Constructively Dealing with Ethical Conflicts

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> "We are experiencing a dangerous time in our country, with a political environment where basic facts are disputed, fundamental truth is questioned, lying is normalized, and unethical behavior is ignored, excused, or rewarded. This is not just happening in our nation's capital, and not just in the United States. It is a troubling trend that has touched institutions across America and around the world—boardrooms of major companies, newsrooms, university campuses, the entertainment industry, and professional and Olympic sports. For some of the crooks, liars, and abusers, there has been a reckoning. For others, there remain excuses, justifications, and a stubborn willingness by those around them to look the other way or even enable the bad behavior. So if there ever was a time when an examination of ethical leadership would be useful, it is now."[1]

This excerpt paints an amazingly grim picture of the state of human affairs. What have we, if not our self-respect, values, beliefs and a fundamental sense of ethical behavior? Unfortunately, a world driven by ego, power, greed and self-indulgence distorts the definition of these fundamentals necessary for a balanced and civilized society. The scope of the problem seems overwhelming with an amazing degree of inertia. Does this mean we all compromise ourselves and succumb to this malaise? We are suggesting the solution is not global but very local, close up and even personal. Affecting change is difficult, but it's possible; and when a degree of momentum is created, change can become positively contagious. This is our strategy.

- Research abounds from clinicians to academics on ethics and how to address ethical issues. Our focus is leadership and the challenges confronting a leader's ability to effectively manage and lead their organizations. On a daily basis, we face ethically deviant issues within our personal and professional lives. We hope to provide some practical and workable constructs for leaders to apply in addressing ethical issues they personally confront plus those issues brought to them. Rather than attempt to corral ethics on a very broad level, we intend to use some of the following to frame our perspective: Behaviors and language presented via the media which provide real time and highly visible ethical issues that people see and try to digest
- Ability to sort acceptable and non-acceptable news items to use as learning experiences
- An overarching theme in ethics of what makes something right and what makes it wrong
- Establishing ethical benchmarks
- Non-enforcement culture – looking at what affects behavior positive and negative

The framework we are suggesting to deal with ethical challenges includes the following:

- Bring it in – don't solve the world's problems. Define your sphere of influence or physical/organizational realm. Deal with that first and get it right.
- Listening – it's importance as a leader
- Role Models – everybody's watching – the good and the not so good – does a role model make something bad/good? Are you a good role model? Take a look at your behavior and the feedback you get.
- Expectations – set them, explain them, demonstrate them, teach them, live them and call people out (nicely) who don't meet them
- Access – be accessible as a leader. If you set the culture, the expectation, be there to explain and help those who want to do the right thing.
- Trust – this is always the key to success
- Contribute experiences – hold periodic ethics open forums so colleagues can exchange their experiences and share ways they addressed them – those that worked and those that did not work.
- Talk it out – afford an opportunity for people to talk out their dilemmas and their thoughts of how to solve them on their own.

Bringing It In

We have been convinced that we live in a global society. That is true in many ways, but our sphere of influence is certainly not global. While we may think the butterfly effect of flapping its wings in one place having an impact far away is an interesting concept, think about the reality of the concept. The American Scientist article "Understanding the Butterfly Effect" states: The purpose of his provocative question, he said, was to illustrate the idea that some complex dynamical systems exhibit unpredictable behaviors such that small variances in the initial conditions could have profound and widely divergent effects on the system's outcomes. Because of the sensitivity of these systems, outcomes are unpredictable. This idea became the basis for a branch of mathematics known as chaos theory, which has been applied in countless scenarios since its introduction.

If 'we' concentrate too much on an unrealistic scope, our influence is lost. We are talking about people, relationships and behavior. While ethics, or the seemingly loss of ethics, appears to be a global issue, affecting change toward a more ethical society (however we define this state) is much less than global. It is actually very local (again depending on how we define local).

While there are clear ethical issues on local and even national stages, we as individuals have very little if any influence on these. However, our own behavior, the behavior of our organizations and our families are within our sphere of influence and are things we can impact and guide. The national and global ethical concerns do sometimes influence those in our sphere. However, even though we cannot impact national and global behaviors, we can impact how those in our sphere react to these national and global concerns. We can't tell people how to think but we can provide guidance and a role model that shows more ethical behavior.

