

# What Do You Do When No One Is Looking??

## Personal and Professional Ethics

Recently I overheard a conversation about a person who attended a large (13,000 participants) motivational seminar event. At that event, this person passed around a clipboard asking people to sign up if they would like to be informed of future events. The purpose was actually to create a mailing list to market a similar, competitive business. Prior approval to do this was not obtained from the event promoter. Smart marketing? Or a breach of ethics?

How would you call it? We are faced with more and more gray areas as our world, personal and professional, grows at a pace more rapid than our ability to cope and process the changes. Ethics is becoming a buzz word in business, seen on the cover of national magazines, debated in news groups on the internet.

Just what is ethics? Let's start with a working definition. Ethics is a set of values that consistently guides our behaviors. These values are usually.....

- (1) in alignment with the majority of society's definitions of correct and positive behavior;
- (2) within legal parameters;
- (3) balancing the good of the individual with the good of the whole.

One of the problems with "ethics" today is that we have so many different mores or values that guide our society. We have been through several major shifts in our societal standards of right and wrong. The most telling symptom of these shifts can be found in prime time television. We have shifted from the "Leave It To Beaver" fifties to the "Friends" nineties. Sexual innuendoes are abundant, and just about anyone is in bed with just about

everyone. This is not a commentary on the right and wrong of these shifts. It is an important awareness "heads up" about the recognition that we do not any more have a "majority of society's definitions of correct and positive behavior."

The Monica/Bill scandal has made it very clear. Dr. Laura, the country's fastest growing radio show, is about moral dilemmas, "What is right and wrong??" With major attrition from organized religion in the last half of this century, we have moved away from the strong Judeo-Christian ethic our country was based upon. In some instances, it has been replaced with "I'll do what I want, what gets me what I want NOW, and it makes no difference how it affects others, or even my own future."

A Roper Survey of more than 3,000 students between the ages of 12 and 19 asked them to identify the country's top societal woes from a list of 15. The top choice, by 56% of the students, was "selfishness." A third of those polled ranked "lack of morality/ethics" seventh. Combine selfishness and a lack of morality or ethics together and you have people who are untrustworthy. Add greed, whether personal or the corporate "bottom line" and you have a formula for difficulty in negotiations, broken agreements and failed events.

Diversity is a hot topic these days, and it comes up regarding ethics as well. By the year 2001, the racial and ethnic groups we now call the "minorities" will be the majority of the US population. The diversity in religious and cultural backgrounds brings with it a diversity in ethics. The values held in some groups are very different than what we have known as the majority values in our country in the past. We are often encouraged to understand gestures and actions and language nuances if we are working with diverse groups or international groups. We

also need to understand that their values or ethics may be quite different than ours and then proceed accordingly.

**O**ne level of ethical virtuosity is “legally compliant” the one who believes that ethics and laws are the same. It is important to realize that ethics are not laws, yet can be guided by laws. Our laws are abundant, growing in numbers every day, in the courts’ attempts to legislate protection from those without values or with values in opposition to what most of us would consider right and wrong. We have laws on the books that are no longer pertinent or valuable to these times. We have more laws than any one lawyer can ever know. And more and more lawyers seem to be necessary to handle the litigation that results from what seems to be a trend in “making others pay.”

**D**id you know that in Wisconsin the law says that you must serve a slice of cheese with apple pie, or in Tucson, Arizona it is against the law for women to wear pants, or in Tampa Bay, Florida, it is illegal to eat cottage cheese on Sunday after 6pm. And if you attend a meeting in Milwaukee, there is a city ordinance that states the only persons allowed to dispense advice are clergy - Sounds like most motivational speakers and workshop leaders could be in trouble?!

**W**ith the speed of technology development and the internet, we begin to find ourselves in virtual realities that don’t have clear rules or laws governing them. The electronic world is shifting and changing before our eyes, faster than we can legislate or control. Privacy issues, boundary issues, ownership and copyright issues - all challenged by our instant ability to obtain information.

**B**alancing the good of the one with the good of whole is not as easy any more, either. The whole that we have to consider is the planetary whole - not just the competition down the block, across town or coast to coast. The word competition actually comes from the Latin, *competere*, which means “to seek together.” Originally a cooperative search for

the best, business competition now means survival of the fittest. After all, it’s a jungle out there, isn’t it?

**R**emembering that survival implies not enough for all and life itself is at stake, that kind of an attitude causes us to pay too much attention to the short-term bottom line, self-preservation or immediate gratification. We forget that true survival requires long-term, successful relationships with customers and suppliers, as well as co-workers and others within the company.

**W**hen people or businesses do not know or understand their inter-connectedness to the whole and are completely self and survival oriented, it throws the ethical system we once knew out of whack. Trust is not possible unless we see each other as equally valuable parts of the whole and recognize that hurting the other is hurting ourselves. When there is no trust, protection becomes the priority and fear rules the game.

**T**he values that guide each individual and/or company can vary tremendously, therefore that individual or company may be “ethical” according to their values and not to yours or to the working definition stated above.

**M**ost important is that you know your core life values and the values that your company stands for and then live and work congruently and consistently with those values. Then people will know you as a person of wholeness or integrity and they will trust you. You will be called “ethical” and you will be able to live with yourself honorably. Balancing the good of the one with the good of the whole is absolutely vital to long-term business success, and is easy to do when your ethics (as in our working definition) are purposefully chosen.

**T**he authentically ethical person would have gotten prior approval to pass around the clipboard at that seminar event, or simply arranged to buy the mailing list. While no law was broken, respect for the investment of the promoter and a cooperative, mutually

prospering attitude would have been the ethical way to approach the situation.

**N**ext time you face an ethical dilemma, look to your values, the law, the code of ethics for your profession and the future. Will you be able to walk with your head held high and pride in your honor if you take the course of action you are considering?

**T**his country, your city, your neighborhood, your profession, the company you work for, all need integral, ethical leadership. Be a role model of integrity and ethics. Aim to live above reproach and you will prosper in the trust you create.

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