Strategies for Increasing Awareness and Improving the Ethical Climate: A Primer

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The following is an excerpt from the BOK Chapter, Managing Ethically.

Ethics—we hear about it, we talk about it, daily, at least the lapses. It touches our lives regularly in both positive and negative ways. So what is ethics anyway? How do we define it? Why is it so important? What is the basis for making ethical decisions? Without the sermon, how do we approach ethical situations or moral dilemmas in both meaningful and practical ways?

Some are uncomfortable with the thought that ethics does not consist of an absolute set of principles. Nonetheless, we can develop and utilize a reasonable set of strategies and guidelines for ethical behavior and action in the workplace.

Given the workplace as the basis for discussion of these ethical principles and practices, it should also be reasonable to adopt the perspective that our moral point-of-view should concern actions and behaviors that serve the interests of that collective or the common good. This is important as it aids in the design and implementation of a framework of guiding principles and a set of practical questions we can use in making ethical decisions and taking action accordingly.

This basis also helps us address what is in the best interest of all concerned, since that may not align with our own specific or immediate needs and desires. Further, we need to be able to work together to support the good of all. Therefore, the basic premise is concerned with the good of others (the collective in this case) and not just for oneself.

In this way, we can demonstrate that leadership is a blend of both competence (job knowledge and skill) and character (high integrity and moral responsibility). Certainly we need relevant skills and knowledge (job competence) to succeed in the workplace. Arguably, we need high integrity and a strong moral fiber (character) to succeed as well.

PRINCIPLES: A FOUNDATIONAL NETWORK

Principles stand the test of time and govern behavior with a resultant set of consequences whether we agree or disagree. This distinction may seem minor, but is critically important to ensure the organization and the collective it represents is focused on and working from a set of unarguable and objective foundational principles as their guide. Hopefully one's personal values align with these overarching principles.

From much of the literature on this subject, six foundational principles emerge and form the basis of this framework. They are:

1. **Trustworthiness, Honesty, and Personal Integrity**—the most important, first and foremost, of all the principles; without it, all the others fall apart
2. **Responsibility for Self**—where character is built from the inside out, day in and day out; and where substance trumps symbolism every time
3. **Freedom of Thought and Choice**—where questions are encouraged and openness in decision making is valued
4. **Being Equitable, Just, and/or Fair**—which is critically important that individuals in the organization feel they are treated in a just manner and will receive fair treatment whether they agree with the decision(s) or not
5. **Respect and Caring for Others**—where compassion and mercy reign in establishing sincere and genuine understanding, which inspires trust and fosters openness
6. **Respect for Human Rights and Dignity**—where one hopes that universal law will outweigh

outdated societal norms, and humility is ever-present

TEN QUESTIONS YOU CAN USE TO AID IN ADDRESSING ETHICAL DILEMMAS

Like the six foundational principles, ten questions have been formulated that can be used to address any given ethical issue or dilemma that arises in the organization. They are:

1. **What is the dilemma, issue, or problem?**
   Although the question sounds too basic, it is extremely important to define the problem accurately and assemble all the facts immediately at hand. This way you know what you don't know and, therefore, what you need to further examine. In addition, this effort helps to understand the context and history associated with the specific problem at hand.

2. **Is it legal? Will I be violating either civil law or organization policy?**
   This question forces you to research the actual legalities of the case and ensures you understand your own organization's policy is in some way unethical, you should seek to have it changed or modified.

3. **How would you define the problem if you stood on the other side of the fence?**
   Put yourself in the other parties' shoes. Doing so can enlighten your thinking and will illuminate others' perspectives.

4. **What are the conflicting values and principles apparent in this situation?**
   It is important to determine where personal values and organizational principles come into conflict. Identifying the conflicts help to smoke out the ethics of any situation. This effort sets the stage for identifying options and their consequences.

5. **What are the alternative courses of action/options?**
   Forcing yourself and others to explore more than one alternative course of action helps open up the possibilities and ensures that all perspectives have been gathered for consideration.

6. **What are the consequences, risks, and implications of each option?**
   Answering this question helps you further distinguish the most responsible course of action versus just taking the most expedient choice. It also highlights or discloses how others might be harmed by any particular course of action.

7. **Can you discuss the problem with the affected parties before you make your decision?**
   The engagement of all affected parties is often overlooked but critical to ensure there are little, if any, limitations of knowledge in your response or action. Unfortunately, the pressure of time and the potential discomfort associated with this type of engagement all too often hold people back from having such a critical set of conversations as part of the fact-finding process.

8. **Is it balanced? Is it fair to all concerned in the short term as well as the long term?**
   When it comes to balance, it is important to ensure consistency and predictability so there is no confusion about the rules of the game. In addition, it has been said that time alters circumstances. You will want to make sure that you have assessed the situation and its circumstances such that your response/action will indeed stand the test of time.

9. **How will the decision make you feel about yourself? Could you disclose, without qualms, your decision or action to your boss, other employees, the newspaper, your family?**
   This is clearly the litmus test for any action you plan to take. There is a standard question that deserves repeating here: "Would you want your decision to appear on the front page of the *New York Times*?" This type of disclosure (or its real possibility) should give you cause for pause and ensure that your character and the reputation/brand of the organization is preserved.

10. **What is your decision?**
    In any case, we have to come to a final conclusion and render a response or action. It is important to ascertain not only what your decision is in the end but also how it will be communicated.

As you can readily see, a great deal of work is involved in establishing ethics as an explicit and implicit part of the organizational culture. And don't underestimate the value of the organization's leadership serving as role models and guides and daily reminders of the importance of ethical behavior.

Ultimately, it's not really about compliance or adherence to rules and legalities. It's about the character of your leadership, your perceived fairness, and ultimately the reputation you and your team builds/earns over time. 🖊

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