

SPEAKING OF ETHICS



Is it an ethical dilemma for sure?

Editor, Tim Hatcher

Speaking of Ethics describes a real-world ethical dilemma related to training. Two HRD professionals describe what they would do. They may refer to such guides as the Academy of Human Resource Development's Standards on Ethics and Integrity www.ahrd.org but the cases aren't intended to provide absolute answers. The responses aren't a resolution, a standard operating procedure, or a policy for ethical problems. They're designed to stimulate thinking, offer different viewpoints, and help people with similar challenges.

This month's case involves a corporate evaluation specialist researching a

customer service problem. The name of the company has been changed.

The Case of the Evaluator's Dilemma

Keen Idea is a U.S. retail high-end general merchandiser with a focus on quality customer service. With more than 100 stores (mostly in large cities), Keen Idea employs 15,000 people. Each store has 100 to 150 workers and 10 departments ranging from clothing and toys to hardware and electronics. Each department has a supervisor who oversees six to 11 people.

Each new employee is given orientation training consisting of a series of videotapes on customer service, product familiarity, and information systems. In addition, supervisors use role play to train new employees individually, and they place employees with a mentor for their first three months of employment.

The corporate vice president of operations has recently noticed an unusually high number of customer service complaints in three of the large urban Midwest stores. The standard survey form for measuring customer satisfaction indicates that customers feel they're being ignored and that employees aren't interested in assisting them. Several customers noted that employees seem unwilling to approach them because of their appearance or ethnicity. Another complaint is that employees are often conversing with each other rather than attempting to help customers.

The operations VP called a teleconference with the three store managers to discuss the complaints. Managers assured her that they'd take care of the situation by talking with the department supervisors and trainers. A month later, complaints had increased 10 percent. The VP contacts you.

As a corporate training evaluation specialist, you agree to devise a plan that focuses on the extent customers are satisfied with their experience at Keen Idea's three Midwest stores and the extent employees are using the customer service skills they were trained on. You

- design and pilot test a multi-item customer satisfaction survey that elicits quantitative and qualitative data about the quality of customer service and observation of customer service skills at the three stores.

- contact the customer service department and request several mystery shoppers, Keen Idea employees who pose as typical customers. Each shopper visits each store twice a week over a one-

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month period and completes a survey after each visit. The shoppers are told not to identify any employee by name.

- collect and analyze the data, and present the results.

Only the three store managers and a few supervisors are told about the evaluation; employees are not told. The results: Nearly 70 percent of the mystery shoppers report having negative experiences and not observing customer service skills. After reviewing the results with the operations VP, you share them with the store managers and selected supervisors, who react negatively and say the results are inaccurate and unrepresentative of the quality of customer service and training in their stores. You reiterate that the data is valid, but they're adamant.

Puzzled and concerned by their zeal, you meet again with the operations VP, who insists that you contact the mystery shoppers and find out the names of the employees who failed to provide quality service. Her justification is that you could provide specific feedback to the managers and help them find ways to reward, further develop, remediate, or dismiss certain employees. You remind her it was agreed that employees' names wouldn't be provided on the surveys or final report—and that her plan is a reversal of what was promised to the store managers and supervisors. The

VP persists. You ask for 24 hours to consider the issue.

Response 1



Jennifer B. Kahnweiler, president, About YOU, a career coaching and training organization based in Atlanta

This case presented real opportunities for an internal consultant to add value to the business. Unfortunately, several ethical boundaries were crossed that prevented that from happening. There was a clear lack of alignment between the two parties about the purpose of the evaluation. It appears that the consultant's goal was to collect and analyze data on the extent of customer service problems in three under-performing stores, but the VP's agenda was to use the data to identify and help (or dismiss) problem employees.

It also appears that the VP saw the consultant's role as just the collector of data as she planned to use the evaluation to support her assumption that employees were the main cause of the customer service problems. The VP also

asked that the consultant deliver the negative results to the managers, thus forcing the consultant into a position of having to defend the data.

Unfortunately, the consultant didn't challenge the VP about her requests but seemed to be willing to comply. It's difficult and risky to question senior managers about the appropriateness of pursuing a certain strategy. As an internal consultant, I feel that speaking up could've had political or even career-derailing consequences. But I'd also feel that it's a greater potential risk to my credibility to be perceived as the pawn or police of management. That stance is consistent with AHRD's *Standards on Ethics and Integrity*, which states that HRD professionals "to the extent feasible, attempt to clarify for relevant parties the roles they are performing and to function appropriately in accordance with those roles. They avoid potentially conflicting relationships."

