Lori Tansey Martens (martens@business-ethics.org) is President of International Business Ethics Institute in Washington, DC, USA.

Adam Turteltaub (adam.turteltaub@corporatecompliance.org) is Chief Engagement & Strategy Officer at SCCE & HCCA, based in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, USA.

Meet Lori Tansey Martens: A veteran shares her unconventional wisdom

By Lori Tansey Martens and Adam Turteltaub

AT: You got involved in ethics very early. What led you to the field?

LTM: I started my professional career at Procter & Gamble (P&G) in brand management, which turned out to be an excellent foundation for a business ethics career—you run your own business within the confines of a large corporation. While P&G was a great training ground, I've always been an idealist and wanted to do work I found meaningful. I saw a job ad in *The Washington Post* (I'm really dating myself!) for the old Ethics Resource Center's Advisory Services, got the job, and realized I had found my life's calling.

AT: What was the state of the ethics profession back then?

LTM: It wasn't really a profession. There were only a couple of nonprofits and a few university professors active in the field as everyone was trying to figure this thing out. I still remember some of the research from the early days. Only half of Fortune 500 companies had codes or values statements, and barely a third were doing any form of (mostly occasional) ethics training. The number of ethics and compliance officers was statistically insignificant. It's been fascinating to watch the field explode.

AT: Let me ask a related question: How would you characterize the attitudes of business toward business ethics as a function rather than just a notion?

LTM: During those early days, companies that weren't in trouble regarded business ethics as a mindset, not a job. CEOs would hold seminars for senior leaders to discuss ethics issues, but they weren't interested in formal, company-wide approaches.

Business ethics as we know it today was born from headline-making scandals of the 1980s, particularly those in the defense industry. The Defense Industry Initiative laid the groundwork for creating formal ethics programs (e.g., codes, training, hotlines), which required full-time personnel to manage. When the Sentencing Guidelines codified this programmatic approach in 1992, companies that weren't in trouble saw the value of adopting preventive programs, and that ignited the business ethics boom.

The problem with the Sentencing Guidelines (excuse me while I reach for my soapbox) was that it codified a particular approach to business ethics before we were really ready to cry "Eureka!" While not intentional, the guidelines had the unfortunate side effect of cutting off innovation in the field as everyone rushed to meet the seven requirements of an effective program. Which, ahem, at the time had not really been proven to be effective.

AT: How have you seen employee expectations evolve?

LTM: Here's what hasn't changed—when you say "ethics," employees hear "fairness." As in, are they being treated fairly by the company? Most employees don't judge a company on its risk management frameworks or stakeholder engagement but on how they themselves are treated. That hasn't changed, and I doubt it ever will. Human nature is pretty fixed.

What has evolved is the definition of fairness, and that's expanded substantially. A century ago, the average work week was 50 hours—roughly eight hours a day, six days a week. Health insurance, 401K matches, and paid vacations were pipe dreams. Now we're flirting with a 32-hour, four-day work week and have added work-from-home into the mix.

By the way, that 50-hour work week of the 1920s was a reduction from the prior decade and was won largely as a result of labor strikes in 1919. Between 1915 and 1919, inflation was rampant in the United States—prices doubled and tripled, but worker wages barely budged, and not enough to make up the shortfall. As a result, 1919 saw the largest number of labor strikes in U.S. history. To paraphrase many of the great philosophers, those who forget the past are destined to repeat it.