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Food for thought: The social-ecological business ethics model in action

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I've written previously about the social-ecological model as a construct for understanding how businesses can influence employees' ethical behavior.^[1] This approach starts with the premise that our behaviors are influenced when we receive the same or similar information from different sources, in various ways, at different times. This essentially creates an environment—an ecosystem—that delivers consistent messaging and wherein changes in behavior become all but guaranteed. Not long ago, I observed this model at work in an unlikely place: an elementary school environmental learning center cafeteria. The benefits and the downside of this model were on full display.

Stepping from the theoretical to the practical happens very quickly, especially when dealing with children. I chaperoned a three-day trip to an environmental learning center with a couple hundred fourth and fifth graders. It was a place steeped in experiential learning—some by design and some by happenstance—through hands-on experience, measurement and analysis, stimulation, and social interactions. I thought to myself, “There is bound to be an ethics lesson here somewhere.”

The power of incentives and peer influence

The learning center teaches children to be good stewards of our resources. One way it accomplishes this is through measuring the amount of food wasted throughout the trip, to generate awareness of each individual's impact. At each meal, instructors assigned a few students to scrape plates before washing, weigh the uneaten food, and record the total weight of wasted food throughout their stay. If the waste accumulated over two days remained below a certain threshold, the class won the coveted “golden plate” award, which is featured on a makeshift wall of fame in the cafeteria. The less you wasted, the greater your chance at claiming the award. Students learned about this arrangement from instructors and staff at the outset of their stay. They were reminded of it by posters in the lunchroom, a cadre of golden plates on the wall with the names of previous winners, a running tally announced throughout the day, and the presence of food waste minders (the kids assigned at each meal) scraping and weighing at the front of the cafeteria.

Initially, students cautiously approached the scraping and weighing station. Those assigned to that station reluctantly took the plates and set about their duties. After several kids completed the activity, the weight of their waste became evident. Students assigned to the station began to fear that they wouldn't come close to their goal. Slowly at first, but then shockingly quickly, they deemed the amount of waste accumulating to be unacceptable and took it upon themselves to act. They told their peers to go back to the table and finish their meals, encouraged others to down the last few bites as they came up to the station, and dutifully reminded those in line for food not to take more than they could finish. Everyone became acutely aware of the risk of missing their goal and took steps (sometimes aggressively) to change not only their own behavior but also that of their peers. By the third morning, it was downright taboo and considered morally bankrupt to waste food. Students' sensibilities

and actions fit squarely into a case study of behavioral ethics.

I don't condone fervently policing kids who didn't finish their grapes. In fact, instructors and chaperons admonished those pressuring classmates too much. But it's clear that students were responding to the messaging they'd received and how they were incentivized. They wanted to win the golden plate! They had read about it, heard about it from their leadership, and, most importantly, observed their peers acting on the shared goal. In short order, they converted something they'd never previously considered into a major priority. Acting otherwise was utterly unacceptable. Think of the implications of this level of engagement when it comes to acting ethically in business.

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