Lack of clear purpose and role confusion led the consultant to pursue a possibly unnecessary evaluation study. Using secret shoppers wasn't the only viable option. I wonder, for example, why interviewing the store managers was never considered. AHRD standards on deceptive research state, "The justified research, educational, and applied

value must be determined." The supervisors and managers were understandably defensive, having had no opportunity to engage in a constructive dialogue about the results with the VP. If I were to comply with the VP's request to identify employees, I'd be continuing the cycle of deception and stepping out of the bounds of objective research. And I'd most likely lose the trust of the managers and employees of that organization, thus jeopardizing any future work with them.

I'd meet with the VP to explain the reasons I couldn't support her plan and say that it violated the agreement with the involved parties to collect customer service data only and not individual performance feedback. I'd make it clear that it would be a violation of the commitment made to the participants. In addition, I'd say that if she's trying to improve performance and increase trust, using punitive measures run contrary to those objectives.

As an alternative, I'd suggest that the VP meet with the store managers and involve them in analyzing the data and eliciting their improvement ideas. She may uncover other root causes that are contributing to the poor customer service. I'd also recommend that the VP meet with each manager individually to

set clear expectations and performance goals. I'd offer to continue consulting with her or to partner with another consultant if the future work was out of my scope.

In addition, I'd ask the VP to consider a follow-up study to measure the effectiveness of the interventions. In that way, I believe I'd be collaborating, not colluding, with management, honoring my professional integrity, and leveraging my expertise to help advance Keen Idea's mission of quality customer service.

Response 2



Howell F. Wright, e-learning program manager, small business/self-employed division, Internal Revenue Service

I'd first try to determine if there *is* an ethical dilemma. There must be two or more ethical principles in conflict. The classic example of a mother who steals food for her starving infant illustrates the conflicting ethical principles of honesty versus not allowing harm to come to others.

The problem in business is that most of us feel we're ethical, but we're hard-pressed to describe what that means in practice. The purpose of a code of ethics or set of ethical principles is to define a standard of conduct that reflects the values of the organization or profession. Ethical standards give us something solid to play specific business-related scenarios against. But to do that, we must know

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and understand the standards. To cite a sports motto, “You do in the game like you do in practice.” It’s important to practice and test our knowledge of ethics using applicable codes or standards. The more we practice our responses to ethical dilemmas, the more likely it is we’ll do the right thing when the pressure’s on.

It’s obvious that the evaluation specialist has a dilemma. But is it an ethical dilemma? What principles are in conflict? When we consider the evaluator’s ethical obligation regarding research design and data collection, there doesn’t seem to be a problem. We must consider the possibility that employees aren’t exhibiting the appropriate behavior because they’re unaware of what constitutes acceptable performance. Another possibility is that employees are choosing not to perform the desired behaviors, for whatever reasons. Keen Idea has almost 100 stores and just fewer than 15,000 employees who *are* doing their jobs with the expected level of customer service.

An assumption is that the company’s orientation training is generally valid. The consultant’s approach to gathering additional data seems appropriate, as mystery shoppers are common in the retail industry. It appears that the consultant began the design and piloting of the evaluation tools appropriately. We don’t know the total number of mystery shoppers, but based on the fact that each made at least eight visits to each of the three stores at various times, we can assume that they gathered sufficient data; 70 percent reported problems. That—combined with an unknown but assumed significant amount of customer dissatisfaction—points to a real problem.

The response of the managers and supervisors isn’t surprising because the problem is now being placed in their laps. The VP is also in a difficult posi-

tion because she faces tough choices about what to do with the three store managers. She chooses to focus on the easier, grass-roots problem: employees.

From an ethical perspective, there does seem to be conflict between two ethical principles: showing concern for other people’s welfare (not naming employees) and the evaluator’s responsibilities to Keen Idea to help identify business problems and participate in the resolution. Because the mystery shoppers weren’t asked to record employees’ names initially, it would be inappropriate for them at a later time to try to identify which employees exhibited the problem behavior.

The consultant should explain to the VP that the senior managers had approved the evaluation design. What was a valid approach could be compromised if data was gathered after the fact in the way she suggested. That could harm employees. The consultant should recommend an additional evaluation to address the needs of employees and the management-supervisor team. That might indicate whether the problem is with the training, the employees, or the managers.

How to Participate

If you’d like to participate as a case respondent or have a good case you’d like to share, contact *Speaking of Ethics* editor Tim Hatcher at hatcher@louisville.edu, 502.231.7787, or fax 502.852.4563.

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