

ethikos Volume 33, Number 1. January 31, 2019 Tone on the team: The fourth ethical dimension

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Organizations, whether they are for-profit corporations, nonprofits, or government agencies, must rely upon their employees to exercise ethical behavior. Historically, organizations have published codes of conduct, policies, and work rules to guide employees in their day-to-day activities. Most employees are inclined to act in accordance with such guidance, but countless corporate and government agency scandals have demonstrated that some individuals succumb to (or even actively engage in) ethical lapses that result in tangible harm to others and civil and criminal penalties. Innovative organizations have improved employee engagement and reduced risk by using additional tools and methods effectively. Moving beyond tone at the top and the mood in the middle, you should be striving to achieve an embedded tone that permeates the entire team.

Moving away from the “big binder” approach

Whether infused with a well-formed conscience or merely fearful of negative consequences for failing to comply, most employees are inclined to follow rules at work and in society. And as long as there have been employers and employees, there have been workplace rules. In some environments, those rules were painted on signs posted at factory gates or on workshop floors. In other instances, posters and bulletin boards conveyed the “do’s and don’ts.” Some of these practices persist today.

As workplaces became more formalized, personnel departments created employment guides that became thick books or binders that employees were expected to read and certify their compliance with. As codes of conduct became more prevalent, whether required by industry standards and government regulation or inspired by enlightened management philosophy, still more documentation began to occupy bookshelves in organizations worldwide.

Unfortunately, although the guidelines may have been documented and disseminated to some extent, most employees didn’t actually read or understand these documents in their entirety.

Compounding this issue, management may not have felt compelled to take any additional steps to engage employees in further discussion about the impact of conducting the organization’s affairs in an ethical and compliant manner. Finally, although leaders were likely acting in accordance with the organization’s published guidelines, their actions largely escaped the notice of most employees who did not have direct contact with those leaders. This two-dimensional approach to compliance and ethics only went so far, because management assumed that it was enough to publish and declare the guidelines, whereupon employees would simply understand and obey.

Despite the well-intentioned and voluminous documentation of rules, policies, and codes, some employees would violate the organization’s expectations. Often, the shortcomings were due to a misunderstanding or underappreciation of the rationale for the rule, along with a genuine lack of knowledge about where to direct

their own questions about specific guidelines. Occasionally, the failure to abide by the guidelines represented a willful choice to act in one's own perceived best interest in contravention of his/her duty to the organization, sometimes resulting in harm to others and civil or criminal liability. These risks continue to exist.

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