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Pandemic crisis or opportunity? Leverage this time to inspire compliance

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In February 2021 I led a webinar on key considerations as we prepare to exit the crisis period of COVID-19. I asked the compliance and ethics professionals attending when they thought all adults would be able to get a COVID-19 vaccine. Half of the respondents said they expected this by October 2021 or later. Only 10% expected it to be before August. The reality was that just two months after that webinar, on April 19, all those above the age of 16 in the US became eligible for the vaccine. By late May, most states had sufficient COVID-19 vaccine stocks to start offering walk-in vaccinations and even incentives (“Get vaccinated, get a free beer!”). The actual outcome versus the attendees’ inaccurate estimations made just two months prior is a cautionary tale illustrating how we are accelerating into a new normal quite a bit faster than expected.

With accelerated, broad changes comes significant risk of organizational cultural shifts, fraud, and noncompliance, so simply returning to prepandemic structures will not help us meet the requirements needed to mitigate this risk. It is essential to keep in mind these elevated risks while we scramble to address the basic challenge of aligning policies, procedures, and processes. Significant factors that must be considered include, but are not limited to, slimmer margins, significant supply chain disruption, unexpected higher personal and organizational debt for some, and pandemic stress fatigue that may lead to unusual behavior. To help in addressing the new normal, it is also important to rethink the role of compliance and ethics and leverage the opportunities presented by this unique period of change.

The emotional appeal

During my webinar in February, I asked what compliance and ethics teams capitalized on most during COVID-19. The overwhelming responses were an increased emotional culture bond (~40%) and increased risk management focus by leadership (~30%), trailed by an increase in community partnership. Less than 10% said they were just fighting fires the whole time. In other words, the pandemic caused organizations to become more introspective with a stronger bond to the brand and connection with employees. “We are...” statements have popped up as organizations assert themselves as survivors or defeaters of COVID-19. These statements speak to company culture, directly or indirectly, and how those with the stronger ethical cultures were better positioned to weather the strains of the pandemic.

Build upon the achievements

Compliance and ethics professionals can capitalize on these campaigns by reinforcing how the strong ethical culture is helping the organization thrive long term with a better chance of surviving future major crises like the pandemic. On the flipside, if the organization engaged in unethical behavior during the pandemic, compliance and ethics can use those examples to sell to leadership the importance of a strong ethical culture to patch the damage done and reduce the chance for future issues and bad press.

Specifically, to build on work identity, the compliance and ethics team can pick themes that resonate with staff on how the organization survived or what it did right (e.g. strong culture, respect between levels of management, flexibility of staff) and find stories to share of individual or small group achievements. Perhaps, for example, a staff member put together a free virtual meditation class for their coworkers to deal with the stress and loneliness brought on by the pandemic. There is a great opportunity to partner with human resources to identify these positive survival stories of “battle buddies” and promote the ethical culture message within them.

Communicate challenges, struggles, and losses

Coordination with other departments can be valuable in this effort. Can the legal team provide examples of lawsuits and regulatory or financial repercussions for other organizations that did not prioritize compliance or ethics? Can finance teams provide financial information or news to high-risk groups (e.g., sales) to dissuade employees from taking shortcuts or making inappropriate payments? Is it possible to coordinate with human resources to include the importance of safety and prevention-related policies such as vaccination efforts in memorial activities for an employee lost to COVID-19?

Extending this to the broader community, consider what your organization has done to support customers and the community during COVID-19. These positive impacts can be leveraged by compliance and ethics to reinforce awareness of organizational codes of conduct and cultural behavior. An especially useful way to do this is to highlight the activities of a department that has previously resisted compliance and ethics engagement, which also establishes a positive starting point for future collaboration.

All these communications should be targeted, be brief, and use the language of your company. These communications can also help shift the image of compliance and ethics from one of a provider of boring trainings to a good resource for engaging, relevant information.

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