Listening

Listening is a key component of our leadership sessions. Everyone has heard the adage that if one is continually talking and not listening there is no room for learning. How does this play into the ethics piece? It goes to ego. We've written about Servant Leadership, with our position being leadership is not an entitled position or one of privilege. Leadership is about serving. This concept goes back to Biblical writings. The point being, if one is continually talking, there is no room for serving because there is no knowledge of the real issues since the leader is not listening. So why is listening such a big deal, or a skill so difficult to become proficient at? We might suggest ego. How will everyone know how important we are unless we tell them - constantly? Or, insecurity; if one keeps on talking and others can't get a word in, then there is no opportunity for discussion or the potential of revealing our deficiencies. Either one is a no-win leadership from a leadership perspective. Listening implies learning, learning means insight, and insight allows knowledgeable and enlightened leadership. Therefore, in the context of ethics, listening is keenly important because of the insight gained. Self-fulfilling prophecies resulting from ego driven leaders leads to distorted ethics, the inability to know the difference between their constructed reality and ethical behavior. I had a business partner years ago who was like this. Gregarious person, very good at marketing, and talked all the time. The issue with him was that he never knew the difference between his world and the real world.

The point here is if one is to set a culture of ethical behavior, it is important to listen. People will respect the fact that you care and take the time to listen. They will also be more likely to want to behave in a similar way as you. They will see you as someone who considers them important since you listen to them.

Role Models – Everybody's Watching

Affecting change as a leader involves a key function, being a role model. The leader sets the example, is the benchmark others measure themselves to. Being a role model is a tough thing because everyone is watching – all the time. In today's world of cell phone cameras and video and social media, it becomes even more difficult. The notion of being a role model 100% of the time is an exhausting thought, if it is an act. The issue is for a person who is 95% effective and genuine, but finds themselves on a video in an off moment just once, the image can be destroyed. The point here is awareness. When society is looking at a leader, there are certain expectations. Yes, we are all human, the skill is keeping some of those 'human moments' under control or reserved for private times. If you have a bad moment, own up to it and show that you recognize it and weren't at your best.

Another role model skill is body language. One's body language conveys more than their words do about confidence, trustworthiness, honestly and intentions. People interpret what is said to them only partially from the words being used. They pick up most of the message, and the entire emotional nuance, behind the spoken words, from one's nonverbal signals. This also leads into appearance. If it's alright for the CEO to come to work in a polo shirt and khakis, that sets a precedent. If it's OK for him but not for others that sends a different message. Here again, people are watching. The leader sets the bar. To change behavior, look in the mirror and think carefully about the words being used, body language and image projected. These are basic leadership skills, but keenly important and send a message about what is ethically acceptable and what is not.

As a role model, and if you are a leader (or a parent) you are a role model, you need to look at your own behavior with a critical eye. What message are you sending? Think about feedback, both formal and informal, that you have received. Is that 5% mentioned above negatively impacting those who watch you and learn from you? As noted it is difficult to be "on stage" 100% of the time and probably impossible, but you need to constantly be aware that you are being observed and watched by those who report to you and those you interact with you. We get tired just thinking about it, but we have been there and know that our little slip-ups were observed and sometimes emulated.

Expectations

When it comes to affecting change, particularly in the context of ethics, we are firm believers in setting the bar high. Establishing expectations regarding behavior, right vs. wrong as the company defines it, and resolving ethical conflicts is a powerful leadership tool. Setting expectations establishes ground rules and sets the level of the bar. Without expectations, people/employees will make their own interpretation as to what is acceptable and what is not. Patterns of behavior then become the standard, and are subject to even looser interpretation as time goes on. With expectations, coupled with the above items builds a solid foundation where change can be implemented.

A note regarding expectations: we are not suggesting a prescriptive listing of rules. Expectations as we define them set the tone, establish the ground rules, but don't stifle creativity, innovation and initiative. One more thing: when dealing with individuals who do not meet expectations or for some reason fall short, don't ignore or let it fester. This is where leadership skills are essential. A determination must be made regarding the reason for the shortfall. The leader must be prepared to address this situation. It could be an opportunity for learning on the part of the individual, or a need to reassign or even dismiss a person. In any event, a deviation from the expectations cannot be left unaddressed. Believe it or not, the organization will notice, and leadership effectiveness will diminish. An organization is aware of such individual and/or group behavior and will watch to see if and how it is addressed.

