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On ethics: Catherine Sanderson

Catherine A. Sanderson, author of *Why We Act: Turning Bystanders Into Moral Rebels,* Poler Family Professor and Chair of Psychology, Department of Psychology, Amherst College in Amherst, Massachusetts, USA

An interview by **Adam Turteltaub (adam.turteltaub@corporatecompliance.org)**, CHC, CCEP, Chief Engagement & Strategy Officer, SCCE & HCCA.

AT: People see wrong around them all the time, whether at work or at home, yet few say anything. What I found fascinating in your book is that you argue it's not that they see something wrong, it's fear of embarrassment that gets in the way.[1] Can you explain the dynamic?

CS: One of the biggest factors that leads people to stay silent is their tendency to look around at what others are saying or doing—for help in interpreting what's going on. But here's the problem: If everyone is looking at what everyone else is doing, and no one wants to be seen as overreacting, then no one steps up and acts. In other words, inaction breeds inaction.

A few years ago, a student was in my office—a very good student who was on the basketball team—and he shared with me a story: "Every day in the locker room, someone says something offensive. And sometimes I say something, but usually I don't." And what occurred to me about that story is that it's highly possible, even likely, that most other students in that locker room also recognized that what they heard was offensive. But each of them looked to the others, and assumed—by their silence—that he was the only one who found the comment offensive. And that situation plays out not just in locker rooms, but in all sorts of situations: on public transportation, around the Thanksgiving dinner table, in boardrooms, and so on.

AT: You also write that we are less likely to come forward when there are others around when we see something wrong. What stops us?

CS: There's a natural human tendency to reduce effort in group settings—what is often described by psychologists as "social loafing." This is why many students hate group projects—in which each person reduces effort so that they aren't doing more than their fair share of the work. It's also why restaurants typically impose a mandatory service charge on parties of five or more, because in groups, each person reduces their own contribution and the wait staff therefore isn't adequately compensated. This exact same dynamic plays out when we see something wrong but are in a group setting; we tend to assume that others will step up, so we don't have to. In other words, we experience a diffusion of responsibility.

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