him) to a better job. This is obviously wrong, but why? At this point, trainees should have an opportunity to apply the critical thinking skills they learned in Component 1. Trainees could discuss how this situation creates long-term bad feelings, mistrust, and even fear, possible coworker suspicions, and a tarnished company image.

• **Component 4**: *Provide trainees with an understanding of their own ethical tendencies.* People differ in terms of how they perceive and react to ethical issues. The reason for this is that they not only have different perspectives on what is right and wrong, but also that they have different personalities which guide them. Thus, while much work has focused on the more philosophical aspects of ethical behavior at work, individual differences or personality traits may also impact the choice of ethical action. Measures of individual differences and characteristics related to an employee's morality can provide an employee with an understanding of his or her proclivities toward particular ethical judgments, both in terms of deficits and strengths.

For example, Machiavellian personality types believe that any means justifies an end they seek. They see no problem with lying to customers, being dishonest with coworkers, and manipulating those under them, if their end goal is better performance for the company. The upshot is that ethics training should include means of dealing with Machiavellian types, such as building a paper trail in dealings with them (it is harder to lie and be dishonest if others have the evidence) and ensuring that you deal with them in public meetings (it is harder to manipulate people in front of others than in private one-on-one meetings).

• **Component 5**: *Take a realistic view — elaborate on the monkey wrenches in ethical decisions.*

Unfortunately, what one does about an unethical behavior may go well beyond any guidelines or personality trait. Even employees with best intentions sometimes go awry, often because other factors enter the ethics picture. This is especially true of managers who are asked to evaluate whether an employee's action was unethical and then having to respond to the action. Such managers are often influenced by a variety of other causes, which we call biasing factors. Indeed, most ethical training does not help trainees deal with these factors.

In some cases, these causes are a result of the attributes of the manager himself. For example, differences as a result of socialized gender roles (e.g., belief that males are more objective, females more emotional), philosophies of punishment (punishment as deterrence of future unethical actions, retribution for past actions, or rehabilitation of the individual), or the impact of the unethical behavior on the manager himself may hamper an objective assessment of and a reaction to the unethical behavior.

For example, a sales manager may complain that he is unable to do anything about a renegade salesperson who steals thousands of dollars of merchandise a year from the company. The sales manager explains that because this salesperson is his top producer taking action against him would reduce the overall department performance and thus ultimately impact the evaluation (and subsequent raises) of the sales manager. In this case, the manager cannot be objective because he perceives the solution to the unethical actions only in terms of how it adversely affects him.

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Evaluators of the behavior may also take other things into account that bias the evaluation of ethical performance. For example, the unethical behavior may be considered within the context of the attributes of the offender, including membership in racial, ethnic, and gender groups, the rarity of the offender's skills (highly marketable employees may be forgiven more easily than those with few important skills), the importance of the person to organization (key people may have more latitude to sin than those on the periphery), political connections, the offender's ethical work history, and the offender's likability (we are more forgiving of nice people than nasty people). Perhaps most important, managers are often duped by the ability of ethical offenders to create the right impression of the unethical event (it wasn't my fault, or, if it was, there were extenuating circumstances).

Sometimes, it is the attributes of the offense that are taken into account and create bias. For example, a manager may take into account the magnitude of the offense (were people actually hurt?), the characteristics of the offense (was the action violent?), who was hurt by the action (were the victims nice, likable people?), and the specificity of codes related to the action (was it clearly prohibited by ethical guidelines?).

Other times an apparently insignificant unethical behavior may pervade the entire organization and establish a low ethical standard. We recall one company that, during a holiday season, it had so much masking tape taken home by employees to wrap presents that the replacement cost for the disappear-

ing tape reached into the thousands of dollars. Instead of enforcing company rules on theft, executives stated that it was an "annoyance" and put together a creative solution for the next season. The company gave each employee a gift box of tape with a note asking them to please leave the company tape on the premises. Whereas the executives came off looking generous in keeping with the season, they did implicitly tolerate the theft and offered a "payoff" to solve the problem. The unintended consequence is that employees may now be tempted to take more expensive items from the company, because they believe that the company will condone theft.

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There are three basic problems here that can cause bias. First, people are fairly easily deluded by appearances and good image management for actions. Second, the perceivers of unethical actions filter their perceptions through their personalities, biases, and past experiences. And third, people look at immediate effects and do not take long-term consequences into account. Ethics training therefore should not only focus on improving the situation but should realistically explore the many ways people can cloak unethical actions in appearances, the various influences on people's perceptual filters, and the importance of examining long-term effects of actions.

• **Component 6**: *Get the trainees to practice and return.* Trainees need time to absorb the concepts. Trainers should allow employees to go back to the organization and spend time trying to understand the material in the context of daily work life. Then employees should be brought back to another session with questions to ask and specific case situations to examine. Only then can it be certain that the concepts have been applied and employees are well into the process of internalizing the ideas.

This process can be enhanced by having employees keep a journal of both their work activities and how they and others react to their actions. After they describe their activities, they could write whether they believe these actions are ethical, unethical, or if they are unsure. In addition, they should identify the short-term and long-term consequences, consider how good they felt about their actions, describe how others responded to their actions, and consider if they had it to do over again, would they do the same thing. Armed with a critical analytic understanding of ethics, employees could meet periodically in discussion workshops and share their journal entries. Coworkers could provide feedback on how they perceived the actions. Together employees could then explore commonalities in values and identify areas where the company could provide further guidance about ethical conduct.

CONCLUSION

These six components are designed to reveal common core ethical values shared among employees, managers, and the organization that may provide overall direction about ethical behavior. At the same time, these components help employees to be flexible, to recognize that various situations may require unique responses, and to evaluate realistically the ethical dilemmas they face. If we expect to refine ethical decision making as new contingencies arise in coworker interactions, to improve dealings between management and workers and to better meet customer demand in an ever increasingly competitive marketplace, we need to offer employees a holistic training approach to help them solve these issues. Simply training them to "do the right thing" in these complex, changing situations will not work. ❑

HONESTY AND INTEGRITY IN JOB APPLICANTS

Nearly a third of executives rate honesty and integrity as the most valuable qualities in job candidates, up from a paltry 7 percent in 1990 when verbal skills were ranked number one.

— *Across the Board*
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