Standing Up for Ethics at Work

By Darnell Lattal, Ph.D.

People at work face small and large ethical challenges regularly. Yet, today, when corporate scandals seem to be an ongoing aspect of business, most people, when asked if they or their fellow employees, including leadership, are ethical, answer yes. In fact, oftentimes those caught in unethical behavior say they never thought themselves capable of doing such deeds. Are the *ethically challenged* different, or are all of us capable of making self-serving decisions that result in unintended consequences?

Behaving ethically is as complex as any business or individual skill-building strategy.

– Darnell Lattal

If you have ever witnessed a bystander picking up and returning money unknowingly dropped by another person, or a stranger speaking up when they witness someone being mistreated you likely view them as people who have done or said something very surprising, behaviorally speaking, particularly in terms of their clarity and willingness to take a stand. We all need the same kind of 'stand up' behavior at work but it too is surprising when it occurs. The workplace can be a learning laboratory for how to build in such behaviors as taking a stand, saying the right thing in the face of disapproval by others, and raising questions, polite or not, about things that may not seem right.

Businesses must build in safeguards and practices that increase the likelihood of people doing the right thing. Getting those safeguards going can be as simple as providing positive recognition when someone makes an ethical choice—even when that choice leads to a loss of immediate business (for example, not signing a contract to deliver a product within a given timeframe when it's knowingly not possible, even when the sale might make the monthly quota). But behaving ethically is as complex as any business or individual

skill-building strategy. Implementing an ethical roadmap requires the time, effort and commitment at both the front end for planning and on a daily basis as the plan is put it into action. Not only do policy, procedure, and systems of work need to be carefully designed but so do the consequences of what happens after speaking up, saying no for a good reason to a boss's request, or refusing to go along with a team target that may do harm to others.

> **Ethics is knowing the difference between what you have a right to do and what is right to do.**
>
> — Potter Stewart

Not all decisions affect issues of integrity, common good, the rights and needs of individuals, or one's own self-interest. However, many decisions in business require a plan for the conditions and messages that lead to certain actions and the consequences that occur as a result of those actions—planned or not. Ethical misdeeds are defined almost always post-hoc, as lagging indicators, long after the wrong actions are taken. Avoiding such workplace problems requires *constant vigilance*. This vigilance takes time and effort but when a company openly strives to support ethical behavior, the positive cultural effect on all employees far outweighs the effort.

ASSUMPTIONS THAT GET IN THE WAY OF ETHICAL DECISION MAKING AND ACTION

Some beliefs cloud our approach to ethics at work, beliefs that may not be false, but fall far short when it comes to ensuring better ethical decision making and action: The following four assumptions should be carefully considered:

1. *Character is the only thing that counts.* Hire right and we will not have ethical problems,

some say. The vast majority of people caught up in ethical scandals are by no means *intending* to be unethical. They are not sociopaths or thieves by design. They often evaluate what they do as intended to be ethical—good for the team, meeting their manager's requirements, or simply getting the results that their company rewards. Yet, when unethical conduct occurs, the individual is still held responsible, whether particular actions are intentionally unethical or not. The lesson is that, in the workplace, character alone is not enough.

2. *Codes of conduct, displayed and described, keep us on the right track.* Rule-governed behavior such as codes and professional standards are necessary to signal the kind of behavior you want, but insufficient to sustain it. The consequences that follow behavior affect future actions. In the workplace some consequences inadvertently reinforce the wrong steps, whether in process control or ethical actions. Don't think that mere platitudes will build ethics into the fabric of the workplace.

3. *What people say is the key to what they will do.* The research on say/do correlation indicates a weak bond between words and actions. We often say what we believe to be the right things, the thing we want to do, but when observed, we do what is reinforcing. The two do not always match and we are amazingly unaware of the disconnect. Whether you are at the top of your organization or elsewhere, you have no immunity from committing unethical acts. We are NOT good observers of our own behavior and its long-term impact. Wanting to do right is very important, but it is not enough.

