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Are unethical people born that way, and can they be taught ethics?

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I was watching a crime show recently that concluded with the accused (a serial offender) being found guilty of multiple counts of theft and aggravated assault. In his concluding remarks, the judge summed up the behavior of the guilty person as irreprehensible, lacking all integrity and ethical behavior. He indicated that the person should receive the maximum sentence with no parole because it was important to keep him out of society and recognized that no amount of education would change him or his behavior.

It got me thinking about the dilemma many compliance folks must have faced in their careers—how do you deal with someone who has no ethics or morals?

Can you change them? Or, like the fictional criminal, were they just born “bad to the bone” and incapable of changing?

I decided to reach out to some of my respected colleagues and get their current thinking, comparing it to the accepted thinking on this topic. I asked 21 professional colleagues, of which 16 replied with their thoughts on two questions: (1) Do you think you can teach people to be ethical, or is it just in their blood as opposed to teaching people how to be compliant?; and (2) If ethics can be taught, how do you do it?

Our moral compass

Having employees with ethics and high moral standards is highly desirable for any company. It is universally accepted that employees with ethics and morals who behave with integrity are the hallmarks of long-term success.

Many corporate codes of conduct reflect the attributes of values, principles, and purpose. The values set the bar and define what the company is aiming for. The principles provide guidelines on how to get there, and the purpose puts meaning to the values. Such organizations long to have their employees united in the concept of ethical behavior, but the reality is (as any compliance professional will attest) you rarely get complete unity. There are always those employees who just don't seem to get it and almost go out of their way to be unethical.

Ethical behavior results from character-building behaviors, which occur during and throughout life. Simply put, it is complying with the societal standards of right and wrong or good and bad. Corporate compliance and ethics are about complying with the regulations that govern the company's business environment and with the values and purpose of that company. Ethics are concerned with what one should do to fulfill one's moral duty. Whenever we make a choice, it is possible for us to have made a different one. The moral compass of ethical employees is based on their conscience, which sways our choices when making decisions.

We know quite a lot about unethical people thanks to many studies and publications in this area. Repeated unethical or dishonest behavior often results in guilt, remorse, or other negative emotions. We might then expect

that people would avoid continuing to act unethically. However, anecdotal evidence suggests just the opposite. Persistent dishonesty and unethical actions tend to be forgotten, and when remembered, the memories become less clear and vivid over time, compared to those of ethical actions or other types of positive and negative behaviors.^[1]

We know unethical behavior can be very disruptive in a corporate setting, decreasing productivity, demoralizing staff, and potentially affecting the organization's reputation.

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