

RATINGS

Who Knew? Ethics Matter

Video

Reviewed by Bill Ellet for *Training Media Review*

It was once fashionable to say that business ethics didn't matter. You might toss and turn at night because of a troubled conscience, but if your company had acted unethically, it wasn't likely to suffer harm. That view was crystallized in a *Harvard Business Review* article published in 1990: "Why Be Honest If Honesty Doesn't Pay?" by Amar V. Bhide and Howard H. Stevenson. Their argument was that honesty in business is primarily a matter of individual conscience because, as their title says, "there is no evidence" that being honest in business has any financial benefit.

Then came Enron and WorldCom and a long list of other



companies caught red-handed. Now there is evidence that honesty pays or, at least, that dishonesty doesn't pay. The new program from CRM Learning, *Ethics 4 Everyone*, thus lands in a changed business landscape. Not that it deals with the grandiose lack of ethics demonstrated by business leaders: This is everyday ethics for the rest of us who will never have the opportunity to ruin an entire firm and steal value from employees, pensioners, and stockholders.

Here's the first question I have about this program: Is it directed at the right audience? The potential for harm seems to me to correlate directly with the amount of power an individual wields. Power generally follows the org chart: The higher you are, the more power you have. Criticize me



if you want for inciting class warfare, but leaders receive the greater rewards, so they have the greater responsibilities.

In fairness, this video does have an "optional" 10-minute segment for leaders. In my mind, there's nothing optional about it. The segment is a list of 10 characteristics of high-integrity leaders, though I'd prefer something more coherent than a list. The ethics of leaders warrant a more integrated approach.

As for the main program, it's a 15-minute tour of everyday workplace ethics for Everywoman and Everyman, led by Eric Harvey, president and founder of the Walk the Talk Company. It hits many right notes:

- Ethics is about individuals making choices, not organizations or employee handbooks. Each one of us is responsible for our choices.
- Beliefs are meaningless unless they're matched by behavior appropriate to those beliefs. Most of us believe we're ethical. But have you run a red light recently or parked illegally and justified it on some compelling personal

matter, such as being late for an appointment?

- Behavior in an organization is cumulative one way or another. It builds trust, or it tears it down.

Harvey's presentation includes strategies for making ethical choices, specifically

four steps. They're more difficult to remember than they should be because they're not really parallel. The first and the fourth are broad principles of everyday conduct, and the second and third are helpful in certain situations.

Ethics 4 Everyone does a decent job of providing tests for ethical actions that will be acceptable to a broad range of individuals in the workplace. I don't want to underestimate the difficulty of this selection. It may seem vapid and weak-kneed by comparison to traditional moral codes, but you're going to be hard pressed to find a set of ethical standards that is acceptable to a broad range of individuals engaged in a secular enterprise, has enough bite to be meaningful, and doesn't undermine the commercial success of the training program. Harvey has confronted this situation repeatedly in his consulting practice, and his experience benefits this product.



One of the video's weaknesses, however, is that its short length limits its value. Ethical conflicts make great video because of the drama involved. This program stints on context and robs the situations depicted of the power they could have. The mundane scenarios shown in the video could have far greater dramatic tension.

Consider the Total Package

The video isn't the key piece of this program. It serves a limited function in the overall training package. What really matters is what happens in the training sessions supported by the video, the leader guide, the participant guide, Harvey's book, and the PowerPoint slides.

The leader guide suggests that a couple of exercises can be dropped to save time. One of them is the first, which asks participants to describe a past situation that made them feel ethically uncomfortable. (Note: In the text of this exercise, at least one line of type is dropped in the leader guide we received.) Do *not* drop this exercise. Cut others if you need to, but keep this one. Assuming participants are granted confidentiality, this exercise could be the most powerful of the entire program.

The support materials are excellent, as is usually the case with CRM products, and that makes a difference here. Facilitating ethics training has to cause a knot in every trainer's stomach. The danger of personal moralities clashing in the training is ever present. In your group, you could encounter the rigidity of religious morality to the laissez-faire attitudes of youthful workers to the cynicism of veterans. It's a training minefield—but one well worth negotiating. Even if you don't end up with a consensus on ethical behavior, you will have a group that's thinking about the issue and what motivates their co-workers.

It has been said that the topic of ethical gray areas covered in this program fails to come to grips with the underlying realities. I respectfully disagree. In one vignette, the video shows an hourly worker who doesn't want to go along with a plan for one worker to stay behind and punch everyone out while the others leave an hour early. (Their supervisor is absent.) Context can matter in this type of situation.

Consider a recent example from the airlines. American Airlines negotiated pay and benefits reductions with its unions, asking them to take a bullet in order to avoid corporate bankruptcy. After the unions agreed to large financial concessions, the news emerged that the airline's top executives had awarded themselves large bonuses, a fact deliberately kept secret during the union negotiations.

The video vignette could be far more real with a bit of context, like the American Airlines example. Is it ethical to cheat

Ethics 4 Everyone product rating

★★1/2	Holds user interest
★★1/2	Acting/Presenting
★★★★	Diversity
★★★★1/2	Production quality
★★★★	Value of content
★★★	Instructional value
★★★★1/2	Value for the money
★★★	Overall rating

on your time card if senior executives have been dishonest? No, it's not. If you generalize that behavior across the organization, to take a lesson from Immanuel Kant, you see it will ruin the organization, at which point everyone loses everything. Still, the situation can be framed as one right (hourly employees exercising the only power they have versus management) versus another (being paid for the actual number of hours one works). The video should make the right versus right conflict more persuasive.

Recommendation

Despite its slick production values, I'm not an unqualified advocate of the *E4E* video. I appreciate the hard choices the producer and subject matter expert had to make, but the video comes too close to a once-over-lightly treatment. Nevertheless, we need ethics programs, and the producer should be given a pat on the back for investing in the project. Even more important, CRM Learning has created a training package in which the video can be a catalyst for exchanges on institutional values and individual behavior that improve the overall health of the organization.

Course Details

Ethics 4 Everyone, video, 2003, CRM Learning, 800.421.0833; www.crmlearning.com. Purchase: US\$995. Other material: leader guide, participant guide (10), PowerPoint slides.

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