

Compliance & Ethics Professional

December
2016



A PUBLICATION OF THE SOCIETY OF CORPORATE COMPLIANCE AND ETHICS

www.corporatecompliance.org



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Working on ethical behavior

- » Develop a set of policies that outline expectations and boundaries.
- » Implement a variety of trainings on ethical standards.
- » Pinpoint recurring issues for more targeted training.
- » Provide clear, consistent, and confidential reporting routes.
- » Establish fair and transparent processes for disciplining violators.

A workplace environment where integrity and ethical behavior are part of the culture is a prerequisite to thrive in business today. The chances of employees facing an ethical dilemma on any given day, however, remain disarmingly high. In fact, some 41% of US workers reported that they observed unethical or illegal misconduct on the job, according to the 2013 National Business Ethics Survey, which generates the US benchmark on ethical behavior in corporations.¹



Perry

Ethical violations can range from relatively mild offenses that exist in a “grey zone” (e.g., Should Sally really be using the copy machine to copy her income tax returns? Is Mark really checking his online dating profile *that* much on company time?), to the morally questionable (e.g., Is this client gift appropriate? Why is Nicole covering for Philip for the third time this month?), to the strictly verboten and illegal (e.g., instances of sexual harassment, fraud, and bribery).

It is no longer acceptable for colleagues to remain silent about unethical behaviors. The good news is that more and more organizations are stepping up, and staff members are increasingly being encouraged

to be more vigilant about detecting and reporting dishonorable conduct.

Tailored frameworks for integrity

A company’s behavioral values and policies are not a page torn from the employee manual, a completed online seminar, or a checked box on an HR report. Neither do organizations need to hire professors of applied behavioral science to improve ethical behavior in the workplace. What organizations large and small need to do instead is dig deep into their corporate cultures and adopt tailored frameworks for maintaining their integrity.

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Embedding principled behavior in the workplace is an investment that pays. In fact, the National Business Ethics Survey² found that of those who observed a wrongdoing

in the workplace, 87% of employees who had an effective ethics and compliance program reported the incident, compared with 32% who did not. Likewise, according to the 2012 Social Workplace Trust Study,³ administered by the Society for New Communications Research, employees who are satisfied with their jobs and feel aligned to an organization are three times more likely to talk positively about their companies on social media and twice as likely to express pride in their organizations.

But where to begin? A good place to start to help boost transparency and cooperation is to ask staff to write down what ethical challenges they might expect to encounter during the next 12 months. This kind of forethought enables leaders to plan a response ahead of an incident, long before it becomes reality and has the potential to spiral into a crisis situation.

In addition to identifying recurring topics that require immediate attention and/or ongoing targeted trainings, it is essential to create clear and transparent systems so that all staff feel safe and supported when reporting unethical behavior. This could take the form of a toll-free hotline, intranet function, or a third-party service.

Then, think hard about how to communicate your organization's standards and practices. Today's workforce is more culturally, geographically, and generationally diverse than ever before. Getting these groups on-message requires customized content delivered in eye-catching formats. For example, Millennials (those born 1980–2000) currently make up the largest cohort in the workforce.⁴ They're digital natives who know technology

well and are likely to be comfortable receiving "virtual" training. By contrast, Baby Boomers may respond better to more traditional methods of communication, such as live presentations or personal messages from the company CEO. Use different communication formats, such as classroom or digital training sessions, intranet, desktop alerts, screensavers, and scrolling tickers, to better engage with internal audiences.

An organization where misconduct is ignored runs the risk of demoralized employees, reduced productivity, and a damaged reputation—a witch's brew that

together places an organization's future in jeopardy. Fortunately, more organizations are recognizing the value of creating a culture of workplace ethics: the National Business Ethics Survey reported a 6% improvement in the number of companies with "strong" or "strong-leaning" ethics cultures (60%–66%) over three years.⁵ Instilling a culture of ethical behavior in the workplace isn't just the right thing to do—it makes good business sense.

Conclusion

Ethical wisdom in the workplace doesn't arrive overnight, and it doesn't occur by magic. It's *work*. But, like all important professional endeavors, it's worth the effort. *

1. The Ethics and Compliance Initiative's (ECI's) National Business Ethics Survey, 2013. Available at <http://bit.ly/nbes-2013>
2. Idem.
3. International Association of Business Communication: The Social Workplace Trust Study, 2012. Available at <http://bit.ly/iabc-wp>
4. Richard Fry: "Millennials surpass Gen Xers as the largest generation in the U.S. labor force" Pew Research Center, May 2015. Available at <http://bit.ly/mille-genx>
5. Ibid, Ref #1

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