IEL Executive in Residence Column:

Reflections on the Rutgers Institute for Ethical Leadership’s 2015 Ethical Leadership Conference on Health Care
by Gerald Harvey

Ethics is not a program; ethical behavior is a lifestyle. I was reminded of this once again at this year's Ethical Leadership Conference. The focus this year: Ethical Leadership in Health Care. Health care is not my field, but the speakers' presentations drove home what previous conferences have made abundantly clear: the technicalities of compliance, the unique characteristics of a given industry, the challenges of daily expectations, all are made easier by embracing ethical behaviors. This was the Institute's sixth Annual Ethical Leadership Conference. The fifth focused on the ethical environment of business sustainability; the fourth, corporate social responsibility. The first three addressed public trust, leadership in the age of social media and higher education governance, where I participated in a panel on a "Leader's Role in Building an Ethical Culture". This year Michael Ullmann, Johnson & Johnson's Vice President & General Counsel, addressed the attendees on "Instilling Ethical Culture & Leadership in a Healthcare Company". His specific focus: health care; mine, higher education. But the underlying message was the same: there is fundamental value to modeling ethical behaviors. Michael took the conference attendees through the Johnson & Johnson Credo, written over 70 years ago by Robert Wood Johnson himself. The core of his message? Values are a fundamental part of Johnson & Johnson's strategic framework. But what happens when the rubber meets the road? How to model ethical behaviors in practice? Faced with a workplace ethical challenge, how to act and react? Analysis paralysis can make an ethical dilemma worse. The Institute of Ethical Leadership teaches a straightforward seven-step process. The steps can be summarized as follows: define the dilemma from all perspectives, test with your gut, your values, the organization's values; clarify the facts, don't assume, verify; explore alternatives, brainstorm options that address the problem in ways that are ethical and compliant; then decide and implement a decision, remember to involve all who need to be engaged. But don't stop there! Evaluate the consequences of the decision taken and implemented, re-affirm the ethical values associated with the decision; and identify learnings from the decision helpful to improve processes for the future resolution of ethical dilemmas. Institute co-founder Alex Plinio has noted that "you can't inoculate against ethical breaches". As a consequence, ongoing positive reinforcement is a critical component of ethical behavior. Post implementation evaluation recognizes that even intelligent and ethical people can make bad decisions. Deconstruction of decisional failures can promote a process and a culture of ethical decision making. Within an institution, whether a corporation, a university, or other endeavor, history has shown time and again that an ethically questionable decision for short term gain will in the overwhelming majority of instances ultimately lead to reputational and financial loss. Every institution and individual will, at some time, be challenged by an ethical dilemma. The test is how that individual and that institution reacts internally and externally.