4. *You cannot measure ethics as a part of daily actions.* Whether an act is ethical can

sometimes be immediately defined, as in cases of flagrant fraud or misdeed, or more often, long after the event itself. Such delay can seem far removed from individual accountability and rarely do companies construct a thorough backward chain of events to find out exactly what happened. However, what is measured is a large part of determining what is valued. Work to develop a checklist of values against which to compare individual and group actions taken. It can be a simple checklist with a few stakeholders (team members, the individual, and the customer) or a more complex analysis but at given intervals review what is being said and done against such a values-stakeholder analysis.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Ethical decisions in business are shaped and maintained at the intersection of individual performance and workplace culture. When delay between the actions of individuals and their consequences occur, unethical acts become more possible. Increasing ethically-sensitive actions include:

1. **Train to increase sensitivity to what is and is not ethical.** Train through case studies and actual work on a regular basis. Learn the known facts about decision-making errors and evaluate your decisions against such criteria. Invite critical review of practices at all levels and seek more training to increase your sensitivities to the nuances of ethical conduct.

2. **Design a unique, measurable, and specific Code of Conduct.** This code must be written after a thorough analysis of company practices that compete with open dialogue, trust, placing ethics above profits, and other factors, such as coercion, fear, or threat used by uninformed managers to get work done. Take an *ethical pulse check* often to assess continuous improvement. Only then does the Code of Conduct begin to mean something measurable that in turn shows up in how employees perceive and respond to the ethical environment. This code, actively applied to performance reviews, pay, and recognition, will hopefully increase the right behavior through the recognition and reinforcement it brings.

3. **Provide knowledge of and methods for adhering to ethical standards.** Examine and translate these standards into example-based samples of what is and is not ethical in the work you do. Discuss these examples in staff meetings on a regular basis.

4. **Include pragmatic ethics measurement with your regular performance metrics.** This requires organizations to assess decisions for both their immediate short-term effects and their longer term impact. Build such measures into performance reviews and tie that to weekly checklists and consequence analysis.

5. **Engage in communication strategies.** Communications should include ethics as a core element of daily review, tracking, and recognizing in systematic ways. Report to the company examples of right decisions made against such pressures as capturing new clients. Use *right* and *not right* examples to clarify.

6. **Provide management education that includes a clear understanding of how people behave.** This education doesn't focus on how we wish people would behave but on how they actually behave. Behavior is lawful and predictable.

7. **Arm your employees with knowledge about their own behavior.** When people understand the dynamics of behavior they can apply an informed and objective lens to the conditions that surround their actions in the workplace.

8. **Establish and measure *daily* actions** at each level of individual performance—executive, VP, manager, supervisor, and front line.

9. **Retain, promote and celebrate people.** Reward the people who engage in consistent and persistent ethical reviews as part of their (and your) *metrics that matter* system in appraisal and selection, building such review into daily activities.

10. **Invite rigorous questions and careful questioning of decisions made at the top. Invite disagreement and refinement.** Help everyone understand that open dialogue at every employment level is highly valued at your company—and demonstrate it in how such questions are responded to and when appropriate new direction is set.

It is possible to *design* a workplace that is more ethical, more efficient, and more profitable. Such a workplace, where integrity is the criteria by which every decision is measured, has a cascading effect on all those who have a stake in the business—customers, employees, stockholders, and other stakeholders, including the public at large. One woman, when caught by hidden cameras, succinctly described why she took action in a difficult situation. She said simply, "I couldn't stand by and let this happen." When you have designed in consequences that recognize and reward taking that hard step, where employees report by example and leadership can see that they don't stand by and let bad things happen, you are well on your way to establishing an ethical workplace.

> **Action indeed is the sole medium of expression for ethics.**
> — Jane Addams

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[About the Author]

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For more than 30 years, Darnell has been dedicated to supporting clients in areas such as strategy implementation, behavioral systems redesign, and leadership development. Her expertise lies in coaching individuals and organizations towards effective behavior change and is currently working to help advance the mission of The Aubrey Daniels Institute. Darnell's greatest joy is in furthering the incredible power for bringing out the best that behavior analysis provides to others, including to her seven grandchildren.

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