Access – Be Accessible as a Leader

When implementing a change initiative, particularly one affecting ethics, there will be questions and confusion. Confusion about interpreting expectations, validation concerning right vs. wrong, and general discussion. The leader must be accessible to the people of their organization. Accessibility can be a trap too. As with all things in life, there is a balance. Being accessible without becoming too accessible requires skill too. Open door policies, touting availability and accessibility of leaders, were all the rage years ago. While this sounds good, a leader has very specific responsibilities leading an organization, and too much of an open door leads to distractions, disruptions and interruptions, all of which detract from the leader's ability to do their job. There will always be one or two who like to run to the office for any reason just to get "face time with the boss."

On the other hand though, if a leader holes up in their office behind a computer screen or on a phone or in meetings, that too is unacceptable. So we are back to balance. Along with the open door policy movement was Tom Peter's Managing by Walking Around (MBWA). His premise, by observing many companies (good and not so good), is for the leader to get out into their organization and listen. I worked for a CEO who once told me that he has not been out with the proletariat for a while. I was quite shocked because so much was said in that brief phrase. Needless to say he did not make himself extremely accessible either.

We have seen the other side also of leaders who walk around just to be seen and who actually disrupt the staff by trying to be

too visible. MBWA is an effective tool, but it must be done with a goal of interacting and listening to what is happening in the organization. Over time the staff will open up when they see that the leader is listening and wants to hear feedback.

Finally, when it comes to ethics and affecting ethical change, a leader must be available to sort out the expected confusion and clarification needed. This is important as part of establishing baselines of ethical behavior.

Trust

The biggie. By the simplest of considerations, without trust there can't be any sort of ethical behavior. Lies, deceit, back stabbing, and what we refer to as Subversive Leadership become the modus operandi. There is nothing worse than an organization where there is no trust. Ethics might as well be a foreign concept and there is no hope of ever affecting any change toward any form of accepted ethical construct. Keep in mind that trust must be built and earned. Enough said.

Contribute Experiences

When conducting our leadership sessions, perhaps some of the most valuable time we spend with the group sharing real life experiences. The human interaction in a constructive and facilitated environment is immensely valuable. It affords attendees to share challenges and positive experiences with each other and learn from each other within the framework of leadership development. We are such firm believers in this structured exchange that we have developed a self-paced video module as pre-training and then in a much more cost effective manner bring the group together to exchange their experiences and interact with each other. Another context might be to hold periodic ethics open forums so colleagues can exchange their experiences and share ways they addressed them – those that worked and those that did not work.

These forums are healthy ways of expressing issues while gaining additional insights into methods and techniques to address them. In addition, these types of forums demonstrate

a leadership commitment to professional development as well as the commitment on the part of the leadership to creating and maintaining a high degree of ethical behavior. As a leader be prepared to share experiences to demonstrate good and bad lessons learned.

Talk It Out

There will be key individuals who just seem to 'get-it' more than others. These are the champions, the change agents, the go-to people who demonstrate the values and behaviors the organization aspires to. While it is important that everyone is involved, these change agents are the future leaders. The 'Talk-it-out' concept is where a leader affords an opportunity for people to talk out their dilemmas and their thoughts of how to solve them on their own. For this to happen there needs to be go-to people, mentors, those who are able to fill in where needed to assist their colleagues in solving their own problems. There is some development necessary on the part of these change agents, but once that is completed, their availability to colleagues is important and with each engagement the change agent gets better at facilitating the discussion, and the person becomes better at resolving their own issues in the future. This can be a formal or informal arrangement. People tend to seek out those who they think can help them understand. Informal mentors can be very effective and viewed as peers rather than someone formally designated as a mentor.

Conclusion

The quote that began this article paints a depressing picture of ethics in our current world. That picture may represent the world but it need not be our immediate world. Few, if any, of us can influence the bigger world stage, but we can clearly influence our immediate world – our sphere of influence. As leaders in our organizations (or simply as parents) we can guide people toward ethical behavior. We can demonstrate ethical behaviors. We can help those in our sphere learn to recognize good and bad ethical behavior. We do this by listening, by establishing clear expectations, by being good role models, by being accessible, by being open and honest and by building trust with and among those in our sphere.

1. A Higher Loyalty – Truth Lies and Leadership; James Comey