Institute for Ethical Leadership

Executive in Residence Column

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We all accept that training is an essential building block in a culture of ethical behavior.

But what to offer; what to do? First, training needs to be offered regularly not merely periodically. Why? To ensure that the importance of training is viscerally understood by management and staff. Second training needs to be varied.

This is true for assorted reasons. A basic reason is that not everyone responds in the same way to the same training stimuli. Another is that offering only the same kind of training over and over again becomes rote and ultimately fails to engage the participants.

Any training program needs to incorporate in-person sessions. Such sessions provide real opportunities for employees to interact with their colleagues and reinforce common understandings of ethical behaviors. In-person programs can also incorporate role-playing that can reinforce the message over and above lectures. Well-crafted PowerPoint presentations can provide visual reinforcement. Having qualified outside consultants offering programs provides a sense of authority and credibility that reinforces the content of the program. While having in-house presentations with colleagues presenting the training programs reinforces that the ethical values being presented are essential to the mission of the company or institution.

On-line programs should also be available. They offer several benefits not associated with in-person programs. The participant can take the program on his or her own schedule. Further, in-person programs generally do not lend themselves to testing. On-line programs do. Many have exercises much like video games that reinforce the message of the training. Affordable off-the-shelf programs are available that provide relevant instruction that make on-line training available to smaller companies and institutions.

Particularly for managers, intensive off-site programs, where they can interact with their opposite numbers at other companies and institutions, have real value. Centers at universities, including our own Institute for Ethical Leadership, provide programs featuring experts in their fields and industry leaders that offer managers the opportunity to look beyond their own parochial experiences.
The fundamental value of training is the development and reinforcement of ethical values. That is the carrot. There is also a stick. When it becomes appropriate to discipline an employee for an ethical failure, or to effect termination of an employee while minimizing the likelihood of litigation, training records are invaluable.

Strict attendance records should be kept for in-person training featuring hand-signed attendance sheets that provide documentary evidence that the employee was present for the training and therefore knew better. On-line programs including Q and A demonstrate that the employee professed an understanding of the required behaviors. This is particularly important when addressing ethical lapses that precipitate compliance failures that may involve fines and penalties.

We need employees and colleagues who are ethically engaged. No one ever wants a nowhere man who just sees what he wants to see.