



ETHICS TOOL

Ethics in Management: Setting the Stage for Modeling Ethical Behavior

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A leading ethics expert talks about how modeling is a powerful leadership strategy and provides some practical tips:

A standard refrain heard often when business conduct is discussed is that leaders need to model ethical behavior for their employees.

Modeling is a powerful leadership strategy where you show your employees through your own behavior how you want them to behave with others. It has been used successfully to demonstrate flexibility, politeness, decisiveness, compassion, sharing and numerous other desirable traits. It also works extremely well as an ethics-teaching tool.

In fact, one of the principal findings of the Ethics Resource Center's 2000 National Business Ethics Survey was that the modeling of ethical behavior by organizational leaders, managers, supervisors and co-workers sets a good example desired business behavior. When employees perceive formal and informal leaders are ethical, they:

- Feel less pressure to compromise ethical standards
- Observe less misconduct on the job
- Are more satisfied with their organization overall, and
- Feel more valued as employees.

In other words, organizational ethics become real for employees when they see good ethics being applied.

The problem with modeling is that all too often the audience present when ethical dilemmas arise is small, and the modeled behavior is missed by the majority of employees who are engaged with activities elsewhere. So, how can a leader multiply the effectiveness of modeling? Set the stage in advance and then make sure you discuss observed behavior that models good ethical conduct.

Make it acceptable to talk about ethics. As a topic, ethics has taken on a negative patina. The multitude of scandals and ethical shortcomings reported in the press paint a depressing picture of individuals who skirt their responsibilities or ignore conduct guidelines to the detriment of their organizations. Sadly, there are countless examples of modeled behavior of good ethical conduct that never see the light of day.

- Take time during a staff meeting or other group event to commend someone on demonstrated ethical conduct
- Talk about ethical conduct routinely and encourage your employees seek guidance whenever they question whether or not an act is ethical
- Keep the lines of communication open. When someone wants to talk about an ethical issue, the time to talk about it is then.... not at some future date. Pushing the discussion off to later diminishes the importance you are trying to place on ethics.

Create a habit of repeating organizational lore. In every organization, there are stories of individuals who have gone the extra mile to accomplish a seemingly impossible task. Stories also exist in every organization of how someone chose to do something right even though it may have been painful to do so.

- Capture organizational stories of proper conduct and use them to illustrate desired behavior
- Write the stories down so they can be passed onto to future employees
- Use organizational newsletters and other publications to spread the word about ethical successes.

Include ethical conduct as a measure on performance evaluations. People do what is rewarded or measured. If the emphasis is on proactive, ethical behavior, you'll see more of it. If it a measurable objective, employees will think more about it.

- Make your expectations for ethical conduct well known
- Capture live examples of ethical conduct to use when delivering a performance evaluation
- Provide some award or incentive for ethical performance (one organization awarded certificates titled "Caught you...doing something good" that were delivered along with a gourmet cookie. Another presented small Corporate Commitment Plaques for ethical conduct.)

Make ethics more important than just annual coverage. Talk about ethics often and at all levels. Ask employees what they like and dislike about their jobs. Inquire if there is anything that they have to do at work that makes them uncomfortable or that seems to them to be a compromise of their own personal ethics. Listen to what they have to say.

When you reach the point of talking about ethics routinely and your team knows where you stand on the need for good conduct and behavior, you'll be surprised how easy it becomes to ask someone for an example of observed ethical conduct on the job and how fast your stockpile of ethics lore grows.

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