"The ethical man knows he shouldn't cheat on his wife, whereas the moral man actually wouldn't." So said the character Ducky Mallard (portrayed by David McCallum) on the NCIS episode “Escaped,” first broadcast in 2006. I was so taken by this statement that I went surfing on the internet to find the original source, assuming that it must have come from a famous essay. Apparently this purported enunciation of the difference between ethics and morality was original with the scriptwriters. I also found that assorted writers and bloggers have been captivated by the phrase. Do you agree with it?

I can, but only if I assume that the follow-on is that because the ethical man knows not to cheat on his wife, he will in fact not cheat on his wife. A man or woman who knows not to cheat, but does it anyway is not an ethical person.

Of course, generally ethical people have lapses of unethical behavior. Often it is because of an uncontrolled desire for a near term benefit (be it romantic, financial or a misplaced desire to help out a colleague, friend or relative). In other instances it is fear, fear of an unpleasant near term outcome (at work, fear of a loss of promotion, compensation or even a job, fear of displeasing an unethical superior).

Successful ethical leaders understand the importance of an environment that reinforces the benefits of ethical behavior. Knowledge of a standard of conduct and failing to follow it is unethical. As an ethical leader, how do you assure that your colleagues, employees, students know the standards applicable to them? Training. Everyone knows the old joke, "How do you get to Carnegie Hall?" Answer: "Practice, practice, practice." How do actors learn their lines? They rehearse, rehearse, rehearse. How do emergency responders know what to do? They drill, drill, drill.

Yet all too many companies and other institutions act as if an occasional PowerPoint presentation on ethical behavior is all that is required. The presentation is offered from time to time while the institution, company etc. points with pride to its website and its fulsome code of conduct. Perhaps some in management think these efforts are sufficient because they appear to satisfy the penalty mitigation requirements of the federal sentencing guidelines.

But shouldn't ethical leaders aspire to more? Let's say it once again: widespread ethical behavior will help minimize costly compliance failures. But to imbue an institutional culture with a culture of ethical behavior requires constant reinforcement. How do you persuade employees that ethical behavior is an important core value? As with theatrical performance and emergency response, there are no short cuts. Think training, training, training.