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Compliance & Ethics PROFESSIONAL®

A PUBLICATION OF THE SOCIETY OF CORPORATE COMPLIANCE AND ETHICS

SEPTEMBER 2018



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Compliance programs vs. social responsibility

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I was told that some companies are developing employee wellness programs focused on mental health. An observation is that employee mental health really is an ethical obligation; therefore, it could be a part of the compliance and ethics professional's job.



I could not be more supportive of this mental health initiative. We are a day late and a dollar short on addressing this issue. However, compliance and ethics professionals focus on business ethics, not social ethics.

Here is the real problem.

Snell

Whatever argument we could make that it's a business ethics issue, that argument could be applied to almost every social ethics issue, including racism, hunger, poverty, LGBT rights, environmental issues, etc. There is no question that businesses should take up these causes, but the question is, who in the company should work on them? Compliance and ethics professionals should work on any of these social issues if there is a law associated with the issue; however, we have to stop short of participating in social change or otherwise duplicating the role of the corporate responsibility professional. Who will find the problems like those found at VW, Wells Fargo, Michigan State University, etc., if compliance and ethics professionals are working on social change? The answer is no one. People gravitate

toward social issues, sharing marketing ideas, thinking of new products—few if any people gravitate toward compliance and ethics enforcement. The outcome will be failure. The whole reason our profession was created is that those who came before us didn't work on what they needed to: preventing and finding wrongdoing.

Investigation, audit, discipline, dealing with whistleblowers, and many other aspects of the compliance and ethics professional's job are painful, and most people, given a choice, would gravitate to things less painful. If we involve compliance professionals in anything other than that core task, they will fail. You can't be outraged that compliance and ethics professionals are not working on social change and expect them to also prevent wrongdoing. They do not have enough resources to get one job done, let alone two.

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I am so supportive of many of these social issues that it is difficult for me to take the position I do take on this. However, we can't hijack the compliance and ethics profession to help others with their very important causes. *