

MAILBOX

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Up and Down

I enjoyed the message... in Eva Kaplan-Leiserson's "Down With Ethics!" (News You Can Use, September *T+D*). We often take a positive policy (prescription) and neuter it with excessive clarification (proscription). I see that... during my work commute. Rules of the road [represent a prescriptive desire to] make highways safe. So, we [have] a proscriptive code to encourage behaviors consistent with that desired outcome. Speed limits are proscriptive; under the limit, I'm obedient. [But] when I travel 60 m.p.h. in a 55 limit...I break the law [but make other drivers] happy...because our culture's generally disobedient.... Why then do we demand so much proscription?

Often we look at business rules the same way. Policy X says we want to encourage the development of satisfied associates, but Rules X1-15 say [some behaviors] are off-limits because someone might construe them as discriminatory or offensive. Attainment of the desired goal [isn't] possible in such a system of contradiction.

So, how do we shake free from that never-ending cycle? One person at a time. People and companies...must realize that

where intent of the law (prescription) and execution of the law (proscription) collide, execution must be challenged or the intent becomes hollow. The net result is that the person stands for nothing. And if you stand for nothing, how can you stand up for what's right? Isn't the foundation of ethics a belief there's a distinction between right and wrong?

It really has nothing to do with the rules or obedience. It has to do with doing the right thing in spite of minimum requirements or limitations of compliance. I think we can agree that leaders who know the difference quickly earn our respect.

*Bob Snyder
Tax Operations Training*

I disagree with the assertion in "Down With Ethics!" In my view, ethics are not overrated and shouldn't be committed to a lesser standard. Focusing on "corporate respectability" is, while nice, the wrong focus. Corporations don't have a responsibility to do philanthropy. Their primary responsibility is to shareholders. I'm more inclined to purchase from or buy into an organization that's ethical...than one that focuses on philan-

thropy and might not be honest in other dealings. Philanthropy doesn't equate to ethical behavior.

The key is to do what's right at all times. I ask consultants, How many of you have taken contracts and done what the client asked in the name of "cash flow" even though you knew it wasn't in the client's best interests? How many of you have provided training when training wasn't necessary, because management requested it?

Giving back to the community is nice, honorable...justified. However, if you truly want to earn my respect, make the tough calls and do the right thing.

*George Ferguson
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Re: Kaplan-Leiserson's declaration "Down with Ethics!" It's folly to swap internal ethical standards for an effective external social mission. That's a classic case of both/and rather than either/or. We can't ignore ethics while doing good. Ethics are to standard operating procedures as hygiene is to food service.

I concur that doing good may be the ultimate validation for a money-making venture...[but] should such firms be

emulated and extolled when their good works come at the expense of their employees?

Perhaps the most virulent cause of unethical behavior is cynicism, which peaks when individuals and institutions profess one set of standards publicly but behave in opposition privately—such as corporations that provide wonderful service to everyone but their internal customers.

The first order of business is to ensure high ethical standards are adhered to and rewarded among employees and with ven-

dors. Organizations must have a code of ethics, ethics discussions, clear consequences for ethical breaches, rewards for excellent behavior, and ethics continually on the agenda. While that internal work is going on, it's good, right, and noble to also work on making a difference for society and the environment. Up with ethics and up with social missions!

*John Y. Odom
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Kaplan-Leiserson responds: I agree completely that ethics and social conscience shouldn't be an either/or. It wasn't my intent, despite the tongue-in-cheek title and intro paragraph, to say that we should throw ethics out the window. The last paragraph: "Companies must ensure that their business practices are really on the up-and-up (as opposed to just appearing so)" and "In our days of innocence, we took for granted that companies and CEOs were ethical. Let's not lose that expectation...." In other words, I'm arguing for the same

"and" that you advocate. My point is that ethics should be expected, but we shouldn't stop there. Ethics should exist across the board as the bare minimum.

Odom responds: Thanks for the clarification. I gave [the article's] closing comments short shrift and shouldn't have.

Correction

Re: The November News You Can Use, the address for the Web-based telecommuting courses is www.workfamily.com/training/training.asp.