

Ethikos Volume 36, Number 3. July 02, 2022 On ethics: Rob Chesnut

Rob Chesnut (rcc4112@gmail.com), former Airbnb General Counsel and Chief Integrity Officer and author of *Intentional Integrity: How Smart Companies Can Lead an Ethical Revolution*

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

AT: What led you to write *Intentional Integrity: How Smart Companies Can Lead an Ethical Revolution*?

RC: So many companies make decisions based on shareholders' interests and not stakeholders' interests. We were taught in business schools—and life—that business is all about making money and that profits are king. But in this changing world, companies have learned that ignoring integrity, trust, and transparency will hurt bottom-line performance, hurt brand equity, sometimes taking decades to recover. Most companies think they have integrity, until they get exposed by data, skewered by the press, boycotted by customers, dropped by investors, and protested by their own employees. I wrote this book to start a conversation on how companies can move forward confidently with an integrity program based on trust, values, and transparency to ensure business success in a world that is increasingly under a microscope from consumers and public stakeholders.

AT: What is intentional integrity?

RC: Integrity is a great buzzword; it looks great on a poster, but no one talks about what it really means. In today's global workforce, we come from such different backgrounds and cultures—that diversity is a strength, but it also means that we lack a shared understanding of how to treat each other and how to act. Leaders are uncomfortable talking about integrity, perhaps because they're acutely aware of their own human failings, or perhaps because they feel uncomfortable with the idea of possibly imposing their own moral values on others. Intentional integrity is a commitment from the top of the company to talk, in a specific and very human way, about how we all treat each other in the workplace, how a company treats customers, and how the company impacts the communities where it operates.

AT: You outline six Cs. Can you briefly take us through them?

RC: The six Cs are all about sending an authentic, human message that integrity matters at your company. At Airbnb I used to go to new-hire orientation every week and talk to the new employees myself about the code of ethics and what it means at Airbnb, using real examples and situations they might encounter. The feedback I got was overwhelmingly positive. To have a leader come in for that conversation, right up front, makes a lasting impression.

1. **Chief:** Integrity begins at the top—executive leadership shapes workplace culture. Make no mistake: If your CEO does not embrace and enforce the company's code of ethics, forget about the other five Cs. The tone at the top of your organization is critical to building a high-integrity culture.
2. **Customized code of ethics:** You must have a customized, specific, published code of ethics that reflects your company's core values as well as the norms of its particular industry, geographic location, and culture.

3. **Communicating the code:** Using senior leaders to communicate and reinforce the code is crucial. If all you do is paste an ethics code on a web page or print it out and bundle it with documents about the health plan and parking procedures, you will send the wrong message to the company about the importance of the code.
4. **Clear reporting system:** Make it easy for employees to report ethical lapses, corruption, and fraud. This is far superior to learning about problems from media inquiries, lawsuits, government regulators, or social media.
5. **Consequences:** A code must be enforced. Violations at any and every level bring consequences, which might be a warning for a first offense but can ramp up to termination. A high-integrity culture depends on fair and reasonable responses to violations.
6. **Constant:** We want employees to think about the company's values constantly when they make decisions or take initiatives that have an integrity component.

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